Photography and Social Justice

*Untitled*, Sabinah Lopez, 2018

**Grade levels:** 9–12

**Duration:** One 45-minute classroom period
Learning Objectives

Can a photograph inspire action?

Message to Educators

Do photographs merely document, or do they always express a point of view? Composition, point of view, lighting: there are many tools at a photographer’s disposal. Consciously or unconsciously, the photographer’s intent is always in the work. This lesson asks: If you know the change you want to see in the world, how can you approach photography with that intent so that it becomes a tool to shine light on social issues and inspire action in others?

This lesson plan includes photography examples that speak to social justice and can spark discussion, as well as a list of materials and tools.

You do not need to be practiced at facilitating discussions using art to effectively lead this lesson. Getty is committed to supporting meaningful dialogue through art, and the lesson plan was created with educators to carefully walk you through the steps.

Lesson Plan Three: Photography and Social Justice

In this lesson, students explore how photographers can become advocates, and how photographs and other documentary evidence can both chronicle and persuade. In the discussion, the group will explore intended and unintended consequences when a photographer is also an advocate. As practice, students are challenged to find those telling details by photographing significant artifacts that figure in social justice advocacy. In the reflection, students can process their work and move forward in understanding their own roles as advocates.

Associated Standards

- Getty SJA LO (Getty Social Justice and Advocacy Learning Objective): Identify figures, groups, and events that play a part in the worldwide history of social justice.
• CCSS (California Curriculum State Standard): ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

• CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

• CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.5: Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphic, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence, and to add interest.

**Materials**

- Projector
- Photograph from Getty Unshuttered community
- Photographs from Getty Museum collection
- Graphic organizer
- A digital camera or smartphone

**Vocabulary**

**Advocate, Advocacy**
Someone who publicly supports and speaks up for an idea, a cause, or members of an identity group. Efforts to bring attention to social causes that need support.

**Classism**
Prejudiced thoughts and discriminatory actions that devalue people of certain socioeconomic classes, based on income, education, occupation, or economic status.

**Colonialism**
The invasion, dispossession, or political control of a territory or group of people, resulting in long-term institutionalized inequality in which the colonizer exploits the colonized.
Identity
An individual’s distinguishing characteristics. May include age, gender, religious or spiritual affiliation, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, ability, education, and socioeconomic status. Some identities confer majority status or privilege, while some confer unequal treatment.

Justice, Injustice
In different contexts, “justice” refers to both moral correctness and fairness, and also the rule of law. By contrast, “injustice” usually describes unfairness.

Oppression
The systemic use of power and privilege to disenfranchise, dominate, or marginalize a group of people, for the benefit of another group.

Racism
Prejudiced thoughts and discriminatory actions by individuals or institutions with power, based on perceived racial groups, to benefit a dominant group. Racism differs from mere prejudice, hatred, or discrimination, because of the power dynamics employed to carry out systematic discrimination through institutional policies and practices, and by shaping cultural beliefs and values that support racist policies and practices.

Upstander
A person who chooses to take positive action in the face of injustice. Can refer to specific events or incidents, or to broader societal conditions. The opposite of a “bystander,” a person who is present or associated, but does not take part.

Instructional Plan

Introduction
Is it possible, or even desirable, for a photographer to be a neutral observer? The questions for inquiry at the center of the lesson include: How do photographs affect a viewer’s emotional response? How can photographs influence a viewer’s understanding of a subject or situation? What changes when a viewer understands more context around a photo? Can the audience’s feelings translate into social action?
Set the Stage

Project the photograph shown below. Discussion can begin by simply asking students what they notice.

*Ten-Year-Old Spinner in North Carolina Cotton Mill*, negative 1908; print later, Lewis W. Hine, gelatin silver print. The J. Paul Getty Museum

Questions for discussion:

- What do you notice first about this image?
  - Describe the subject of the photo. (A young girl in a factory or industrial setting.)
  - What do you think the photographer is interested in communicating about the subject? (The young girl has a direct gaze that communicates the attitude of someone who is much older. She stands with one hand on the machine next to her, suggesting that she is very used to the location and the work of the factory.)
  - What details do you notice in the background? (The setting is very sparse, it is clearly a factory of some sort, there are machines far into the distance, and the out-of-focus background seems to show the high ceilings and tall windows of a large space.)
  - What details do you notice in the foreground? (The girl wears worn, rumpled clothes, her hands seem dirty and worn, and her hair is practically pulled back from her face and not styled.)

- Does anything change when you know how the artist titled it? (*Ten-Year-Old Spinner in North Carolina Cotton Mill* confirms that the young girl works in this factory.)

- Does anything change when you know a bit more about the artist?

- What story do you feel the photographer is telling? What story would you use this photograph to tell?

- Is the photographer merely documenting, or does he have a perspective on the subject? What makes you arrive at this interpretation?

Lewis W. Hine

In the early 1900s, sociologist Lewis W. Hine (1874-1940) used photography as a form of social documentary and a tool for social reform. He contributed to exhibitions and publications of the National Child Labor Committee, and his influential photographs led to changes in labor laws in the United States. During the Great Depression, he photographed for the Red Cross, bringing attention to issues such as drought and unemployment.

