

# Every Picture Tells a Story: Teaching the Past with Photoblogs

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Nearly every day our students are using social media and images to tell stories about who they are and what they value. Unfortunately, some do not think very carefully about which images they choose to share or how their images convey unintended or unwanted messages. Photoblogging provides an opportunity to not only build on our students' skills and fascination with using images to convey messages, but also teach the media literacy skills they desperately need. In this article, I provide an explanation of photoblogging and how teachers can use this concept to engage students in historical inquiry, build on their existing technology skills, and learn to think critically about the images they share and see all around them.

## Photoblogging and Historical Inquiry

Blogs can be used by teachers to showcase student work for parents and others, or they can be used by students to highlight their own work. Blogs require no programming skills and allow users a space to post articles, photographs, and videos with relative ease. Websites like Blogger, Wordpress, and Weebly allow free access to templates, and are compatible with most schools. While our students are often referred to as digital natives, this does not mean they are automatically or naturally proficient at all technology. Since blogs are relatively easy to navigate, students' focus remains

on the social studies content they are learning.

In a social studies classroom, blogs can highlight what students have learned in a given unit, can serve as a collaborative space to post research, and can ultimately promote a student-centered learning environment. Blogging can help students practice writing in a more authentic setting, especially if students' blogs are made open to the public. While blogs are used to showcase student work, they are often still teacher-initiated and teacher-controlled. A traditional blog may use photos to tell the story; however, the entire purpose of a photoblog is to showcase a photograph and to tell the story behind that photo.

A popular example of a photoblog is the website *Humans of New York*.<sup>1</sup> Brandon Stanton began this photoblog telling the stories of New Yorkers and posting their pictures to his website.<sup>2</sup> Combining an image with a story can be very powerful, potentially fostering an emotional connection and empathy.

A recent article that I coauthored described the use of photoblogs to engage students in learning about the American Civil War beyond the battles, generals, and politics.<sup>3</sup> In the proposed lesson, students investigate people of the era and create their own photoblog, called the *Humans of the Civil War*. The purpose is to compile a digital narrative of the Civil War that disrupts the traditional focus on political and military

history. To do so, students research and compile a more complete picture of who was involved in and impacted by the war. Students conduct research, interview each other (in character) to determine the "story," post a picture representing their individual, and then provide a written narrative. As indicated within this project, the design and production of a photoblog provides a powerful context for students to engage in historical inquiry.

A photoblogging project/activity can utilize all four dimensions of the C3 Framework, thus providing students opportunities to develop questions and plan inquiries; apply disciplinary concepts and tools; evaluate sources and use evidence; and communicate conclusions.<sup>4</sup> The Inquiry Design Model (IDM) provides a "blueprint" for teachers to build historical inquiry into their social studies classes.<sup>5</sup> Photoblogging, by its very nature, is inquiry-based and fits seamlessly into an IDM lesson plan. The photoblog is the medium through which students communicate their conclusions, but in order to produce the product, they must ask questions, conduct research, analyze sources, and use discipline specific concepts and contexts.

## Photoblogging and Media Literacy

Previous articles have highlighted the challenges social studies teachers face when using technology for research purposes, especially in a time when

## Key Questions to Ask When Analyzing Media Messages

Developed by the National Association for Media Literacy Education

### Audience & Authorship

- Who paid for this?
- Who made this message?
- Why was this made?
- Who is the target audience (and how do you know)?
- Who might benefit from this message?
- Who might be harmed by it?
- Why might this message matter to me?
- What kinds of actions might I take in response to this message?

### Messages & Meanings

- What is this about (and what makes you think that)?
- What ideas, values, information, and/or points of view are overt? Implied?
- What is left out of this message that might be important to know?

