

Using Visuals to Teach about Africa

Introduction

Visuals are key for student learning—more important for learning about Africa than perhaps for any other region of the world. The reason is simple: students arrive in class with a mental bank of African images which distort and stereotype the continent. They need to not just hear about Africa, but also see new and different images in order to fully take on the broader realities of the continent. In my first year teaching, I recall a high school senior asking me, “Ms. Brown, if Africa has cities, what do they look like?” His use of *if* was, shall we say, revealing.

Photos can be found in many places:

- Middle school-level books are a good source, such as country studies from publishers like Lerner, Children’s Press, Wayland, and Oxfam.
- National Geographic can be an excellent resource as long as you are cautious not to choose stereotypical photos of atypical people/things.
- Be careful about photos from African embassies, as they often cater to tourists wanting to see animals and to enjoy what is different or ‘exotic.’
- An excellent web source is <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/AfricaFocus/>, which is a large searchable database by country and topic, with free downloads of materials for classroom use..

Lesson Plan: Recognizing Bias Through Photos

Help your students uncover stereotypes they may hold about Africa by using a simple photo viewing activity.

Ask students to call to mind the world’s continents. (You might have them list the continents and brainstorm words or pictures they associate for each continent in their learning logs.) They will view 30 photographs and attempt to identify the continent in which the photograph was taken. This begins as a silent, written activity.

Have them number their papers 1-30. You can tell them that some of the photographs may seem easy to identify and others more of a challenge, but simply to make the best educated guess they can using clues in the pictures. Once you’ve gone through the 30, start at the top.

Project the photograph and ask students to share their answers, and what clues in the photograph contributed to their responses. (Here’s a good place to work in movement: stand up if you

thought this photo was Europe.) Students will eventually discover the pattern: all photographs are from Africa.

Ask students, what made some photos easy to identify and others a challenge? Have students discuss whether there were any patterns in their choices. One pattern typically surfaces: rural village scenes are generally correctly identified as Africa, whereas urban settings and images of wealth are attributed to Europe or North America. What does this tell us about our current images of Africa? Where do our images come from? Are these sources reliable? What questions arise from this activity for further inquiry?

Lesson Plan for Teaching with Photos

Select photos to use on a particular country or topic (be careful not to go for too broad a topic such as “Africa.”) The collection of photos should contain the following characteristics:

1. People (including some with children)
2. People doing activities (school, shopping, sports, arts, traveling, etc.).
3. Everyday diversity—urban and rural, rich and poor
4. Avoid stereotypical photos, such as of atypical peoples (e.g., the Maasai), wild animals, or atypical cultural practices. For more information on stereotypes, review the article “Criteria for Evaluating Materials on Africa” available here: <http://www.bu.edu/africa/outreach/criteria/>.
5. A brief (or long) description accompanying each photo.

Divide your students into pairs. Give each pair two photos, each different from the other (e.g., one rural, the other urban). The assignment is a scaffolded one.

Part One: Observe and say out loud to your partner as many things as possible in the photo (the reason for noticing as many things as possible is to encourage students to go beyond first impressions.)

Part Two: Write down on the table provided by the teacher what you see. For this part, the teacher makes up a grid with typical social studies categories on it, including:

1. Weather, including temperature (deducible from clothing)
2. All of the activities seen in the photo
3. Clothes
4. Natural surroundings (tree, clouds, water, etc.)
5. Human-made surroundings (such as stores, schools, roads, buses, cars)

Part Three: Take a small post-it and use it as a “bubble” to put above the head of one or more of the people in the photo. On the post-it, write what that person might be saying or thinking. This is the crucial step because it is at this point that students put themselves into the scene. They imagine themselves as Ghanaians walking to school and what they might be saying to their best buddy, or as Kenyan women in the market. They are no longer outsiders looking in.

Part Four: Title the photo.

Part Five: Share your photo with the rest of the class and explain to them what's in the bubble and why you chose that phrasing.

Part Six: Ask the class to reflect on and share what they have learned. Do this either after each photo or after all the photos.

One possible starter question is: In what ways are the people in the photos like people you know?

A concluding question might be: What photos of the US would you like to send to a school in Ghana, if you could? This question reinforces the concept that Ghana is a country just like the US is a country, and to get kids thinking about what are the main things that go on in their world. As a teacher you could ask the kids to think of what the parallel images of the US would be to the photos they have just seen of, say, Ghana or of Kenya.