

Picture This: Using Photographs to Study the Past

Discuss life in the past and demonstrate the value of photos as primary sources

OBJECTIVES

At the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Demonstrate knowledge that photographs are a primary source material
- Demonstrate knowledge of using people as sources by interviewing an elder relative, friend, or neighbor about a past event
- Verbally discuss and take notes about photographs
- Collaborate with other students and the class about primary and secondary sources

VOCABULARY

Primary Source: “first hand” information. This would be a record of evidence that happens almost immediately from witnesses who were there. Primary sources might include: interviews, personal and legal writings, as well as photographs.

Secondary Source: “second hand” information. This would be a source of information that is further removed from the actual event. Secondary sources usually include writing styles that interpret or analyze the event.

BACKGROUND

Photographs are a form of artistic expression and human record that modern people understand very well. They are used to capture peoples' lifestyles, special or historic events, candid activities, family and social relations, artistic feelings, and even criminal deeds. Photographs of peoples and cultures who did not keep written records are often the only primary source of information about them. Over a century ago, when having one's picture taken was more rare and expensive, people often posed with serious and formal expressions, creating the impression that the society and people were a little dour.

For modern researchers who use photographs to glean details about the past, historic photographs must be studied carefully and critically. While many scenes and events have been recorded because a

MATERIALS

- Printed worksheet or paper to write on for students
- Supplied photo, either printed or projected for the class
- Old photos brought from home
- An elder relative, friend or neighbor to interview
- Pencils or pens

GRADES: 7-8

Subjects: Social Studies, Photographic Arts

Standards:

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.1.A](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.1.B](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.1.C](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.1.A](#)

Skills: observation, deduction, inference, comparison, interviewing

Duration: 60-120 minutes (allow one hour to prepare for this activity and 1-2 class periods to complete it)

Class size: any; pairs

photographer was in the right place at the right time, most photographs from over a hundred or more years were posed for. They were taken with a specific purpose, forethought, and composition in mind. A photograph was not cheap to take and it could take minutes before the next photograph could be taken. It is the photographer, through his or her positioning of the camera's eye, who defines a picture's content and determines what will be included or omitted in a scene.

Thus, when a photograph is used as a primary source, it should be augmented by other information. Knowing who the photographer was, why, when, where it was taken, who requested it, and the identity of the subject(s) can shed light on the content and meaning of the image. Documents, artifacts, oral histories, and personal records help to augment a photograph into a larger pattern of events and behavior.

Historical archaeologists use old photographs in many ways. For example, by determining the earlier appearance of an area, such as the landscape and structures, an archaeologist can anticipate and better interpret features found during their research. Photographic images also help to identify fragments of recovered objects that may appear intact in a photo.

Photographs are a particularly vivid teaching device for students because they provide views of the past. They can provide a source of inquiry, explanation, and serve a lasting purpose by stimulating the visual and mental senses. Current day technologies allow for photographs to be taken quickly and often. It is certainly a different era for this type of primary source.

The photograph supplied in this lesson plan, taken in the 1910s in Iowa City, Iowa, portrays two women and small children in strollers on the corner of a sidewalk in front of a large brick home with an open porch. People are seated on the porch and others stand in a crowd behind the women, as if they are watching some sort of event. After analyzing the photo, students are to discuss how the couple's turn-of-the-century lifestyle compares to scenes captured in their own family photograph. This is to include interviews the students conduct with elders with the intention of adding information to the primary source photo. Students are also to discuss how an old photograph might be useful to an archaeologist.

PROCEDURES

Beforehand:

1. Several days before the activity, assign students two tasks to complete:
 - a. Students are to find an old family photo to bring to class for the day of the activity. The image can illustrate people, a place, or an event, but the scene should be as "unmodern" as possible.
 - b. Students are to interview an elder relative, friend, or neighbor who can provide information about the family photo. As a group, the class might develop two or three questions to ask the subjects about their lives and changes they have noticed over time related to any objects or events in the picture. Students should take notes of the participants responses to the questions. These notes will be used during the class activities.
2. Decide how students will be divided into two-person teams. Make copies of the student worksheet for each student.
3. Collect the family photographs prior to the day this lesson takes place. Instruct students not to show their pictures to classmates.

Day-of:

1. Introduce the lesson and review vocabulary by discussing how photographs are examples of primary sources of historical information. They are “first hand” documentation. Discuss with the students how visual records have changed over time (photography became more reliable about mid 1800’s), and how this might be useful to archaeologists. Concepts such as photograph quality, cost, availability and quantity compared to today can be explored.
2. Divide students into pairs or teams. Each pair or team are to analyze the included photograph, taking notes on their observations and perceptions. It might be helpful to use the questions on the worksheet to guide them.
3. As a whole group, have a discussion about observations and conclusions that have been made by the students. Suggestions for topics can include: clothing, age, purpose of event, objects, and what the people may be thinking or experiencing. Encourage students to make comparisons between the apparent lifestyle of people from the 1900s, and the comments received from their interviews.
4. Provide each student with a worksheet. Students then work with their partner or team exchanging their personal photos. They are to use the worksheet to guide them through analyzing someone else’s photograph. This task should be completed independently.
5. After the personal photographs have been analyzed by another student, the students are to verify their thoughts and conclusions through a secondary source, which is the student who brought that photograph in. If some worksheet questions still cannot be answered, the students should decide what other sources (people, books, archives) might provide the missing details.

WRAPPING UP

As a whole group or combining teams, invite volunteers to share their analyses of another student’s picture (primary source). That student can then share their knowledge of their own picture (secondary source) and their notes from the interviews they conducted. There are many topics to explore from here. Were the initial analysis and guesses accurate? Did students discover more questions to ask about their own photograph? How did having a secondary source effect the understanding and knowledge about the personal picture?



SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY



Photo source: https://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/islandora/object/ui%3Anoble_1333

Title: Women and small children in strollers, Iowa City, Iowa, 1910s

Creator: unknown

Time: 1910-1920

Country: United States

State: Iowa

Rights Management: No known copyright restrictions