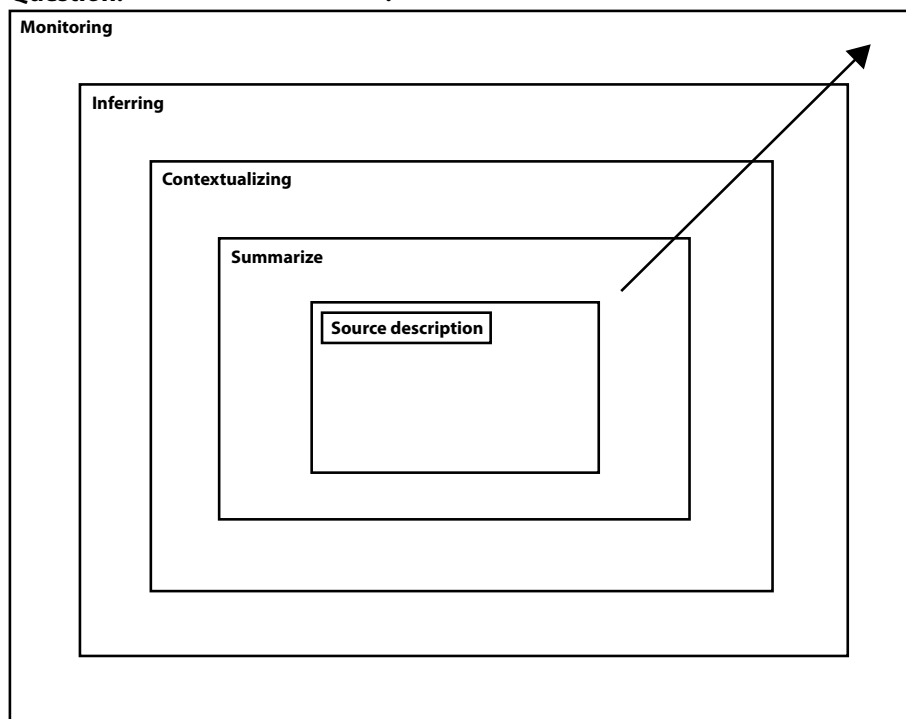
- What techniques are used?
- Why were those techniques used?
- How do they communicate the message?
- How might different people understand this message differently?
- What is my interpretation of this and what do I learn about myself from my reaction or interpretation?

### Representations & Reality

- When was this made?
- Where or how was it shared with the public?
- Is this fact, opinion, or something else?
- How credible is this (and what makes you think that)?
- What are the sources of the information, ideas, or assertions?

### Question:

?



SCIM-C is an instructional technique designed to scaffold students' historical thinking. This template helps students corroborate their findings on multiple primary sources. For more information, see the Virginia Tech webpage [www.historicalinquiry.com/#part2](http://www.historicalinquiry.com/#part2).

fake news is all too prevalent.<sup>6</sup> Engaging students in analysis and production of photoblogs provides a context to teach students invaluable media literacy skills that can help them learn to critically evaluate the images they are bombarded with every day.

Media literacy “models a constructivist approach to document-based analysis that asks students to apply key content to a *focused and complex analysis of messages, meaning, authorship, audience, representations and reality* [italics added].”<sup>7</sup> Social studies educators can use photoblogs to teach students close reading skills needed to analyze the visual messages they both receive and create. Researching the story behind an iconic historical photograph provides an opportunity to investigate not only who created a particular image and why it was created, but how this image might impact different social groups. When building a photoblog, students become the “authors” and are building a message rather than analyzing one. In this role, they must think carefully about the



Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, NYWT&S Collection, [reproduction number, e.g., LCUSZ62-11157].

Rosa Parks rides a Montgomery, Alabama, bus (Dec. 21, 1956).

credibility of the images and sources they utilize, their intended audience, and the overall message their photoblog conveys.<sup>8</sup> In this manner, teachers can utilize photoblogs to engage students in historical inquiry while building their media literacy skills. The following outlined lessons use photoblog analysis and creation to integrate core principles of the IDM and media literacy.

### Lessons Using Photoblogs and Photovoice:

The difference between a photoblog and photovoice is that photoblogs can use historical photographs while photovoice highlights students' voices via their photo-taking perspectives (i.e., their original photographs) and their voice in narrating the story of a photograph or series of photographs.<sup>9</sup> The ensuing lesson ideas integrate the skills of both historical inquiry and media literacy. Students take on the role of author. They must think carefully about their audience when selecting images and drafting dialogue, keeping in mind the messages

that their images convey.

