Artful Rights: Using Images to Teach the First Amendment

Karon N. LeCompte  
*Baylor University*

Michelle Bauml  
*Texas Christian University*

We present an instructional strategy in which children utilize critical thinking skills to interpret images related to social studies concepts. To illustrate, we focus on teaching First Amendment freedoms; however, we encourage teachers to apply the strategy with other social studies concepts. Using visual media such as paintings and photographs to teach abstract social studies concepts can be especially helpful for teachers working with English language learners and young children. Suggested resources for locating images for classroom use are provided.

**Key Words**: social studies, elementary instruction, primary grade instruction, citizenship education, First Amendment, visual literacy

**Introduction**

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

*Constitution of the United States, Bill of Rights, First Amendment, 1791.*

According to the National Council for the Social Studies (2010), an essential goal for school curriculum should be to support the development of students’ appreciation for and application of core democratic values. Schools should be places where children learn to become active citizens. *Citizenship* may be defined as active participation in community, state, national, and even international decision-making (Sunal & Haas, 2008). Walter Parker (2003) contends that schools are well suited to provide spaces and situations where children can think and talk about problems they share. Even at a young age, children can discuss the fairness of classroom rules or what to do about cleaning up the playground. The point is that young children are capable of having decision-making discussions, and they can learn to acknowledge that there are different perspectives on shared issues. One way children discover how to be active citizens is by learning to recognize that they can better understand important issues if they listen and then talk through their options as a group. Needless to say, this kind of talk requires careful orchestration by the teacher.

Teachers know that children become intellectually engaged when they are inspired through the use of multiple modalities. Photographs and paintings naturally evoke children’s interest and may be used to provide powerful alternatives to text-based social studies instruction. For teachers with students who are English language learners (ELLs), using images...
is especially appropriate because children can observe, discuss, and relate to pictures as a means of developing academic language for abstract concepts.

English language learners, in particular, may have difficulty understanding social studies due to its linguistic demands. Abstract concepts such as liberty, justice, rights, responsibilities, and democracy, for example, require learning through reading and listening. Teaching these concepts out of context can make learning more difficult for ELLs (Weisman & Hansen, 2007). Despite challenges, social studies curricula present an important avenue for ELLs’ success because they provide students with the opportunity to share their experiences related to culture, language, and funds of knowledge. Teachers too often do not bring student’s experiences related to culture and communities into the curriculum (Sleeter & Grant, 1999).

Using images to teach about basic human rights allows students to share their insights and relate them to their lived experiences. First Amendment rights are complex ideas that require multiple modalities and active involvement with vocabulary to be understood. Some students may come from communities where freedom of speech is not a right. School is the ideal place for students, regardless of their birthplace, to learn about the rights citizens have, which serve as a basic premise of civics education.

Using images to teach social studies is not a new idea. Many historians agree that using images to teach history enhances understanding and adds to the enjoyment of the subject (Coohil, 2006). Visual literacy experiences in which children study paintings or photographs for meaning also allow students to connect prior knowledge to unfamiliar or abstract ideas (Bisland, 2010). Images such as paintings and photographs have the potential to provide students with visual information about complex concepts. Simply reading or saying that one of our First Amendment freedoms is “freedom of speech” does not necessarily make this notion understandable or meaningful for children. Critical observation followed by discussion allows students to create meaning about a picture.

In this paper we present an instructional strategy in which children utilize critical thinking skills to discuss and interpret images related to social studies concepts. To illustrate, we focus on teaching First Amendment freedoms; however, we encourage teachers to apply the strategy with other social studies concepts. Adapted from curricular materials of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, this activity involves children in looking at a piece of an image—like a puzzle piece—and then working together to interpret the image as they connect the pieces. The process of engaging in this activity requires them to become active thinkers about social studies, and naturally integrates language arts skills of speaking and listening. Teaching the First Amendment Freedoms

Teaching First Amendment rights is fundamental to civics education. The topic usually is taught in secondary courses, yet these rights are so central to citizenship education that many educators see them as part of a school's culture. In 2001, a coalition of First Amendment Schools organized a kind of “laboratory for Democracy.” These schools (K-12) formed their organization based on the following guiding principles: (1) create schools that serve as laboratories of democratic freedom, (2) develop in all members of the school community a commitment to knowledge of inalienable rights and civic responsibility, (3) engage all stakeholders in a shared commitment to work together for the common good of the school.
community, and (4) foster the knowledge, skills and virtues necessary for thoughtful and effective participation in the democratic life of the school and community beyond (Beatty, 2004). These schools promote a culture of active citizenship as central to their mission regardless of the age of students.

