Analyzing Historical Photographs to Promote Civic Competence

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Students in all content areas are almost exclusively presented with text-based instruction that starkly contrasts their experiences outside a classroom. With the advent of sophisticated technologies unknown to earlier generations, modern students are evermore immersed in visual data such as photographs, videos, games, apps. Visual media comprise many of the resources that adolescents use to negotiate understandings of the world. Many teachers and teacher-educators suggest that civic competence requires meeting powerful media with equally powerful analysis tools. In this, the first of two coupled articles — the second to be published in the July issue of Social Studies Research and Practice — I describe the educative potential of employing visual documents, especially historical photographs, in social studies instruction and refer to implications drawn from recent research studies. I also introduce an original lesson demonstrating wise practice teaching strategies for implementing historical photographs in classroom instruction to promote students’ civic competence. The second coupled article will extend the wise practice teaching strategies and feature all of the resources needed to enact the lesson and provide closure to the ideas posited throughout both articles.

Key Words: Historical Photographs, Visual Literacy, Historical Thinking, Inquiry-Based Instruction, Document Analysis, Social Studies Wise-Practices

Introduction

Adults tend to use texts—print and online news articles, letters, and legal contracts—to make sense of the world, but written documents tend to hold far less significance for modern students. Contemporary students, instead, tend to rely more on visual data to form conclusions about the world such as photographs, videos, cartoons, films, video games, (Burns, 2006; Callow, 2006) and use tablet PC, smartphone, and iPad applications. Modern students seem to live in environments saturated with multimedia where many learn “to read, write, listen, speak, and make meaning of their lives through . . . media” (Aiex, 1988, p. 47).

Starkly contrasting with their social experiences outside a classroom, students in all content areas are almost exclusively presented with text-based instruction (Burns, 2006). Research strongly suggests teachers tend to neglect potentially rich visual literacy strategies, instead relying heavily on textbooks and workbooks, writing assignments, and other strategies that emphasize primarily traditional literacy (Ball & Cohen, 1996; Ben-Peretz, 1990; Caron, 2005). To be academically successful, students must be proficient readers and writers; they must be traditionally literate. To successfully navigate the world outside schools, however, students also must be visually literate: able to decode, comprehend, and analyze the elements, messages and values communicated by images (Burns, 2006; Callow, 2005). Visual literacy is a key component of civic competence in contemporary society as group identities, public concerns, and power relationships are negotiated through society’s production, circulation, and consumption of visual images (Werner, 2002). Public reaction to images can authorize or contest widely held perceptions of normative behavior and its degree of desirability. These powerfully persuasive messages require equally powerful tools for discussion, critique and analysis (Callow, 2006).
Others further that argument, claiming that members of politically marginalized and lower socio-economic communities are in most need of these skills because visual imagery tends to promote traditional social relationships (Callow, 2006; Werner, 2002).

Recently published textbooks typically contain chapters of patchwork collections of written and visual data; however, these are employed only cosmetically by including captions nearby explaining the “correct” information to be gleaned (Felton & Allen, 1990; Werner, 2002). It is possible that textbooks could be structured differently to be more interactive. The recently published *History Alive! The United States* textbook (Hart, 2002) is an example of a textbook specifically formatted to create opportunities for students to interpret and discover messages delivered visually. Even this outlying example, however, does not require students to consistently and systematically think critically about visual data.

The purpose of teaching students to think critically about historical photographs is not to produce scores of historians, but rather to develop civically competent citizens. Students need the powerful analysis tools to negotiate the deluge of visual data, including photographs, comprising the world away from school. The proposed exemplar lesson around which this article is written was designed to refine students’ abilities to collect and analyze data, form and test reasonable hypotheses, and make decisions and solve problems. Students participating in the lesson will use photographs of past events to develop their critical thinking skills and their respective civic competence. The aforementioned skills may then transfer to the present, strengthening students’ democratic dispositions, improving their ability to identify and evaluate the powerful messages and arguments that are presented to them, and enabling them to act in a way that their well-informed conscience allows.

