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Visual Art Lesson Plan: Dorothea Lange and the General Caption

Grades

9-12

Subject Areas

Visual Arts

English Language Arts

Media Type

Photography

Estimated Time

Independent project

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Student Learning Objectives

Students will learn about twentieth-century American documentary photographer Dorothea Lange and her work with the Farm Security Administration. By exploring a series of her photographs and the writing she paired with it, they will prepare to then conduct a photographic investigation of their own or a neighboring community. Students will create a series of documentary photographs and research and write a general caption for the group.

Context

In the 1930s, the twin cataclysms of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl inspired a group of socially conscious photographers to capture the mass exodus of Americans from their homes and farms. Photographer Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) began her career as a portrait photographer but in the midst of the Great Depression, she turned her camera to the streets, documenting the experiences of her fellow Americans. In 1935 she began working for the Farm Security Administration (FSA—a program of the New Deal). In this work, she and other photographers traveled around the country taking photographs for the government to help show what was happening in the United States. This extensive documentary project helped motivate Congress to provide relief to those greatly affected by the Depression and Dust Bowl. The photographs are stored at the Library of Congress and are in the public domain.

In the FSA project, Lange's title was "field investigator, photographer." She prepared some, but not too much for her research trips. When she returned home, she would read more to learn more about the context of the photographs she took. She said, "To know ahead of time what you're looking for means you're then only photographing your own preconceptions, which is very limiting and often false."¹ The photographers were expected to submit a General Caption to accompany their images. Lange perfected this method of pairing image and descriptive, informative text.

Essential Questions

- How can documentary photographs effect change?
- How can artists exercise social conscience?
- How does art help us to understand the lives of people of different times, places, and cultures?
- How is art used to impact the views of a society?

¹ Quoted in Spirn, Anne Whiston, *Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange's Photographs and Reports from the Field* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008), 20. This is a great resource about Lange and her General Captions.

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National Visual Arts Performance standards

Anchor Standard 1.1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 1.2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 1.3: Refine and complete artistic work.

Anchor Standard 2.1: Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation.

Anchor Standard 2.2: Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation.

Anchor Standard 2.3: Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

Anchor Standard 3.1: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard 3.2: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Anchor Standard 4.2: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

English Language Arts Standards

CCR Anchor Standard RL.1 – Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCR Anchor Standard RL.6 – Assess how point of view, perspective, or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CCR Anchor Standard RL.7 – Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

CCR Anchor Standard RI.2 – Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

CCR Anchor Standard RI.4 – Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

CCR Anchor Standard W.2 – Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCR Anchor Standard W.5 – Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCR Anchor Standard SL.2 – Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

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Resources

Meadows, Rae. "Dorothea Lange and the Art of the Caption." *Contexts* 14, no. 4 (November 2015): 66–69. doi.org/10.1177/1536504215611899 (also enclosed at the end of this document)

Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives in the Library of Congress, Washington, DC loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa

Webcast "About the FSA Collection" with speaker Carl Fleischhauer. 2011/09/13. Running time: 11 minutes. loc.gov/item/WEBCAST5541

"Dorothea Lange's 'Migrant Mother' Photographs in the Farm Security Administration Collection: An Overview," Prints and Photographs Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, DC loc.gov/rr/print/list/128_migm.html

Dorothea Lange General Captions and accompanying Image Groups

General Caption No. 19, [Route 501, Person County, North Carolina], July 5, 1939; Call number LOT 1495, General Caption No. 19 [P&P]; Reproduction number LC-DIG-ppmsca-12500, loc.gov/item/2006682428

Image group that would include some of these images: *Person, Orange, and other counties in northern North Carolina. July 1939. Tobacco farms in Person County* loc.gov/pictures/collection/coll/item/2004678476

General Caption No. 46, [String bean harvest, Marion County, Willamette Valley, Oregon], August 1939; Call number LOT 327, General Caption No. 46 [P&P]; Reproduction number LC-DIG-ppmsca-12502, loc.gov/item/2006682430

Image group that would include some of these images: *West Stayton, Marion County, Oregon. Aug 1939. Migratory bean workers in camp and in the bean fields* loc.gov/item/2004673916

General Caption No. 49 (attached to lesson).

Images: see some from Lot 437, loc.gov/search/?fa=partof:lot+437

Photogrammar—a website that geographically organizes the 170,000 photographs created by the United States Farm Security Administration and Office of War Information (FSA-OWI) from 1935 to 1945. For example, you can find images Dorothea Lange took in North Carolina. photogrammar.yale.edu

The Great Depression Resource Page for Teachers at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/themes/great-depression

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Vocabulary

Documentary photography: Documentary photography is a style of photography that provides a straightforward and accurate representation of people, places, objects and events, and is often used in reportage.

Farm Security Administration (FSA): The Resettlement Administration (later Farm Security Administration in 1937) was founded in 1935. It created planned communities for individuals greatly affected by the Depression, revitalized land and gave loans to farmers. The Historical Section (overseen by Roy Stryker) hired photographers to document social history and current conditions in American life. The archive is available at the Library of Congress.

Lesson

- Begin by asking students what photographs have inspired a significant emotional response for them. Which photographs, if any, have caused them to want to act in response? Which photographs have helped them develop understanding about a moment in history or a current event?
- Discuss the FSA project and look at one of Dorothea Lange's photographs (e.g. "Migrant Mother," http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/128_migm.html) and consider how the image helps tell a story. Look closely and identify what you observe. What might this image compel people to do? After Lange submitted this image to a newspaper, people sent aid to the pea pickers' camp (even though the subjects in "Migrant Mother" never received that aid. They'd already moved on.)
- Review photos from one of Lange's other series and read the **general caption**. (For example, see her photographs associated with General Caption No. 19, taken in Person County, North Carolina in 1939.) What do the images communicate? What additional information does the general caption offer? How would Lange have found the information, beyond making visual observations?
- Invite the students to read Rae Meadows' article "Dorothea Lange and the Art of the Caption" and use that as a jumping off point for them to create their own series of images and later write a general caption.
- Students should identify a community or area of their community to explore (perhaps at school or part of the wider community.) They should make a series of well-made photographs documenting what they find. Through research (possibility interviews, newspaper articles, community statistics, etc.), they should add to the understanding and information their photographs provide. Then, they should write a general caption to accompany the photographic series. Students should also caption each individual photo, using Lange's

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images as an example.

→ Finish the assignment with an exhibition/critique.

Adaptations

- For eleventh grade students, collaborate with American History or American Literature teachers while they explore the Great Depression (e.g., if the latter reads *Grapes of Wrath*).