

Is Seeing Believing: Visual Literacy for the 21st Century Digital Information Age

(NOTE: This lesson plan has been prepared specifically for the SC State Department of Education and may appear on its web site in a slightly altered form.)

Is Seeing Believing:

Visual Literacy for the 21st Century Digital Information Age

by Frank W. Baker fbaker1346@aol.com

Target grade levels: 5th-12th

Background

The digital manipulation of images is widespread: but despite what many believe, it is not a new phenomena. Images have been manipulated since the start of photography. Learning to read photographs, and to question them, is part of what is today known as “visual literacy.” All too often, our students believe everything they see. Exposing them to images, and teaching them how to both question and “read images,” is one way of teaching them critical thinking and critical viewing skills—both essential skills in the 21st century.

Standards

National

NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts

Standard 6

Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), **media techniques**, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

South Carolina

Guiding principle #8 from the 2008 ELA Standards encourages

teachers to consider teaching with and about the media.

SC Standards & Indicators

Understanding and Using Informational Texts

5-2.2, 6-2.2 Analyze informational texts to draw conclusions and make inferences.

5-2.3 Analyze a given text to detect author bias (for example, unsupported opinions)

5- 2.8, 6-2.8 Predict events in informational texts on the basis of cause and effect

relationships.

7-2.2 Analyze information within and across texts to draw conclusions and

make inferences.

E1-2.7, E2-2.7 Analyze propaganda techniques in informational texts.

E3-2.7, E4-2.7 Evaluate propaganda techniques and rhetorical devices in informational texts.

Definition of Non Print

Sources of information that are not primarily in written form (e.g. pictures and **photographs**, TV and radio productions, the Internet, films, movies, videotapes and live performances). Some nonprint sources may also contain print information.

Non Print Sources of Information Support Document (excerpt)

Photographs, pictures and other images exist everywhere in the world of our students. From books, to magazines, newspapers and billboards, images are a big part of their world. What do we want students to know and understand about visual images? How do students derive meaning from what they view? Students should recognize that photos/images are texts too, non-print texts. And like all texts, they need to be studied and understood for how they are created to make meanings. This can start in elementary school with picture books and helping students understand how images can be “read.”

Photographers/image makers use a number of techniques to create pictures. Those techniques include color, framing, focusing, depth-of-field, perspective (point-of-view) and more. Viewers of photos/images bring prior knowledge, experience and more to these texts. Since photos can also be digitally altered, it is important for students to be able to question images, much the same way as they do traditional texts. Additionally, photos and other images can be catalysts to help motivate students' writing.

Teacher preparation

The teacher will introduce the topic of the digital manipulation of images by:

- showing the short 7 minute videotape excerpt: The Digital Manipulation of Images

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNYPEuZDjS0>) from "Is Seeing Believing? How Can You Tell What's Real?"

- selecting one or more of the background readings for students

<http://www.frankwbaker.com/isb.htm>

- engaging them with the lesson plan of a famous Civil War photograph (posted below)

Background on the videotape:

Following a recent visit to the Newseum, a wonderful new museum devoted to journalism and news established by the Freedom Forum Foundation in the Washington, DC area (a must-stop on your next visit there), I discovered an outstanding 22-minute video and teaching kit created to help middle and high school students explore the artistic and ethical issues involved in "altering" photographs through digital imaging.

Now an excerpt from "Is Seeing Believing? How Can You Tell What's Real?" is available (via YouTube) Teachers who utilize newspapers and/or mainstream news magazines (Time, Newsweek, etc.) in the classroom will be especially interested in using this resource, as will arts educators.

The video, a 22-minute excerpt of an hour-long PBS series entitled "Media Matters," begins by explaining that in the traditional process of news photography over the decades, "the image itself was rarely tinkered with." But things are now different. "Today's computer technology makes such alterations not only easy, but also undetectable. And it's happening a lot..."

Following several recent controversial examples – the head of former Texas Governor Ann Richards placed on the body of another woman sitting astride a motorcycle; TIME magazine's darkening the cover photo of O.J. Simpson's mugshot, and National Geographic moving the Egyptian pyramids so that they appeared closer together – we hear from art designers and photographers, news editors and photojournalists exploring whether the manipulation was proper or warranted in each instance. Along the way students see exactly how a computer can alter a photograph seamlessly and perhaps most importantly, hear how even so-called experts are wrestling with the issues involved.