**Historical Photographs**

Because they are ubiquitous in contemporary American society, photographs may be the most educative and engaging visual document around which teachers can center instruction. Tangible and digitally formatted photographs are very likely to be carried in someone’s wallet or purse, collected in folders on one’s iPad or tablet PC, gathered into books or family albums, framed and hung on walls, placed in lockers and cubicles, displayed as computer desktop backgrounds and on cell phone (especially smartphones) and iPod screens. This familiarity with viewing and practicing photography may explain why many people consider photographs “pieces of the world rather than statements of it” (Sontag, 1973, p. 5). This presumption is not held in the case of fine arts. While fine-artists are known to be *creating art*, many people consider photographers to be *capturing reality* (Johnson, 2004).

Teachers should expect that their students are likely to consider photographs intrinsically true and objective, and may need reminding that photographs, too, need interpreting. A photograph can be easily reduced or enlarged, darkened or lightened, airbrushed, cropped or otherwise changed to alter its meaning. Even before a photograph is captured, its photographer has made several interpretive decisions that directly influence a future viewer’s experience. With each photograph, photographers must decide what to include and exclude from their viewfinders, how much light and from what direction to allow onto their subjects, to employ a sharp or soft focus, and what to highlight in the foreground and what to place in the background (Davidson & Lytle, 1992). These decisions culminate in emphases that photographers always and explicitly impose on their audience; these are deliberate and unavoidable impositions of the photographers’
standards of truth, beauty and that which they believe has value (Thum & Thum, 1972).

**Difficulties in Learning with Visual Documents**

Critically thinking about visual data, such as historical photographs, introduces significant challenges for learning. Among the challenges are that learners rarely consider visual data academically worthwhile (Levstik & Barton, 2001; VanSledright, 2002); rarely accept that various people can view the same data and think differently about it (Afflerbach & VanSledright, 2001); and typically are unfamiliar with the vocabulary, syntax, and grammar of most historical genres (Unsworth, 1999). In order to develop visual literacy and critical thinking skills in their students, teachers need to teach their students historical content, common artistic conventions, and specific references to cultural norms of given time periods (Lowenthal, 2000). Without a solid knowledge foundation, learners are likely to shape their attitudes toward the past through their understandings of contemporary issues. This present-ism can interject unhelpful political or moral dispositions and lead to mis-interpretations (Seixas, 1998). Coined as “availability heuristic” by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman (1973), this phenomenon is demonstrated when students solve interpretation problems with only the cognitive tools that are most readily available to them. To successfully navigate the world outside schools, students must be visually literate, able to decode, comprehend, and analyze the elements, messages and values communicated by images (Burns, 2006; Callow, 2005). An obvious intersection between visual literacy skill-building and social studies course work occurs with historical images: portraits, drawings, paintings, and historical photographs.

**Implications from Recent Studies of Historical Images**

While many reformers over the past several decades have called for teachers to employ historical images in their instruction (Burns, 2006; Felton & Allen, 1990; Giroux, 1997; Howard, 2001; Seixas, 2001; Werner, 2002), I identified only four scientific studies investigating how students think historically about visual resources: Levstik and Barton (1994), Callow (2006), VanSledright (2002), and Wineburg (1999). Below, I briefly summarize each study, its findings, and the implications that inform the lesson included near the end of this article.

Researchers Linda Levstik and Keith Barton (1994) asked 58 American elementary students to place nine visual documents chronologically from “longest ago” to “closest to now.” Many of these students were able to identify and link together historical information, however, few thought deeply about the values conveyed through the visual imagery. A majority of the students were “uncritical of (the images’) veracity” (p. 192) and without overt instruction they often misled themselves into ahistorical assumptions and conclusions. The researchers found that with consistent mediation, students tended to revisit their interpretations with new evidentiary data (the study described this as a dynamic perspective) or continually revisit the whole sequence of events to alter their tentatively drawn conclusions (synoptic perspective). An important implication from this study is that, when properly supported with appropriate scaffolding, students were able to think more deeply and critically about visual data.

