

Visual Literacy

Dorothea Lange: Eye on America

This issue's American history play (pp. 18-21) focuses on Dorothea Lange, whose poignant photographs captured bleak moments in U.S. history in a way that words could not. Use this lesson plan to help students "read" Lange's photos and develop visual-literacy skills. This lesson was written for *JS* by Karen Kellaheer, a substitute teacher in Warren County, New Jersey, and former Scholastic editor.



Karen Kellaheer

PHOTO COURTESY OF KAREN KELLAHEER

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- observe and describe historic photographs.
- use their observations to draw conclusions.
- apply what they learn by taking their own documentary photos.

PREPARE

Preview some of Lange's photos in the Web link section of the lesson plan (p. T-3). Allow students Internet access to view them, or print out several. (Include captions for historical context.) Purchase several inexpensive disposable cameras for the last part of the lesson.

ENGAGE

Ask: What does the expression "One picture is worth a thousand words" mean? How might it apply to historical photos in particular?

TEACH

1. After students read the play aloud, ask them to find context clues that help identify Lange's purpose in taking photos. *Examples:* "People need to know what's going on here!" (p. 20); "The peo-

ple in these camps want their story told, and I intend to tell it." (p. 21)

2. Direct students' attention to the examples of Lange's work that appear on both spreads. Point out that when we read text, we identify words and sentences, then use thinking skills and prior knowledge to make sense of them. When we "read" images, we observe details in a picture, then think critically about what those details mean.

3. Have students work in pairs to choose a Lange photo that interests them from the play or from examples that you printed out earlier.

4. Use the following questions to help students make sense of the photo they have chosen.

Observe:

- Are there people in the photograph? If so, describe their appearance, clothing, actions, and facial expressions. If not, what is the content of the photo?
- What kinds of objects or buildings do you see?
- To which part of the photo do your eyes go first?

Analyze:

- What does the title and/or caption tell you about the photo?
- What message do you think

Lange was trying to send when she took the photo?

- How does the photo make viewers feel?
- How does the photo help us understand this period in history?

5. Guide students toward the realization that photographers designate what they think is important or meaningful. They may zoom in on one person or thing, leaving out other details. Photographers are as much a part of their photos as writers are part of their text.

EXTEND

Challenge students to take photos that would tell future generations about student life in the U.S. in 2009, as Lange's photos shed light on the 1930s and 1940s. Have students take turns with several disposable cameras to document typical student life, trying to capture emotions as well as facts. (Remind them to get permission from subjects before taking any photos.) Collect all of the photos, then let students choose favorites for an "Our Eye on America" display.