

Methods for Teaching with Photographs

The methods described below provide entry points for the use of photographs in teaching a variety of subjects and grade levels. These methods share the common purpose to encourage students to look more deeply at photographs. Looking deeply engages students' feelings and empathy, as well as their curiosity and questions. Using photographs may be helpful in arousing interest in a new subject or illustrating an important idea. It may intensify students' engagement with what they are studying. Students may reflect on the connections between their own lives utilizing prior knowledge and the current subject of inquiry. We are certain you will discover your own original ways of using the Rogovin photographs.

1. Before and After – Introducing Issues Through Portraits

This activity encourages students to deepen their observation and analysis of photographs and to see how social environments shape people's lives. Teachers can use this activity in a wide variety of units and subjects.

Before

Show a photograph to students. Ask students questions. What do you see in this photograph? What does the photo tell you about the person(s) in the photo? What does it mean to you? Have students discuss the photos as a class or write their own thoughts in a journal. Have the class read newspaper articles, a poem, or other related material.

After

After reading the material, ask the students, "Now what do you see in the photograph? How did the writing change your viewpoint?" Again, students can discuss their answers or write them before sharing. This second writing tends to be more observant and more attentive to feelings. All of this encourages a deeper discussion of the issues implicit in the photograph.



Native American

2. Here and There

Show two photographs of the same person, but in different contexts, e.g., at home and at work. This activity encourages students to imagine the complexity of a person's life. This exercise can act as a companion activity to learning about characters in literature or different cultures and stereotypes. Students can imagine photos about their family members and neighborhood.



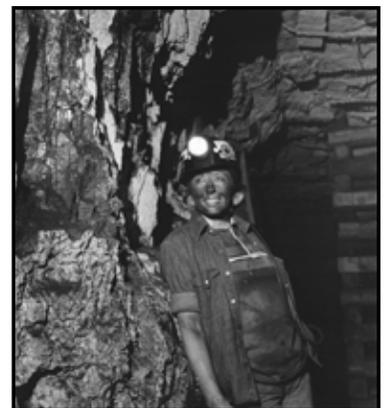
Family of Miners

Show Photo A

Ask the students to write or discuss what they see. What do you notice about the woman? Where does she live? What does she do for a living? What things are important to her?

Show Photo B

Ask students to write or discuss what they see now. What else do you notice about the woman? What else does this photo tell you about her? Is it surprising that she is a miner? Why? What do you think it would be like to be a woman miner? What questions would you like to ask her?



Family of Miners

3. Another Point of View - Interior Monologues

Students choose a person in a photograph and write in the first person as if they were that person. Have students imagine that they are “inside” the person in the photograph, writing about that person’s life, thoughts, and feelings. This “interior monologue” exercise encourages students’ empathy, imagination and questioning. Use the Lower West Side portfolio for this exercise as the same people reappear in three or more photographs taken over 30 years.

A variation of this exercise asks students to choose an object in the photo and write in the first person as if they were that object. Any portfolio may be used for this variation.

In this photograph of a German miner in the changing room, objects include the locks and chains for the changing baskets, his cigarette and coal dust on his face and chest. Ask students to use vivid language. “I am the coal dust on the miner’s face. I was in that craggy wall earlier today, but now I am sinking into his skin with every rub of his hand. I go into his lungs and will choke cells...”



Lower West Side



Family of Miners



Chile

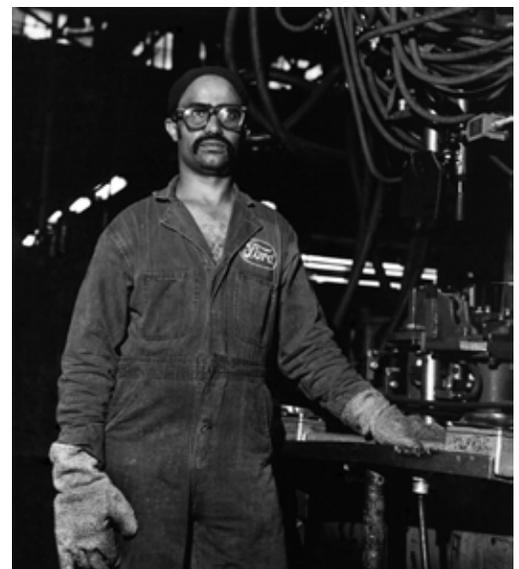
4. Interview the Subject

Choose a photograph for an interview.