As a basis for discussion, teachers should consider freedom of speech as the right to speak freely. This was not always true in the United States of America. Before the First Amendment was ratified, saying something negative about community leaders could land a person in jail. Today, freedom of speech means individuals have the right to express themselves in any ways they choose.

Freedom of press is the right of citizens to publish news and information. Freedom of press has become a watchdog over the government. It involves the discovery of truth, facilitating participation by citizens in political decision-making, and promoting tolerance.

Freedom of assembly is the right of people to gather and march or protest in a nonviolent way. Getting together to share ideas, coming together to share common beliefs, and acting upon those beliefs is a right granted by assembly.

Freedom of religion allows people to worship and practice their faith without government interference. It contains two parts, the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause. The Establishment Clause essentially means that the government cannot pass a law providing for an official religion. The second part of freedom of religion, the Free Exercise Clause, prohibits the government from interfering with an individual’s religious practice.

Finally, freedom of petition is the right people have to appeal to the government either positively or negatively about something they consider important. As United States citizens, we have the right to petition Congress, state governments and their legislatures, and courts at any level. Common to all of these freedoms is the protection to exercise them without government interference (Five Freedoms Project, 2008; Illinois First Amendment, 2012).

Teaching First Amendment rights to elementary students is always an adventure. You never know what they are going to say (much to their parents’ surprise). Students’ perceptions and experiences can become central to classroom conversations that relate First Amendment concepts to ideas and events students know about, such as family talk at the dinner table, going to church, leadership roles they observe in family members, or raising their hands to speak in class. Their comments usually are insightful and filled with child-like honesty. Rich classroom discussions have the potential to become foundational in children’s understanding of rights as citizens. Engaging in “artful” rights lessons can help children recognize their First Amendment freedoms and transfer that knowledge to meaningful contexts in their lives.

**Selecting and Preparing Images**

Children enjoy puzzles and thus, they are inclined to see the connection between putting together a puzzle and “reading” an image for interpretation. Teachers should begin this exercise by selecting a photograph or painting that includes several people and/or objects and lends itself well to teaching a social studies concept. For example, George Caleb Bingham’s (1811-1879) *Stump Speaking*, 1856 (see Figure 1) offers a powerful visual for teaching about the freedom of speech. In the painting, people are gathered and listening to a gentleman speaking from the top of a tree stump; a common scene from 19th century American politics when
candidates would move from town to town delivering campaign speeches from the stumps of sawed off trees. The clothes worn by listeners in *Stump Speaking* suggest they represent a range of backgrounds, from local farmers to aristocratic businessmen. Some people appear to be listening with more attention than others and some are not listening at all. However, the gentleman on the tree stump is waving his arms in the air and seems to be passionately delivering a speech.

After selecting the visual, the image should be cut into chunks that can be thought about and discussed alone or away from the other pieces. As shown in Figure 1, choosing a photograph or painting that includes people or objects is important because individual pieces of the full image will be explored and interpreted before the puzzle is assembled to reveal the entire picture. Bingham’s *Stump Speaking* works well because the painting can be printed and cut into several large puzzle pieces with each featuring a different perspective. The required number of puzzles should be determined by the number of students in the class.

**Figure 1.** George Caleb Bingham’s (1811-1879) *Stump Speaking*, 1856.
[Shown here as six puzzle pieces for use with the activity.]