Introducing the Civil War photograph lesson

The Lesson Plan

I suggest that teachers project (on a SmartBoard or screen) the photo "Home of the Rebel Sharpshooter's Den"

Suggested website: <http://www.civilwarphotography.com>

Teachers should log onto the Library of Congress web page and download and read “The Case of the Moved Body”

(don’t give this to the students yet)

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammenm/cwphotml/cwpcam/cwcam3.html>.

What is presented here are readings from noted Civil War photographer Alexander Gardner, which correspond to particular photographs, originally published as *Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War*. Gardner worked for the famous Civil War photographer Mathew Brady. Of particular interest is the photograph now known as “The Home of the Rebel Sharpshooter’s Den” by Gardner.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/cwphhtml/cwpcam/cw00171.jpg>

Teachers may wish to download this photo and create an overhead transparency of it. Historian William Frassanito, in his book *Gettysburg: A Journey in Time*, contends that the soldier’s body was, in fact, moved to the location of the den.

Teachers may have students read the accompanying piece “Does the Camera Ever Lie?”

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/cwptyml/cwcam/cwcam1.html>

Introduce the language of photography by reading “*Word and Image*:

The Language of Photography”

<http://www.time.com/time/teach/archive/981012/text5.html>

to the students. This is a good site that introduces students to some of the key concepts in photography.

Without giving them any context or background, students should be encouraged to ask questions about the image. Some of the questions they might ask include:

– when and where was the picture taken?

- what were the circumstances that led the photographer to take this picture?
- is the soldier in the picture asleep or dead?
- how did his gun get in the position it is in?
- who took the photograph and why?
- did the soldier fight for the North or the South?

After students have exhausted their possible questions, the teacher can then reveal:

- the photograph is an original from The Civil War
- the photographer was Alexander Gardner
- the soldier is dead
- the soldier's body WAS MOVED from its position on the Gettysburg battlefield to the den (at which point the teacher should ask students: "What question do you want to ask now"? And the WHY question will come up—in other words, what was the purpose, why did the photographer move the soldier's body?)

Background

In general, teachers and students need to know that photography was still in its infancy during the 1860s in America. There were no high-speed shutters, which today, can "stop" a race car going 150 mph. President Lincoln, for example, had to sit still in a chair in a photographic studio for many minutes at a time, in order for the photographer to open the shutter, expose enough light on his photographic plate, to get an acceptable (non-blurry) image. For this reason alone, there are no photographs of actual Civil War battle action scenes.

The photo, "Home of the Rebel Sharpshooter's Den" was published and distributed in its time as one way of swaying public opinion against the war. By seeing the horrors of a dead soldier, with his gun, or hundreds of dead soldiers on a battlefield, the photograph and its accompanying caption, could communicate to readers much more than words alone. Discuss the phrase, "A picture is worth a thousand words."

Contemporary Images and the Manipulation of Images

Just about every image on every woman's magazine has been manipulated.

But detecting that manipulation is difficult. Photoshop and other manipulation software is in use by artists, graphic designers and others. Students can be encouraged to locate before (alteration) and after images of celebrities, for example.

Some celebrities have even criticized major publications or instigated legal action.

What kind of control does a celebrity or sports star have over his/her image?

What about the "rights" of photographers? These and other issues are ripe

for student discussion and research.

Background readings: The author has posted a number of recent news articles and essays about the digital alteration of images. Those can be found by going to:

<http://www.frankwbaker.com/isb.htm>

See also Visual Literacy
resources http://www.frankwbaker.com/vis_lit.htm

Recommended texts

Image Ethics in the Digital Age—University of Minnesota Press

Underexposed: Censored Pictures and Hidden History—Jacobson, ed.

Picturing the Past: Media, History, and Photograph

Phototruth or Photofiction: Ethics and Media Imagery in the Digital Age—Wheeler

Photo Fakery: The History and Techniques of Photographic

Deception & Manipulation

– Brugioni

Other resources

Now available: [Ethics In The Age of Digital Photography](#) (DVD: 1 hour)

produced by the National Press Photographers Association

Description: This 60-minute DVD by John Long offers suggestions for dealing with the ethical implications of the electronic revolution in photojournalism. With some examples of digital manipulation and the problems caused by altered images, this video touches on the principles that support ethical decision-making.

[The People's Choice: Digital Imagery and the Art of Persuasion](#) (lesson plans)