

Tips for Teachers – Teaching

Using Historical Photographs in the Classroom

Tom Morton

Suggestions for Teaching

You need not do these in this particular order, nor do you need to include all of the suggestions.

Guide students to observe closely:

Students need to look before they leap, in other words, to linger over details and reflect on what they see. On computer and tv screens, today's students live with fast paced, ephemeral images. They are not used to close reading. Hence, their observation may be limited or partial.

Teach students to scan slowly the photograph: to move their eyes from side to side, top to bottom, and corner to corner, for 30 seconds to two minutes. Then ask them, "What do you see?" Almost every student will be able to contribute. If they neglect what you think are key features, ask, "Can anyone find...?"

Connect to context (but maybe only a little at first):

History educator Jane Card refers to this decision as "walking the tightrope"¹: do we give lots of background information so that students make valid inferences or do we want them first to puzzle over the photo, generate questions and hypothesize answers? This will depend on your learning objectives but at some point students will need enough context to test their inferences for plausibility.

Cultivate curiosity:

The best quality to bring to reading pictures is curiosity. Build on student observations and whatever they have for background knowledge to make inferences and build curiosity.

A useful broad inquiry question towards this end would be "What story might we tell about the Gold Rush using this photograph?" Continue to move between the source, background knowledge and inference to answer the question.

The video "Face Value vs. Inferences" for "Men posed on a flume" that accompanies this guide can support this step.

¹ Card, J. (2008) *History Pictures: Using visual sources to build better history lessons*. London: Hodder, 7.

Consider the photographer's purpose:

The reasons for taking a photo often parallel "Author's Purpose" in reading literature. Was the photograph taken to inform, to entertain, to persuade, to express a feeling or insight? ²

It is most likely connected with its intended audience. "Men standing on a flume, William's Creek" is not in a studio, but the central position and the proud pose of T.R. Patullo suggests strongly that Patullo commissioned the photo to entertain and impress friends and relatives.

Generate questions:

Ask students to consider what further questions they might ask about the photos. [The BC Heritage Fairs website](#) offers ways to guide students to write meaningful inquiry questions.

Have students write hypotheses:

Have students answer the inquiry question that you posed at the beginning—"What stories of the Cariboo Gold Rush does this photo help to tell?" In addition, students can answer one of their own choice or one chosen by class consensus. Share some of the hypotheses.

Dig Deeper

Corroborate or challenge with other sources such as those in "[B.C.'s Gold Rush](#)" Pathway.

Revisit the image and revise hypotheses:

As you look at different sources provide frequent opportunities to rethink their 'story' or hypothesis.

Let students know that it is okay to be uncertain about their conclusion. It can even be more than okay—to stay curious and have further questions to explore are qualities of a good historian.

Reflect on the concept of evidence and historical photographs:

Help students see the connection between evidence and conclusions by asking how analyzing photographs might reflect the work that historians do and about other times and places when they might want to look closely at photographs and cross-check their conclusions with alternative sources.

² Mac Austin, H. and Thompson, K. "OneHistory Discussion Questions for Images", *OneHistory.org*, <http://onehistory.org/imagequest.htm> .