Set up chairs for the subject(s) in the portrait and invite students to play their roles. Have the other students develop questions for the interview and discuss what they will ask each person. Encourage students to go beyond introductory questions and ask deeper questions as well. Focus the questions to develop subjects that the class is studying. Interviewing is both an art and a skill, one that students will develop and use in many situations throughout their lives.

5. Who’s Missing?

Who is not in the photograph? Who else affects the person(s) in the photograph every day? Why aren’t they in the picture? What circumstances might bring those people together in the same picture? How likely is that? For example, the foundry owner would rarely appear in the same photograph with the steel worker, but the owner determines wages, working and living conditions, and the health and safety of the worker (unless there is a Union). Students could write interior monologues from the point of view of who is missing.



Yemeni



Working People

6. Are “They” All Alike? Analyzing Stereotypes

A stereotype assumes that all people in a particular group are the same and that they can all be reduced to an oversimplified idea or image. Students view photos that will elicit common stereotypes relevant to a subject that they are studying. Students discuss what they think the person is like. The teacher provides more detailed facts about the individuals. Students discuss how the new facts change their perception of the people. The teacher follows with a discussion of the social use and misuse of stereotypes – in school, as students are teased, bullied or ostracized, on TV, in cartoons, reality shows, etc.



Lower West Side

7. Putting the Puzzle Together

Assemble a collection of photographs about an individual or family and ask students to put the pictures together to tell a coherent story. How do individuals change over time? How do they feel? What might they be thinking? How are their relationships changing? What may have happened to them? What is bringing them together?

Give each student one photo from the Lower West Side portfolio. After they have written answers to the questions above, ask students to put their photos on a table. Next, have students assemble the photos into groups of three or more photos of the same people over time. Thus, a student who began with a single photo will work with classmates to complete that triptych or quartet.

Ask the students to describe their impressions of the Lower West Side neighborhood of Buffalo, New York, based on the portfolio. How does it compare to their own neighborhood? What can you tell about daily life of people in that community in Buffalo? How does the neighborhood change or stay the same over time? Is there a community in their city that is similar in makeup to the one in the Lower West Side portfolio?

8. Interviews with Portraits

Students photograph and interview people for a project, e.g. a local historian about community cultural traditions, a family member or neighbor about their job/memories/travels. After studying portraits of people, help students plan how they will take pictures expressive of their interviewee's character.

9. The Photographer's Tools*

Students learn about the basic elements that the photographer works with – light, composition, focus and background, black and white or color. While viewing a photograph, discuss how the photographer used these elements to create the meaning and expressiveness of a photo.

10. The Photographer's Relationships*

How does a photographer relate to the people in his/her pictures? As passerby, observer, an acquaintance, friend or peer? Outsider? What kind of relationship do they have? How does the person(s) in the photograph seem to feel about having their picture taken? What is the photographer's point of view? What is the photographer looking for? How does a photographer show the person in a natural moment? What enables a photographer to express the essence of a person? What precautions might a photographer take? Why? What is at risk?

How does the photographer get beyond a "Kodak smile" or a stilted posing for the camera? Students view and talk about many photographs to develop answers to these questions. Students share photographs they have taken, and compare how people presented themselves to be photographed whatever the choice of camera (SLR- single lens reflex, digital, disposable, or cell phone cameras).

Milton Rogovin says that he doesn't pose the people he photographs—they pose themselves. Do you get that sense from looking at his photos? Find other photographers' work in books or elsewhere and see how they photograph people. Is it from a distance? Or does the photographer seem to have a relationship with the subject of the image? How are people "misrepresented"?

*For a more detailed discussion of teaching about the elements of photography, see the sample Photography Class Projects.