



Using a Museum Photography Collection as a Bridge for Writing

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Abstract: Any single artifact in a museum possesses the potential to serve as a starting point for the viewer to interpret its meaning, develop an idea, and then generate a written piece. In this article, the authors describe steps for using a photography exhibit collection as artifactual inquiry.

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The inspiration for writing, and the way you get ideas and formulate opinions comes from a lot of different places.... Just look around [the museum], there is always something to think and write about.

The quote above from a teacher candidate in my teacher preparation course sums up the importance of visiting museums when teaching writing. Whether used as a freewriting exercise, or as a bridge for writing an essay, opportunities for writing are prevalent when touring and studying a museum photography collection. Photos in such a collection are artifacts and possess the ability to tell countless stories (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010). Any single artifact in a museum possesses the potential to serve as a starting point to interpret its meaning, develop an idea, and then generate a written piece.

Including the Study of a Photography Collection Within the Curricula

Both the Common Core and the National Council of Teachers of English standards for high school grades note the importance of analyzing and interpreting scenes from artistic media and of conducting research using a variety of sources, such as print, non-print texts, and artifacts. Using a photography collection in a museum as an artifact not only addresses national standards, it also provides students an opportunity to develop a greater awareness and understanding of their community, an opportunity to view, interpret, and analyze art that has environmental, social, and historical significance. Museums offer future teachers, and adolescents, opportunities and experiences with multiple forms of literacy (Barry, 2012; Eakle, 2009; Schwartz, 2008). Despite few studies on museum collaboration and writing instruction, there

is much research on using museums as informal education sites, particularly in the areas of science and social studies education (Greene, Kisida, & Bowen, 2014; Melber, & Cox-Peterson, 2005; Wetterlund, 2008). Such research indicates that students who attend a field trip to an art museum demonstrate improved critical thinking skills and historical empathy and tolerance, and for students from rural or high-poverty regions, the increase is even more significant (Greene, Kisida, & Bowen, 2014). In this article, we describe phases for using photography artifacts within the teaching of writing as an interdisciplinary experience.

Background

As part of a decade-long partnership between a university and an urban high school, we conduct a yearly writing camp that serves high school students who need additional support and strategies to pass the state mandated reading and writing exam. More than 80 teacher candidates seeking middle and high school teacher certification teach at the camp each spring. Teacher candidates teach strategies on how to write an effective essay, including how to respond to an essay prompt. Our goal is to empower these adolescents to develop a love for writing and to see college as a possibility. Because of the success of this camp and the value we find in working with urban adolescents, we initiated a new project this school year blending the resources of our local Amon Carter Museum of American Art with best practices for teaching writing. With this project, future teachers enrolled in a writing methods class learned about a photography collection at the local museum, learned strategies for teaching writing through photography, and then prepared and taught adolescents writing using the museum photography as a bridge for writing. It is important for future teachers to know approaches for using multimodal prompts when teaching writing. We describe the process we used for integrating a writing experience with the study of a photography artifact.

Learning to Read Photography Artifacts

Photography collections in museums communicate more than the time, place, and subject recorded in a photograph. Patrons learn the history of the time period, the history of the place, and the history and background of the subject and artist; they are able to better understand diverse experiences and societal issues, such as environmentalism and the intersection of nature and culture. The following phases may be useful to teachers as they consider approaches for connecting museum photography to reading and

writing in their own classrooms; these are also the steps we followed as we studied photography.

Phase 1: Study mentor texts. Before traveling to the museum, physically or virtually, read and study photography. Mentor texts are excellent photography books. First, give students the time to explore the books and talk about the photography with their peers; then, teach students to “read photographs.” Teachers need to explicitly teach strategies for reading photographs.

When reading photography, teach students to observe both literal and nonliteral messages portrayed through a photograph. Select a photo to study together. Just as we learn to develop deeper readings skills, students need to be taught how to develop deeper reading as they examine and read photography (Van Horn, 2008). See Figure 1 for questions that can be used as a guide to practice reading a photograph with your students; we used a photo from ESPN (http://www.espn.com/espn/page2/story/_/id/7095414/six-things-know-being-professional-bullfighter) as a guided practice in reading photography.

Phase 2: Visit with the museum staff about your objectives for the visit and museum resources available for the tour. We chose the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth because of our interest in connecting with a local museum as well as the fine collection of North American photography available at this museum. The museum’s permanent collection features paintings, photography, and sculpture by leading artists working in North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most of the works fall into the period from the 1820s through the 1940s. To prepare for our visit, we first visited with museum staff regarding the goals of our project: to appreciate and become more familiar with local photography, and to be able to discuss photography that involved content of time, place, and a societal issue, such as the environment and/or race or class, in order to connect to writing. From the conversations with the museum staff, we were then put in contact with a docent who had expertise in this photography; she was also a retired English teacher. Our docent then preselected 20 photos at Amon Carter Museum of American Art to study, and she prepared an oral overview and slideshow of the artist and his/her works.

We studied the photography of Dornith Doherty, a North Texas photographer who traveled the globe to construct a visual



Layers of Reading Photographs	Questions to Ask and Answer
1st Layer: Surface Level Reading	Who and/or what is in photo? Jot down what you see.
2nd Layer: Connecting Meaning	Does the photo remind you of someone you know, or a time or event in your life? Jot down how this photo connects to you on a personal level.
3rd Layer: Connecting Meaning to Writing	What do you want people to do, think, or believe—based on what you’ve learned from this photo? Use the photo as a starter for developing a claim (opinion to persuade).

