Picturing the Past

Overview

This activity explores the use of historic photographs as a primary source, and challenges students to document their own history by creating a photo essay.

Learning Outcomes*

The student will understand how to use primary resources and read visual materials. The student will also learn the importance of documenting the present for historical purposes, and challenge them to think critically about their surroundings.

Activities/Procedures:

Part 1: Why Photographs?

Taking pictures has become a part of our daily lives—from snapping selfies to capturing our pet's every move to those annoying photos your mom insists on taking of you being "cute." But not too long ago, photography was a special activity. Before digital technology, photography relied on film, which was costly to buy and process. Now, we can take as many photographs as we want, whenever we want, without spending money or waiting to have them developed!

- What sort of things do you take pictures of? Think back over the past week. Have you taken any pictures? List below up to five things you photographed in the past week or month. Next to each image, write what you did with the photo. Did you send it to a friend? Did you post it on a social media app? Why did you take that photo?
- How do you think what people take photos of has changed over the last 100 years?
- Do you think the cost of film photography influenced what people chose to photograph?
- If you answered yes to the above question, how do you think this impacts the historical record? What kinds of images or scenes do you think might be missing from historic photograph collections?

Part 2: Reading Photographs

Photographs can capture unique perspectives, especially today! Photographs allow the viewer to share their opinion in a visual, artistic format. These images also become an important part of the historical record, because they *show* us how history happened. Look at the scans of film images below and answer the following questions.

A)

B)

C)

D)

Write a few sentences about each photograph. What did you learn from each? Why are these important?

A)

B)

C)

D)

Do you think these images would still be important if they were taken with a digital camera, in color, only a few years ago? Why or why not?

Part 3: Capturing History Today

While we may feel that there is an abundance of photographs out there—too many to keep track of—these are still important pieces of history, especially during big changes in society. Our experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic will be an important part of the world's history. One way we can help future generations learn about the pandemic is by capturing photographs that show people how the coronavirus impacted us and our community. Some example photographs are:

These two images were taken at a local grocery store in mid-March, 2020, right around when states began to issue shelter-in-place orders.

- What do these images tell you about what was happening in this community?
- Do you think these images will be of historical value in 50 years?

Part 4: Sharing Your Point of View

Time for you to document history! Create a photo essay of 8-10 images that document your experiences during quarantine. Before shooting, take some time to think about what you want to communicate people. Consider the following questions:

- How has quarantine changed my daily life?
- How do I feel about the virus?
- Do I social distance? If yes, how?

- What is important to me right now?
- What are others around me experiencing?
- What do I want people to know about my experience and feelings right now? What do I want people to know in 50 years?

Take your pictures and document when, where, and why each photograph was taken. Submit these descriptions along with the images and a one-page introduction to your photo essay.

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