Finally, teachers should be prepared to share some background information about the selected image. Knowing something about the artist and why he or she painted the image provides children with contextual information and can help them make connections to their
own lives. *Stump Speaking*, for example, is one of a series of paintings about late 19th century elections in the American West by George Caleb Bingham. At one point, Bingham became a political candidate and a “stump speaker” himself. Because much of Bingham’s work portrays ordinary citizens engaged in frontier life, his paintings are well suited for exploring government, history, and citizenship in classrooms with young children.

**Artful Rights in Action: Freedom of Speech**

The artful rights strategy involves four steps, which are outlined below. Each step is supported with narrative examples from the first author’s experiences teaching about the freedom of speech with a mixed group of 19 second and third grade students. The setting is a private school elementary classroom in a medium sized city in the south.

**Step 1: Describe**

After preparing the selected photograph or painting, each child or pair of children should be given a piece of the image. Students should have a few minutes to study the piece and then be asked to take turns describing only what they observe. For example, the teacher might ask, “What people and objects do you see on your puzzle piece? What do you recognize? What looks unfamiliar or strange to you?” Record the details students share so their comments are visible to the whole group (e.g., using chart paper, a Promethean Board, or a white board).

The first author’s description of Step 1 in action with a group of second and third graders follows:

The students are looking at puzzle pieces from a painting, in this case Bingham’s *Stump Speaking*. I move from group to group listening. I ask, “What do you see?” Modeling listening skills is important to me, so I repeat what each child says. “OK, so you see some people sitting on a porch.” I turn to the next child and ask, “What do you see?” The pattern continues until every member of the group has a chance to share what they see.

**Step 2: Infer**

Ask the children guiding questions to help them think about what might be happening in their piece. These questions might include, “What do you think the people in your puzzle piece are doing? Are they listening to or looking at something or someone? What makes you think so?” Because each puzzle piece will likely have potential for many possible inferences, encourage students to consider and share at least two of their ideas to explain what might be going on in their puzzle piece. Again, record students’ responses.

The first author’s description of Step 2 in action follows:

Now I ask, “What do you think the people in the painting are doing?” Again, I listen carefully and use the children’s responses to help them justify their reasoning. I ask, “Why do you think that?” Lauren speculates, “This is an exciting event. They probably don’t have TV or anything, so they are coming outside to see what is happening.”
Step 3: Assemble
Next, ask the children to put the pieces of the artwork/photograph together and to reconsider what might be happening in the entire image. Make sure everyone has an opportunity to see the completed picture.

The first author’s description of Step 3 in action follows:
After everyone has had a chance to share their ideas about individual pieces, the group quickly assembles the puzzle pieces into the whole image. Students’ talk turns into a back and forth conversation about the details in the image. For example, they notice kids playing, and Evan says, “That would be me. I want to play, not listen.”

Step 4: Interpret
As students observe the entire image, prompt them to identify details to help them confirm, negate, or revise their initial inferences. To guide students’ thinking, revisit observational and interpretive questions asked earlier. Ask, for example, “Now with the puzzle pieces together, what do you think is happening in the picture? Has your idea about your puzzle piece changed since we put the puzzle together?” Importantly, teachers should be prepared to guide the discussion in order to communicate the image’s connection to the selected social studies concepts and to provide students with information that will help them understand the big ideas represented in the image.

The first author’s description of Step 4 in action follows:
As their teacher, I encourage the children to look at the painting again and think about their own right to free speech. We record these examples on chart paper. The children are making connections to circumstances in their own lives and the right of free speech. For example, Lauren makes a connection from a recent experience: “My mom went to a meeting last night. I had to sit next to her and do homework. She listened and took notes. I think she wanted to ask a question, but she changed her mind.” Maria adds another personal connection as she relays, “We mostly talk at the dinner table; my parents don’t really go to meetings. They talk in Spanish and English, but I can tell when they are mad about something.” Marcus shares his ideas as well: “At dinner time, my mom always wants to hear about my day. That’s when I have the chance to talk.” Maria looks thoughtful, “Yeah, mostly you can say anything you want—but you can’t say bad things about your friends.”