Figure 1: Questions that teachers can use for guiding the study of photographs.

meditation on the planet’s botanical diversity. His work showcases the international seed banks and shares the beauty of seeds and their transformation into plants. This exhibition celebrates the completion of his seed project and is entitled *Archiving Eden*. The next photography collection we studied is titled *Nature/Culture* and presents the work of various photographers. This exhibition explores different parts of nature and humanity. In addition to showing how nature is featured in our environment, the collection recognizes the problems with the term when applied to snapshots, portraits, and Native American cultures. Luther Smith, a Fort Worth photographer, was also featured. He is known for photography of the Trinity River, and through his work, one can see how water is effectively managed and maintained. Smith’s photography was especially relevant as south Texas was devastated by floods at the time that we studied his photography. Preparing for using photography as an artifact within the teaching of writing involves knowing the history of the photographer and the significance of the photo in the exhibit.

Phase 3: *Visit and tour the museum.* After participating in a guided tour, in which the docent prepared information about each photographer, including their biographical and historical information, teacher candidates completed the writing exercise independently in which they read a photograph as described in the previous paragraphs. The students chose one photograph to “read” from the collection that we toured and then completed the steps of identifying the three layers of reading photography.

Phase 4: *Following the trip to the museum, connect the museum experience to writing.* Debriefing after the writing exercise is important. When we returned from the museum, each teacher candidate shared how he/she “read” their photo. Many were interested in environmental concerns and were mesmerized with the photography they viewed in the exhibit *Archiving Eden*. They were particularly interested in the seed banks worldwide—and what that means to society. There was much talk and discussion regarding the photography, which also generated ideas for writer’s notebook entries. Then, we discussed persuasive writing, the elements of persuasion, and how to develop a claim; we extended the discussion to converse about how teachers can then bridge the writing activity at the museum to the teaching of persuasive writing. First, it was important that we read mentor texts—not only persuasive essays but also essays in which the author used writing strategies to “show not tell.” We read a variety of texts, such as Mitch Albom’s (2000) essay published in the Detroit Free Press, “A Bullet’s Impact.” We discussed the persuasive elements

of the essay; we talked about how the author “shows not tells” through vivid descriptive writing and character dialogue. Future teacher also need to see examples of adolescents’ writing; we examined persuasive essays written by a ninth grader as she progressed through the writing process. At the conclusion, the first author taught lesson planning minilessons and held lesson planning conferencing workshops to prepare her students for their first lesson of teaching using photography.

Phase 5: *Teach what you learned.* The next phase involved traveling to an urban high school to share one of the photos from the Amon Carter Museum of American Art with adolescents as a means of talking and writing about photography. The teacher candidates studied in-depth one photographer from the exhibit, prepared a brief visual with highlights of the photographer and his/her exhibit, and prepared a lesson to guide students to read the photograph. All of their plans were discussed with and demonstrated to their peers and the first author in our lesson planning workshop class session. Such practice and teaching of the lesson prior to actually teaching adolescents is important. The adolescents we worked with were in a regular education English classroom composed predominately of students who were learning English as a second language. The adolescents enjoyed learning and talking about the photograph; however, when we guided them toward the third layer of reading a photo—connecting meaning to writing—they struggled. One teacher candidate explained,

I don’t know if we really understood how to get from the abstract the visual information, distill that into the argument, and then create a prompt from that. . . . I was so worried about getting them to interpret the images. Whereas, that work could have been done at another time. There was a disconnect [between discussion of the photography and making a claim—and making meaning of the photo].

Other teacher candidates made teaching decisions based on this first lesson and brought mentor texts to support meaning making for the next follow-up lessons. For example, another teacher candidate explained,

They were really on today. I tried to focus a lot, especially when I’m giving them a text to read and annotate and then report out. I try to get them to think about what they are reading as they read, being active readers. Just getting them to engage with that worked really well today. I had them highlight, not just thesis statements, but things that were just



interesting to them in the articles. And then highlight things that were confusing so we could discuss and clarify that knowledge. I think it made it all a lot more approachable. They picked claims effectively and picked super appropriate claims. They really get it. I did a formative assessment at the beginning, because it has been two weeks. I asked them each one of them about a different part of the persuasive essay and they did really well.

Much of what we know about effective writing instruction can also be applied to this experience. Adolescents need time to talk about their ideas, they need time to prewrite and generate ideas, they need time and space to draft, and they need exposure to mentor texts as they provide a guide for writing. For these adolescents in particular, they needed extended experiences with making meaning and with expressing their ideas in English as well as benefitted from additional support in generating ideas. Once they finally began drafting their ideas, there was less of a challenge for many.

Conclusion

One of the teacher candidates summed up the experience and what it meant: “We have officially come to the end of this journey. Five weeks, five lessons, and five hearts. I have learned so much about myself, adolescents, and the world of teaching during this project.”

There are so many benefits of integrating photography as artifacts into the teaching of writing. Such benefits include a greater awareness of the resources within the community and rich conversational opportunities for adolescents as well as for future teachers. For those students who struggle to write, language development is important in generating ideas for writing—and a museum experience is an excellent way to initiate conversation that then bridges into writing about the experience. Museums inspire ideas as well as provide a glimpse into the past and hope for the future.

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