Using Photographs as Teaching Tools

As a kindergarten teacher years ago, my Polaroid camera was never far from my side. My students loved to see pictures of themselves with their parents, friends, siblings, and relatives. I also used photographs to illustrate stories they invented and as an aid for developing pre-reading strategies. I realized then—and I’m even more convinced now—that photographs are an ideal way to engage young learners.

Years later, as a high school English teacher and yearbook adviser, I realized how powerful and poignant stories could be transmitted by a single, forceful photograph. I became conscious of how strongly adolescent students reacted to photographs and how they loved to take and share them. As a result, I developed activities and lessons that incorporated the use of photographs to weave connections between the stories they were reading and stories from their own lives. I found that photography also enhanced students’ writing, encouraged their responses, and helped them make connections with various types of literature, as well as cultures and races to which they had never been exposed.

The National Standards for the English Language Arts say that students should be able to “read a wide range of print and non-print texts” and to “use spoken, written, and visual language.” In addition, many of today’s high-stakes assessments require students to respond to photographs or other visual prompts. Although they represent a “visual generation,” today’s students need to be taught how to “read” and properly respond to pictures.

Photography in the Classroom

To begin using photography in the classroom, it is important that students first become comfortable and self-assured in their ability to interpret photographs. They should initially be encouraged to use personal or favorite photographs to develop the confidence to analyze unfamiliar photos. Displaying colorful and unusual photographs around the classroom can initiate discussions, generate questions, elicit theories, and stimulate analytic thinking. For example, asking students to bring in pictures that illustrate vocabulary words is a wonderful way to reinforce their ability to memorize those words. Asking them to find pictures that demonstrate mathematical theories, scientific phenomena, geographical land forms, or even literary themes can add a visual dimension to any lesson.

Photography has its own specialized vocabulary and, as a starting point, all students should be taught the definitions of background, foreground, figures,
and action. Since photography literally means “writing with light,” students also need to understand the importance of light (and dark) in the analysis of a photograph. Questions like “What do you think happened just before this picture was taken?” or “What do you think is going to happen next?” promote higher-order critical thinking and lively classroom discussion.

Principals and Photography

Principals can encourage school-wide interest in visual literacy by using photographs in hallway displays that emphasize school themes or goals (e.g., diversity, friendship, social values). Bulletin boards can be used to display newspaper and magazine photographs that highlight current or community events. And schoolwide contests can encourage students to conduct research to identify specific pictures of people or historic events. If budgets permit, principals might even consider getting cameras for their students. Local stores may be willing to donate inexpensive disposable cameras.

Digital cameras, while more costly, are ideal for student use because they do not require film and allow a great number of pictures to be taken and erased. If principals can provide a few digital cameras for each grade level, teachers can share them with their students. Digital cameras allow students to personalize their stories and reports, and to record their perceptions of the world. The results are powerful learning experiences for students and teachers alike.

The Power of Pictures

Students are often reticent to share personal narratives with an entire class, but this is an important step toward building classroom learning communities based on trust and an exchange of ideas. Photographs can help students share unique perspectives with their classmates. As students view pictures they or others have taken, they begin to realize and be energized by the limitless bounds of their creativity.

In short, photographs can become powerful teaching tools. As they become more and more frequently used in classrooms, educators will find that a picture can be worth even more than a thousand words.

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