Images and conversation abound in the room as children think about First Amendment right to free speech. I smile to myself as I see “light bulbs” come on in their minds and as I hear meaningful connections the children are making as they entertain their own ideas about citizenship begin to take shape.

Assessing for Understanding
Sharing, listening, and thinking are active processes in using images for social studies. They also are skills associated with learning active citizenship. Documenting evidence of students’ understanding is important. This can be accomplished in a number of ways depending on the teacher’s goals. Teachers, for example, may wish to focus on discussion as a primary lesson objective and to document students’ responses and/or use of language. The process of using descriptive vocabulary for observation and interpretation provides valuable
practice for academic language development, especially for ELLs and for all young children (Cummins, 2000).

Writing is another powerful way for children to demonstrate their learning. The process of looking at an image carefully gives students ideas for including details in their writing. They are not overwhelmed with the larger task of just writing about an image. Using Bingham’s *Stump Speaking* as an example, we have included below several ideas for incorporating writing as a form of assessment after completing the puzzle activity as a group:

- **Expository writing: Describing with Details** - Have students write one or more paragraphs about their interpretations with details from the class discussion. Instead of writing about *Stump Speaking* as a whole image, for example, students can write about specific details of the image and how those details reflect our right to freedom of speech. Flipbooks could be a great student product whereby each of the freedoms are described and illustrated in a five-part book.

- **Informal writing: Connecting Ideas to Students’ Lives** - Ask students to write about how the social studies concept(s) represented in the image relate to their own experiences and/or ideas. Students may write, for example, about what it means for *them* to have freedom of speech. What might their lives be like without this freedom?

- **Narrative writing: Creating a Story about the Image** - Students can create original stories about the people/objects in the image to explain why it represents a particular social studies concept. For example, the man standing in *Stump Speaking* has something to say. What is it? Why is he there? How do his actions represent freedom of speech?

- **First Amendment Rights: A Unit of Study** - As a unit of study, older children can venture out into the community and take their own photos of “our rights in action.” They can look for examples from community, state, or national news. They could compare *Stump Speaking* to a more contemporary picture of a citizen speaking out to an officeholder at a local town all meeting. Another instructional example is to ask students to research court cases that involve First Amendment rights such as the Candy Cane Case. (In 2003, an eight-year-old in Plano, Texas was banned from handing out candy canes in school because they had religious messages attached to them.) These kinds of activities hold rich promises of engaging children and helping them understand what active citizenship is all about.

**Teaching Tips**

When working with images, children often become excited and want to share their puzzle pieces and voice their opinions. Naturally, they want to hurry and finish the puzzle. Wait-time and questioning are important features of this activity. Give the children time to think and share, but encourage them to consider different ways to describe and interpret what they see in their piece of the image. One second grade child, for example, during the first author’s lesson held a puzzle piece from *Stump Speaking* that depicted the main character: a man standing on the stump delivering a speech. The student offered a reasonable conjecture: “He is reaching out to someone.” With further questioning from the teacher, the class determined Bingham’s intended message. One student explained, “He has something important to say.” Another child shared her ideas, “He has something to say, but not everyone
is listening. See that man is looking the other way?” Yet, another boy shared his thoughts: “I think he wants to change something. Maybe it’s like a neighborhood meeting. My dad goes to those.” Allowing children to share what they see, then providing ample time for questioning and interpretation are key.

**Promoting Thinking Skills**

According to the *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (2010), critical thinking and literacy skills are essential components of high quality social studies instruction. The activity promotes the kind of social studies-language arts integration that honors both content areas and incorporates multiple modalities during instruction while promoting critical thinking through discussion and interpretation.