In a study of year-six students in Australia, Jon Callow (2005) found that a class of 11 and 12 year olds were able to construct a meaningful understanding of that nation’s democratic style and electoral system from the information they gathered from interpreting written and visual texts. While the study concentrated on students’ ability to learn specific vocabulary and demonstrate their knowledge through a believable “project,” it also required students to
recognize political positions in images. With explicit directions students were able to successfully recognize historical perspectives as conveyed via political posters from the past, and then apply their skill to create their own from an assigned modern perspective. While this study seems to support Levstik and Barton’s (1994) finding concerning the importance of scaffolding, another implication from this study is that students were engaged with a purposeful “real world” activity and seemed to consider the project worthwhile.

American fifth-grade students were studied by Bruce VanSledright (2002) who found that 9- and 10-year-olds were more motivated and self-directed learners when working with written and visual texts. With explicit directions participating students developed a deeper understanding of history through an inquiry-based approach that employed visual document analysis than when memorizing data. Students also seemed to retain the information and were able to apply it to new situations. Again, scaffolding students and establishing relevance for students are important implications for future lessons and studies.

Another study of eight American twelfth-graders (17- and 18-year-olds), found that they were less likely to make meaningful decisions about the past without explicit directions (Wineburg, 1999). The students in this study were presented with visual documents and asked to think-aloud about which of them “most accurately depicted what went on.” Left to their own devices, students rather arbitrarily selected an image without any systematic reflection or comparison across outside knowledge or other documents. Students tended to rely on their sense of historical inevitability, carelessly binding a cause to an unrelated effect. Consistent with the studies mentioned above, Samuel Wineburg (1999) found that even with explicit directions, thinking historically and interpreting visuals was very challenging for students. Without concrete support to help students discern what to attend to regarding the photographs, there was virtually no critical thinking evident. This study suggests that students are likely to need significant structured guidance to form a meaningful metacognitive routine (asking themselves “what else do I need to do to better understand the image”) that may lead to more meaningful interpretations of texts.

**A Proposed Exemplar Lesson**

What follows is an answer to the call for employing visual data meaningfully in classroom instruction that pragmatically incorporates the implications from the studies mentioned above. This exemplar lesson utilizes wise-practice teaching strategies to employ historical photographs in developing students’ visual literacy and critical thinking. This lesson was developed to be “platform-agnostic.” Students could experience this lesson utilizing the latest technological devices (i.e., the iPad2, tablet PCs, Interactive Dry-erase boards). Students could, perhaps just as meaningfully, experience the lesson with an overhead projector, a slide projector, or simply hardcopy handouts. The crucial theme underpinning the lesson is to engage students in thinking historically about the photographs and refine their visual literacy skills so as to transfer those abilities to the present. As designer of the lesson, when it concerns exactly which vehicle(s) to employ during its implementation, I willfully observe the deference due classroom teachers.

This lesson is titled *The Great Depression Era: Historical Photographs of the 1920s and 1930s* and is designed to be taught to students as an initial 90-minute “grabber” lesson into the era. This lesson introduces students to the topic-specific question that guides their study of the
era, a study that may take several days to complete. From thinking critically about the visual data, students will only begin to formulate hypotheses to the topic specific question: “How did Great Depression Era society address the problem of individuals and families being unable to pay their bills?” Subsequent lessons could further develop students’ visual literacy and historical thinking skills, and elaborate on content themes and information. The lesson following the one described below, for example, could concentrate more overtly on the experiences of women, African-Americans, and newly immigrated residents of the United States. Other lessons could trace the specific cause-and-effect relationships surrounding the New Deal programs or have students read primary accounts of individuals, from varying perspectives, who were most affected by the depression and society’s efforts to address their needs.