View Lewis W. Hine photographs in the collection: [https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/artists/1566/lewis-w-hine-american-1874-1940/](https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/artists/1566/lewis-w-hine-american-1874-1940/)
Discuss: Photography as Advocacy

Project the photograph below without the caption, and invite students to discuss it in the context of photography and advocacy.

*Flávio da Silva, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1961, Gordon Parks, gelatin silver print. The J. Paul Getty Museum, purchased in part with funds provided by the Photographs Council. © The Gordon Parks Foundation*
Questions for discussion:

- What do you notice first about this image? (It’s a portrait of an emaciated, ill child, in a dark interior that’s in bad condition.)
- What do you think the photographer is interested in communicating about the subject?
  - What is the position of the subject, and his scale within the frame? (He is centered in the frame and looking directly at the camera, as in a traditional formal portrait. He is, in fact, poor and sick.)
  - How did the photographer use color, shadow, and lighting? (Black-and-white film, deep shadows, and strong contrast between light and dark make the photograph dramatic.)
  - What is the subject wearing or holding? (He appears to be wearing dirty, ragged clothing; the neckline of his shirt echoes the curve of his chin and points the viewer’s eye to the subject’s face.)
  - What do you notice about the foreground and background? (There’s very little background except for a wall; the dark backdrop lets the subject’s hair merge into it, further highlighting his gaunt, pale face; the subject is standing on fabric of some sort—perhaps a bed?)
- What do you think the artist is trying to show or explain?
- Does anything change when you read the caption? (Now we know when and where it was made, and by whom; it suggests an American who traveled to Brazil, possibly to photograph in the favela (slums) there.)
- Does anything change when you know more about the artist?
- Does your interpretation change when you know more about the circumstances of the photograph and the aftermath of its publication? This question may provoke discussion about classism, colonialism, racism, oppression, and bystanders and upstanders.
- Looking once again at the photograph, what to you are the most telling details in it? What emotions does it spark in you? How do the details contribute to your reaction?
Gordon Parks (1912-2006) portrayed American life and culture through photography, with a focus on race relations, poverty, civil rights, and urban life, showing a deep commitment to social justice. In 1961, as part of an assignment for *Life* magazine in Brazil, he photographed Flávio da Silva, an ailing boy who lived with his family in one of Rio de Janeiro’s working-class neighborhoods, which are known as favelas. Parks’s reportage resulted in donations from *Life* readers for Flávio’s care, but it also sparked controversy for its depiction of poverty in Brazil.

For more, see: *Gordon Parks: The Flávio Story*, Getty Museum exhibition website and download the gallery text: [http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/gordon_parks](http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/gordon_parks)  
[https://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/gordon_parks/downloads/GPF_Web_Text_PDF.pdf](https://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/gordon_parks/downloads/GPF_Web_Text_PDF.pdf)


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**Practice: Photography as Document or Memorial**

Having learned about photographers who advocated for social justice, it’s now time for a challenge. This can be a good point to call out photography and narrative skills. In the earlier exploration of Gordon Parks’s photo of Flávio da Silva, we discussed elements such as framing, color, shadow, lighting, foreground and background, and symbolic objects. The related photography skills videos listed under Other Resources can also serve as quick skill refreshers. Ask how they will apply these skills and understandings in their own practice.

Encourage students to continue their practice at their homes and in their neighborhoods. Assigning the challenge as homework, if possible, affords them time to work on the assignment, and the opportunity to find and explore artifacts from their lives.
Reflect

Reflection can take place in the group setting or individually. Ideally, have students share one to three photos taken in response to the challenge. They can each choose to speak about their intention with the photo(s), or not. Having the viewers provide positive feedback is key to the exercise. However, sharing can be a vulnerable moment for students. Use your best judgment about whether a group reflection is appropriate, and enlist the support of your students to create a safe space.

Questions for discussion:

- What is the first thing you think a viewer notices about the photograph(s)?
- What were you trying to communicate about the subject?
- What did you discover about yourself, and about others, in the course of the project?
- What was challenging, and why?
- What part are you most proud of, and why?
- What would you do differently next time?

Assessment

- Observe the group’s discussion of the lesson. Assess contributions to the discussion. Did students pose thoughtful questions? Did they respond to questions with reasons and evidence? Did they listen to different points of view? Did they clarify and challenge ideas and conclusions when appropriate? Did they synthesize evidence and ideas?
- In the Reflection section, assess student feedback for clarity and thoughtfulness.
- Encourage students to share their personal responses to the photography challenge on the Unshuttered platform.

Thank You…

...for your commitment to using art to inspire youth creating social change in their communities. Please adapt and improve upon this lesson plan to meet the needs and age range of your group. Now is the time! We are grateful for
educators like you who listen, learn alongside their students, and inspire action.

Resources

Related photography skills videos:

Candid Portrait: https://youtu.be/FebvMZWsQww

Composition: Leading Lines: https://youtu.be/DdtxbCjBo