The five freedoms of the First Amendment are particularly well suited for the puzzle piece strategy because visuals are powerful communicators of civic ideals and practices as well as historical notions, which children may find difficult to understand (Bisland, 2010). In our example, Bingham’s *Stump Speaking* is an excellent painting to use when teaching civic ideals and practices as well as history. When a group of second graders were given the painting, the children noticed people’s clothing. Several children made comments about the hats on the men and women and the style of jackets. These comments led to a discussion about when the painting was produced and why. The teacher prompted children to expand their thinking about freedom of speech in their own lives by listening to their questions. Helping children make connections to historical context provides them with experiences in building historical understanding. They learn, visually and verbally, to think about the period in which this image was created. Because each child holds a different piece of the puzzle, this activity encourages the cooperative learning skill of interdependence. Social learning is a huge part of social studies for ELLs and all young learners. This kind of interaction too often is neglected in the current climate of No Child Left Behind legislation (No Child, 2001) and Race to the Top (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Table 1

*Suggested Images for Teaching First Amendment Freedoms*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Freedom of religion</th>
<th><em>Freedom of Worship</em> painting by Norman Rockwell, 1943. (Prints may be purchased from the Norman Rockwell Museum)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Baptism near Morehead, Ky.</em> Photograph by Marion Post Wolcott, 1940. (Amon Carter Museum of Art)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freedom of speech</td>
<td><em>Stump Speaking</em> by George Caleb Bingham, 1856. (Amon Carter Museum of Art)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Freedom of Speech</em> painting by Norman Rockwell,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Newspaper vendor and cart in [Civil War] camp photograph by Alexander Gardner, 1863. (Library of Congress)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freedom of assembly</td>
<td>The County Election painting by George Caleb Bingham, 1852-1854. (Amon Carter Museum of Art)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Civil Rights March on Washington DC photograph by Warren Leffler. (Library of Congress)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Meeting in a Hogan photograph by Laura Gilpin, 1953. (Amon Carter Museum of Art)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freedom to petition</td>
<td>Commissioner Bogy reading treaty to the Sauk and Fox delegation photograph by Alexander Gardner, 1867. (Amon Carter Museum of Art)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mister President lithograph by William Gropper, no date. (Amon Carter Museum of Art)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Teachers may obtain images held at the Amon Carter Museum by contacting the museum’s Teaching Resource Center. Most of these images are public domain and are therefore provided at no charge. Images from the Museum may only be used in the classroom and may not be reproduced or used for any other purposes.

As with each of the five freedoms, the notion of freedom of speech can be confusing to children. In school, children are taught to “raise their hand” before speaking. This social norm in schools can offer a starting place for discussions about how common courtesy must be adhered to in order for freedom of speech to be effective. Bingham’s image provides students an opportunity to consider and discuss the meaning of freedom of speech and why it is a right for citizens. More importantly, the image can be used to stimulate critical thinking about our government.

Piecing together an image in puzzle form helps children interpret artwork by introducing it in parts. This process helps simplify images that otherwise might be overwhelming and encourages children to observe detail. The process can help children notice, describe, and
record details that can lead to meaningful conversations and deeper understanding of social studies themes and concepts. Moreover, dividing an artwork into parts can demonstrate how misleading it may be to look at only part of the story being told. By moving from the part to the whole, children can practice revising their conceptions based on new evidence. Suggestions of other images that can be used to teach about First Amendment freedoms are shown in Table 1. The web-based references section of this article includes several website addresses for locating similar images for teaching social studies concepts.

Teaching and learning through multiple modalities is as natural as it is enjoyable. Adapting images by making them into puzzles helps children see that “a picture is worth a thousand words.” They learn that because of the First Amendment, they have a right to freely express their words, voice opposition to our government, freely practice their faith, and gather with friends. They are young, but they are practicing citizenship. Imagine what they can do as adults.

References


Web-Based References

Teachers’ Resource Center [trc@cartermuseum.org](mailto:trc@cartermuseum.org)

Author Bios
Karon LeCompte, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Social Studies Education at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. She teaches classes in elementary social studies methods. Her research interests include civics education, technology, and teacher preparation. She works with teachers on civics education and law related education. E-mail: karon_lecompte@baylor.edu
Michelle Bauml, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood/Social Studies Education at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas. Her research interests include new teacher development, teacher thinking and decision-making, and early childhood/elementary curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in elementary social studies.