In the specific lesson shared here, students use multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1999) to develop their content knowledge about America during the Great Depression Era and through a three-part teaching strategy of the teacher (1) modeling for the whole class, (2) assigning the class to working in small groups, and then (3) involving the class in discussing the photographs as a group. Students think critically about visual information, especially historical photographs. At lesson’s end, students should be able to name and describe many of the social conditions of America’s 1920s and 1930s, forming hypotheses toward a meaningful question around which this lesson and the entire Great Depression Era unit is built.

The lesson’s introduction (which may take up to 10 minutes) involves initiating a seemingly impromptu discussion by asking the question “What should society — you, me, all of us — do when individuals and families can’t pay their bills?” While students share their thoughts, you, the teacher, categorize the responses into broader themes by saying something like “Interesting. What you said just then sounds like another answer I heard and they both deal with the causes of individuals and families being unable to pay their bills.” Other themes students are likely to mention are: conditions, informal responses, private individuals helping, formal attempted remedies by the local, state or national governments.

As responses wane, share that virtually all societies throughout human history had to think about what responsibilities, if any, members of a community have toward their neighbors who are poor and needy, it could be considered what John Saye and Thomas Brush (2004) call a persistent issue in history. Then, connect this discussion to today’s lesson by sharing with students that they are not going to continue thinking about that question in today’s society, but rather think about that question as it happened in America during the 1920s and 1930s Great Depression Era. You might add that, instead of bookwork or lecture or watching films or researching via on-line encyclopedias, students will gather information and take notes from looking at (critically analyzing, really, but that terminology might intimidate some students) and then discussing, historical photographs. Thinking about these photographs should help students as they begin to explain the social conditions, migration patterns and consequences of the 1920s and 1930s Great Depression Era. You may wish to share the lesson’s purposes: (1) developing students’ visual literacy skills of decoding and analyzing the messages and values presented in images, (2) refining students’ historical thinking skills of sourcing, contextualizing, corroborating, and thinking deeply about historical documents, (3) forming initial hypotheses toward answering the topic specific question that will be tested and honed as subsequent lessons occur. Again, the topic specific question is: “How did Great Depression Era society address the
problem of individuals and families being unable to pay their bills?”

Next, move into a transition (taking about 5 minutes) from the seemingly impromptu discussion and the lesson’s question to emphasizing that the skills students are sharpening during the lesson are absolutely essential for civic competence, a truly thoughtful 21st century citizenship. Remind students that there are, and likely will always be, people or groups who intentionally use visual images to influence their decision-making (how they spend their money, who they vote for, etc). Today, we will think about historical photographs, using them as evidence to hypothesize about the past, but hopefully, take those now-sharpened skills practiced in class and use them to improve our lives away from school.

Next, distribute to each student a copy of a student handout specifically designed for this lesson. Strongly encourage students to take notes on the handout. Explain that really thinking critically about visual images is very different from casually glancing at them. You might want to draw students’ attention to the handout as by careful design, it concentrates their analysis in each of the following four steps, or habits of mind (Wineburg, 1999) that historians employ: (1) **sourcing**: accounting for who created the photograph, and guessing why they did, (2) **contextualizing**: analyzing the photograph’s contents, angle, lighting, background, etc., (3) **corroborating**: comparing the photograph’s information with other evidence, and (4) **thinking deeply**: reasoning about the photograph to better understanding the past.

*Figure 1*: The first historical photograph analyzed in the lesson, Lange’s (1935) *Migrant Family*
The intersection of visual literacy and historical thinking comprises the next part of the lesson and may take up to 45 minutes. Because thinking critically about visual images is really challenging and likely new to students, this is when you might demonstrate how to meaningfully analyze a historical photograph. Again, you can direct students to an iPad application, an online URL address, project a multimedia presentation, or simply print a student handout, whichever vehicle is available and that the teacher decides is best for the students. In just a few minutes you can thoroughly model the four historical thinking steps, by thinking aloud and thus letting students hear and see a successful analysis. The first historical photograph to be analyzed is Dorothea Lange’s (1935) *Migrant Family*. Appendix A is a primer for use when planning and teaching students about Lange’s *Migrant Family*. The full lesson will contain primers for each photograph that model thinking historically and provide specific information needed to complete a student’s handout. Suggested questions are offered, either for rhetorical effect or for students to answer.