**Iconic Photographs:** (See page 111 for the complete lesson plan using the Inquiry Design Model.) In this lesson, students are asked to analyze the compelling question: "How do images shape our understanding of events, people, and the world around us?" Using the iconic photograph of Rosa Parks sitting in the front of a bus (above), students research, reflect, and draft arguments on the following questions: (1) What factors should be considered when selecting an image associated with a historical event or current event? (2) How does the photograph shape our understanding of a historical event or figure? (3) How does a photograph reflect larger political, economic, and cultural change? After completing research on the significance of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycotts, students can put together a photoblog that tells Rosa Parks's story in 10 sentences or less.

Teachers can modify this lesson by presenting students with three photo-

graphs and asking students to analyze each photograph and then pick the one they deem the most historically significant. Students must be able to defend their answers when presenting to the class.

**Student Photographs:** Every year in my social studies methods class I ask students to take photographs of civic engagement in their everyday lives.<sup>10</sup> They are oftentimes perplexed. The only requirements are that the photographs be original and that students provide voice-over commentary about what they chose to photograph and why. Students are asked to start with 10 photographs and then narrow the group to the 5 photos that most represent civic engagement. Yet they still struggle. What is civic engagement they ask? Many admit to Googling the topic before starting on the project. They moan and groan about this assignment, yet on presentation day admit they ultimately enjoyed the project and learned more about civic engagement than from books and lectures. Student

## Lesson Plan Using the Inquiry Design Model

Historical Significance and Photographs		
Compelling Question	How do images shape our understanding of events, people, and the world around us?	
Standards and Practices	D2.His.3.6-8. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to analyze why they, and the developments they shaped, are seen as historically significant. D2.His.6.6-8. Analyze how people’s perspectives influenced what information is available in the historical sources they created.	
Staging the Question	Students make decisions every day about what images they like and dislike, what images they choose to post on social media, and how these are a representation of their realities. Students also interpret images and decide which ones are worthy of a response. Ask students to share with a partner the latest picture they posted to a social media account and explain what message they were trying to send. After students look at their own photographs, display a recent image that has gone viral and engage students in a conversation about why this particular image was deemed significant. Have students create a list of the reasons why they think a photograph or other form of media is significant.	
Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3
What factors should be considered when selecting an image associated with a historical event or current event?	How does the photograph shape our understanding of a historical event or figure?	How does a photograph reflect larger political, economic, and cultural change?
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
As a whole group, create a list of factors that should be considered. Is the list different for historical events and current events? Or do the same factors apply to both?	In small groups, analyze the photograph of Rosa Parks using the factors created by the whole group. Write a one-paragraph summary about how this particular photograph shapes our understanding of the civil rights movement.	In small groups (or individually) re-search the Montgomery Bus Boycott and create a graphic organizer (or mind map) that connects the photograph of Rosa Parks to the larger political, economic, and cultural change of the civil rights movement.
Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources
Source A: Key Questions to Ask When Analyzing Media Messages (NCSS position statement, <a href="http://www.socialstudies.org/publications/socialeducation/may-june2016/media-literacy">www.socialstudies.org/publications/socialeducation/may-june2016/media-literacy</a> ).	Source A: Any iconic photograph such as Rosa Parks sitting in the front of a bus. Source B: SCIM-C Graphic Organizer	Source A: “Rosa Parks and the Image of Respectability” ( <a href="http://www.aaihs.org/rosa-parks-and-the-image-of-respectability/">www.aaihs.org/rosa-parks-and-the-image-of-respectability/</a> ) Source B: SCIM-C Graphic Organizer
Summative Performance Task	Argument	As a class, create a photoblog for the Rosa Parks photograph. If you had to tell her story, using this photograph, in 10 sentences or less, what would you say?
Taking Informed Action	Extension	Write a one- or two-page essay on how the photograph of Rosa Parks sitting in front of the bus has changed our understanding of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the civil rights movement at large.
		Understand: Reflect on how your identity and point-of-view influenced your analysis of the Rosa Parks photograph. Assess: Discuss as a group how images shape our understanding of events, people, and the world around us. Act: As a class, select five images from current events and write a brief commentary (10 sentences or less) on how these images influence our understanding of key topics (e.g., immigration, climate change, marriage equality). Post images on either a class photoblog/webpage or around the school.

