Creating a lesson plan for teaching with

HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPHS

that combines primary source & visual literacies

Daniel Davis

Associate Librarian/Photograph Curator/Coordinator of Instruction

Utah State University, University Libraries, Special Collections & Archives

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES
UtahStateUniversity.

IN 2019 I CREATED A LESSON PLAN "Exploring the West in the Golden Age of Photography" that integrated two ACRL literacies, primary source and visual. While these two literacies have some fundamental differences, there are also many complimentary ideas such as the skills needed to find, critically examine, and create an interpretation from a visual document.

After teaching with the lesson plan, I feel that these two literacies ultimately complement one another. As well, I discovered that visual documents such as photographs are useful learning tools because they are conducive to new interpretations based on one's unique background and experiences. This poster session details how I integrated the two literacies into one lesson plan and then how I then taught from the lesson plan so that learners can create their own unique interpretations of visual documents.

WHAT IS PRIMARY SOURCE LITERACY AND WHAT IS VISUAL LITERACY?

The term "Visual Literacy" has been used by artists and academics since the 1970s, but it wasn't until 2011 that it was officially codified. Visual literacy has a very different tone than primary source literacy. It is meant to be measureable and testable and is aimed at people who are creating and using visual documents professionally. Defining primary source literacy, by contrast is "inherently problematic," and it is "flexible rather than prescriptive."

Not all the categories of visual literacy apply, but for my lesson plan standards two, "..student finds and accesses needed images and visual media effectively and efficiently," three, "...student interprets and analyzes the meanings of images and visual media," and four, "..student evaluates images and their sources," are most relevant.

Broadly speaking primary source literacy is the acknowledgment that primary source research requires skills with: searching for unique archival primary sources; recognizing many different material formats; placing primary sources in a historical context; creating a unique interpretation of the item; and thinking about the significance for why the item is located in an archive. Finally, primary source literacy acknowledges the importance of instruction to guide the learner.

The acknowledgement of archival silences is also important to primary source literacy and I think 19th Century Western photographs are useful because photographers pick and choose what to photograph, and learners have to think about why some people and activities were deemed important enough to photograph, while others were not.

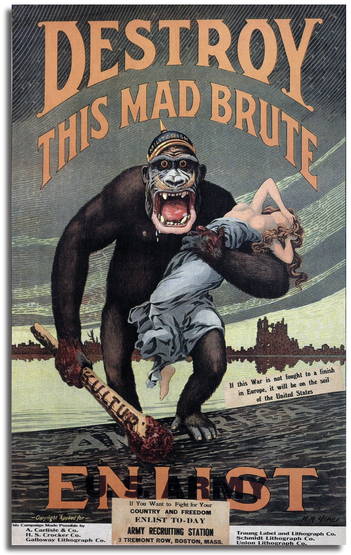
ala.org/acrl/standards/visualliteracy
archivists.org/sites/all/files/GuidelinesForPrimarySourceLiteracy-June2018.pdf

THE LESSON PLAN

In 2019 I went on a six month sabbatical. I saw how other institutions were creatively using primary sources in their instruction, and I wanted to combine my two main interests, teaching with primary sources and 19th Century Western Photography, into one lesson plan. I took a "deep dive" into the literature of teaching with primary sources, teaching with visual images, and creating lesson plans based on archival material.

In my lesson plan I provide prep readings, lesson plan objectives, classroom mechanics, and three modeling examples. While this lesson plan is far more detailed than what is typically used in a one-shot archival instruction session, and it is focused on 19th Century Western photographs, I believe it could act as a template for teaching with other visual resources.

works.bepress.com/daniel_davis/6/



TEACHING FROM THE LESSON PLAN

One of the painful lessons about archives instruction is that you are not the instructor and you mold your message and your lesson plan based on what the instructor wants and needs. Between October 2019 and February 2020 I taught four classes, and only one, to a group of USU library student employees, was strictly from the lesson plan.

In another class, a concurrent enrollment class broadcast to high school students in three locations, I broadened the class topic to be visual resources important in American History that also included progressive-era photographer Jacob Riis, WWI Posters, and WWII photo journalism. The other two classes consisted of a small (seven students) graduate sociology class, and a history research methods with twenty-two students.

The feedback I got, however, both formally and informally was positive. One of the instructors wrote:

> *"The workshop allowed my graduate students to recognize that historic photographs can help to shape research questions, deepen one's understanding of social context, and provide information critical to one's analysis. From providing markers of class to capturing the dynamics of race and gender, these materials provide invaluable information that could not be captured in statistics, traditional writings, or voice recordings."*

One of the students echoed these comments, answering the question: What is your confidence with interpreting & analyzing primary sources (specifically historic photographs) after this experience?

> *"I feel more confident! I like getting to discuss it w/ a partner – it helped me express my interpretations better."*

CONCLUSION

Are historic photographs good tools to teach primary source literacy and visual literacy? The short answer is yes – both my informal and formal feedback indicates positive results. In these classes I asked students to answer two simple questions before the class:

> *On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being "not much" and 5 being "very much") how confident are you in finding materials in Special Collections?*
>
> *On a scale of 1 to 5 how confident are you in analyzing and creating an interpretation of a primary source?*

Before class the averages were 2.35 and 3. After the class the averages jumped to 3.7 and 3.9. Still, it's a bit too early to declare a complete success. Teaching is an iterative process. I will continue to use the lesson and gather data both formally and informally. As well I hope to get feedback from other archivists and educators. While early, I think encouraging primary source literacy through the use of historical photographs shows great potential.

Further Reading:
Bahde, Anne. Using Primary Sources: Hands on Instructional Exercises. Libraries Unlimited, ABC-Clio, LLC. Santa Barbara, 2014.
Davis, Daniel. Across the Continent: The Union Pacific Railroad Photographs of A.J. Russell. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 2018.
Prom, Christopher J. & Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe, ed. Teaching with Primary Sources. Society of American Archivists, 2016.
Sandweiss, Martha. Print the Legend: Photography and the American West. Yale University Press, New Haven, 2002.
Willumson, Glenn. Iron Muse: Photographing the Transcontinental Railroad. University of California, Berkeley, 2013.
Teacharchives.org – (Brooklyn Historical Society) – For more information on creating lesson plans and crafting learning objectives.