Remind students that they do not have to have a lot of background knowledge to begin thinking more deeply about visual imagery. Clearly, someone more expert and knowledgeable will need to assist the students in correcting historical inaccuracies and redirecting faulty assumptions, that is their teacher’s role in this lesson. This lesson is designed to for students who may have little content knowledge and few visual literacy skills so that they genuinely desire to learn more and engage in the lesson. An important component of thinking critically is “knowing what else I need to know.” You may want to encourage students to do their best to connect whatever background, content knowledge they have to the investigative skills they are sharpening. Such connections should go a long way toward helping students begin to develop an understanding of the era, one that will further develop in subsequent lessons.

Next, place students into small groups of three or four. It might be best to create these groups prior to the day of the lesson and attend to students’ strengths and limitations, personalities, and multiple intelligences. Then, transition to the second historical photograph which, although not included here, will be featured along with all necessary curriculum materials in the subsequent article: *Outside sub-treasury building steps across from the New York Stock Exchange in New York* taken by an unknown photographer. Give the student-groups approximately 7-10 minutes to think about the photo historically using the four steps identified above and to complete the next column on the data-retrieval-chart. It is very important to move about the room, visit with each group, initiate conversations regarding their historical thinking, and offer specific, individualized feedback. Help keep the groups on task and guide them toward deeper understandings. With this particular photograph it is important to “source” the document because the title and date supply a great deal of information, without which it may be difficult to discern the photograph’s “context.”

After the groups have analyzed *Outside sub-treasury building steps across from the New York Stock Exchange in New York*, gather the attention of the whole-class and have students from each group share their respective group’s observations, conclusions, and thoughts. Ask a group or two to respond to another group’s findings, thus developing a conversation among the students to help everyone discover and create a meaningful understanding of the photo. Having negotiated responses and kept the conversation focused, use the information from the photo’s primer to add more content knowledge and, if needed, correct any mistaken assumptions the students had.
Encourage students to collect all the information not already on their data-retrieval scaffold. They may need additional paper as the boxes are relatively small. Then, complete the exact same tasks and routine with students using *Breadline of New Yorkers, Men Working on Norris Dam (Tenn. Valley Authority)* and *Bonus March on the Capitol*. Visit with each group several times to initiate conversations, offer specific, individualized feedback to each group, and help keep them focused.

Now toward the end of the lesson, guide students in synthesizing their findings taking roughly 10 minutes. After the groups have analyzed and discussed each historical photograph, ask students to formally address the lesson’s question in light of the all the information from today. Direct students’ attention to the back of their student handout, it closely structures their forming of hypotheses about this era. The completed front of handout should now be helpful to students.

At the lesson’s close, roughly 5 minutes, reiterate how the skills practiced today, thinking critically about visual images, have great value to students’ everyday lives. This might be a perfect place to revisit the topic-specific questions by having students begin to hypothesize initial answers to “How did Depression Era society address the problem of individuals and families being unable to pay their bills?” The final few minutes of class can be devoted to debriefing the lesson, mentioning again its purposes and how it is situated into the week, month, and perhaps even the semester plan of studying history. Reiterate how the skills practiced in today’s lesson—those associated with thinking critically about visual images—have great value to students’ everyday lives as they are a part of one’s civic competence.

**Conclusion**

Learning in classroom environments like the one described above can help students refine their respective abilities to critically deconstruct and analyze visual data and is one method for strengthening their civic competence. Space limitations prevented this article from including all of the above lesson’s curriculum materials needed for its implementation (additional primers, graphic organizer, etc.). Presented here, instead, is the context for developing students’ visual literacy through the explication of historical photographs, implications from recent studies of visuals employed in classrooms, and a concentration on one of the lesson’s resources, Lange’s (1935) *Migrant Family*. The second coupled article will augment the wise practice teaching strategies featured here and will include the curriculum materials needed to enact the lesson; it will also provide closure to the ideas posited throughout both articles.