## Digital Storytelling Resources

**Digital Storytelling Contest**  
<http://distco.org/>

**Audio Digital Storytelling by Dr. Christy G. Keeler, Ph.D.**  
<https://christykeeler.com/AudioDigitalStorytelling.html>

**Using Blogs in a History Classroom**  
<https://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/teaching-guides/22261>

**18 Free Digital Storytelling Tools for Teachers and Students**  
<https://elearningindustry.com/18-free-digital-storytelling-tools-for-teachers-and-students>

**Photovoice YouTube Video**  
<https://youtu.be/kAszQx62XxE>

**Storycenter.org**  
[www.storycenter.org/](http://www.storycenter.org/)

**Edutopia.org**  
[www.edutopia.org/discussion/how-incorporate-digital-storytelling-empower-student-voice](http://www.edutopia.org/discussion/how-incorporate-digital-storytelling-empower-student-voice)

[www.edutopia.org/article/student-created-videos-classroom](http://www.edutopia.org/article/student-created-videos-classroom)

presentations range from voting, to donating blood, to serving in the military, and to taking field trips with youth to historic sites. Each presentation is unique to the student and represents his or her own interests, thoughts, and concerns.

In this activity, teachers are appealing to students' participatory nature and allowing students to decide what is important to them and to critically examine their own choices and voice.<sup>11</sup> This lesson idea differs from the previous two because the onus for providing relevant sources is on the student, not the teacher. And more so than in the previous examples, students can reveal their presentations using any form of media so long as their "voice" is highlighted; the students are responsible for creating something—a key concept of Dimension 4 of the C3 Framework. It is important, however, that teachers provide some basic structure for Photovoice assignments. First, teachers should provide a context for the assignment (background information) and a guiding prompt (such as "What does civic engagement look like in your community?"). Secondly, teachers should provide students with information about visual ethics (such as asking for permission to take someone's photograph).<sup>12</sup>

### Conclusion

Photoblogging provides social studies teachers with an opportunity to engage students in historical inquiry in a meaningful and relevant way. These lesson ideas are constructivist and offer opportunities for content acquisition (including media literacy), product completion (application of knowledge and skills), and process knowledge (understanding how the technology works). Students make decisions every day about what stories they are going to tell about themselves. On social media they make decisions about what pictures or videos to post and what to write. Images are the backbone of their stories. Students already have the skills necessary to complete a photoblog assignment; they just need the opportunity to apply these skills. ●

### Notes

1. Brandon Stanton, Humans of New York, [www.humansofnewyork.com](http://www.humansofnewyork.com).
2. The author only posted pictures that were approved by the participants. In the event the participant did not want her or his face shown, the photograph might only include the person's hands or feet.
3. Elizabeth Barrow, Janice Anderson, and Martinette Horner, "The Role of Photoblogs in Social Studies Classroom: Learning About the People of the Civil War," *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education* 17, no. 4 (2017), [www.citejournal.org/volume-17/issue-4-17/social-studies/the-role-of-photoblogs-in-social-studies-classroom-learning-about-the-people-of-the-civil-war](http://www.citejournal.org/volume-17/issue-4-17/social-studies/the-role-of-photoblogs-in-social-studies-classroom-learning-about-the-people-of-the-civil-war).

4. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, Md.: NCSS, 2013).
5. Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S. G. Grant, *Inquiry Design Model: Building Inquiries in Social Studies* (Silver Spring, Md.: NCSS, 2018).
6. Meghan McGlinn Manfra and Casey Holmes, "Media Literacy and Fake News in the Social Studies," *Social Education* 82, no. 2 (March/April 2018): 91-95.
7. "NCSS Position Statement: Media Literacy," *Social Education* 80, no. 3 (May/June 2016): 183, [www.socialstudies.org/publications/socialeducation/may-june2016/media-literacy](http://www.socialstudies.org/publications/socialeducation/may-june2016/media-literacy).
8. National Association for Media Literacy. <https://namle.net/publications/core-principles/>
9. This is the opinion of the author.
10. This assignment was adapted from a lesson plan originally housed at [www.ReadWriteThink.org](http://www.ReadWriteThink.org).
11. "NCSS Position Statement: Media Literacy."
12. StoryCenter, "Ethical Practice," [www.storycenter.org](http://www.storycenter.org).

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