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**Appendix A**

Primer for Lange’s (1935) *Migrant Family*

**Source:** (a) Name the photo’s date, title, and creator: 1935, Migrant Family, Lange (b) Guess what type of person might have taken this picture and for what purpose: Lange, photographer for the Farm Security Administration (FSA)...1935-1940, documented, interviewing, and photographing rural poverty and exploitation of sharecropping farmers and migrant laborers (c) Guess was it personal or published, candid or posed, amateur or professional: Published, posed—they all seem to be looking at the camera

**Context:** (d) What do you see in the photo, (details, people, action, surroundings, etc.): five people—a woman and four children (ages 12, 9, 7, >1)... Very raggedy and old blankets sewn
together to form a makeshift tent held together by rope and long sticks... One open and one closed suitcase... Rickety rocking-chair that one of the children is sitting/leaning on... Desolate rural area in which the people are currently residing (squatting?)... Trash and empty cups to the left of the tent... The clothes of the kids and woman are dirty and torn... Their facial expressions suggest loss, fear, and devastation... They seem to be alone—no other families around... (e) Next, what you think is happening in the photograph? Support your response: These people comprise a very poor family who live in a desolate area... They may be living in this tent because they have been kicked out of their home... They may be waiting for the chance to move to an area with (hopefully) more opportunity... (f) Consider how this image serves as a record of the Depression Era: American farmers prospered during WWI, supplying soldiers with wheat and vegetables...After the war, many farmers borrowed heavily from banks to expand their farms or buy new, more-advanced equipment... Thus farmers produced more goods than ever, leading to surpluses that they either couldn’t sell or could only sell very low prices (Hart, 2002)... Farmers unable to sell their crops were thus unable to repay their loans, often including their mortgages... Many farmers defaulted on loans and lost their farms... Also hurting farmers at this time was a severe drought turning soil into dust... Much of the Great Plains at his time experiences the worst drought ever recorded... No rain = no growing crops = soil erosion and dust storms... A newspaper reported about the drought: *Three little words achingly familiar on the Western farmer's tongue, rule life in the dust bowl of the continent—if it rains* (Wessels Living History Farm, 2010)... The term “Dust Bowl” stuck... Over 350,000 farmers left the nation’s heartland and moved West (DuBois & Dumenil, 2005)... 10 million acres of land lost 5 inches of topsoil (Hart, 2002)... (g) What is the overall message: Farmers fleeing the Dust Bowl—called “Okies” because many were from Oklahoma—were unable to afford housing... Many families lived in makeshift shacks, tents, and shanties outside cities... Families were devastated and had to live in squalor... This family, and the tens-of-thousands (or more) like it desperately needs help... (h) What specific details support...thoughts: The woman in the photo is Florence Owens... Mother of seven children she was migrating from the Dust Bowl to California... Lange said: *She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food* (DuBois & Dumenil, 2005)...  

**Corroborate, Think Deeply:** (i) How does it relate to other photos, evidence? This photo evokes tremendous emotion unlike most of the others... (j) Which others agree? Disagree: *Breadline* is similar as they portray the effects of the depression, however, the men in *Breadline* are well dressed while the women and children in *Migrant* are dressed in rags... *TVA* is also rather rural while the others are urban... *Bonus March, Sub-treasury,* and *TVA* display active crowds while *Migrant* shows only one passive, suffering, family... (k) Why might other photos support/refute this one: The purpose of this photo is to display the harsh effects of the depression: fear, desperation; others show causes, responses of the depression era... This photo was taken by a professional photographer who may have been appealing to a much larger audience... (l) What does this photo suggest about the topic-specific question: Clearly some intervention was needed; families, women and kids specifically, were literally starving and miserable... (m) What else do I need to know: How exactly was this photo used by Lange and the FSA?... (n) What questions does this photo raise in my mind: Where are the other three children? Where is the husband/father?
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