Stepping inside a Photograph

What can a portrait photograph reveal about its subject? What thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences are suggested by the subject’s gaze, facial expression, posture, or clothing? Unlike a painted portrait, a photograph happens in an instant. Photographs have the power to capture us in authentic moments that evoke joy, empathy, surprise, or fear. At their best, they inspire the viewer to stop and think about the moment of human life represented in the picture. In this lesson, students are invited to “step inside” a photographic portrait. They will use visual evidence to imagine the perspectives of both the subject and the photographer and to tell their stories.

Grade Level
Adaptable for all grades

Common Core Academic State Standards
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3

National Visual Arts Standards
- Responding: understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning

Suggested Art Images
Click on the titles below to view high-resolution photographs on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Any of the suggested images are appropriate for this lesson.
- 7674, Chalmita, State of Mexico, 1984, by Graciela Iturbide
- Cynthia, Philadelphia, 2004 (image); 2011 (print), by Zoe Strauss
- Primer día del verano (First Day of Summer), Veracruz, 1982, by Graciela Iturbide
- South Philly (Mattress Flip Front), 2001 (negative); 2003 (print), by Zoe Strauss
- Untitled (Harlem Ambulance), c. 1936–41, by Lucy Ashjian
- Untitled (Philadelphia), 1954 (negative); c. 1954 (print), by Dave Heath
- Walking from CVS, West Philly, 2010, by Hannah Price

Supplementary Images
- Alfred Stieglitz, Hands, Variant IV, 1935, by Dorothy Norman
- Cable Car, San Francisco, 1956 (negative); c. 1960 (print), by Dorothea Lange
- Hand of Gerald Warburg, Cellist, c. 1930, by Imogen Cunningham
Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Use visual evidence to infer the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of a person in a photograph
2. Collaborate with a partner to imagine a dialogue between the photographer and the subject
3. Write a personal narrative from the perspective of a person in a photograph

Materials Needed

- Screen for projecting images
- Character Development Worksheets and Dialogue Templates (provided at the end of this lesson)
- Tools for writing

Lesson Process

1. Choose a photograph to display from the list of suggested images.
2. Give students a few minutes to look at the picture, and then ask them to share their initial observations. Guide them by asking what they notice about the setting and the person or people in the picture. Where and when do you think this photograph was taken? What details help you understand the setting? What do you think you know about the person, or people, in the photograph? What details are you using to make these inferences?
3. Tell students that they are going to use visual evidence to “step inside” a photograph and take the perspective of the person, or one of the people, in it. Refer to the Artful Thinking Palette for a description of this thinking routine.
4. Guide students through the process by asking which details allow them to imagine the subject’s feelings, thoughts, and experiences. What might this person feel or perceive? What might this person believe or know about? What might this person care about? What makes you say that?
5. Next, ask students to imagine themselves as the photographer who took this picture. What do you imagine the photographer perceived or felt about the subject? What made the photographer want to take the picture? Do you think the photographer cared about the subject? Ask students to provide visual evidence for their responses.
6. For the next activity, you may project one image for the whole class or allow students a choice of images. Hand out the Character Development Worksheet, and have students sit with a partner. Students will use the worksheet to organize their observations and inferences about a new photograph. One student in each pair will take the perspective of the subject in the photograph and one will take the perspective of the photographer. As students begin their work, remind them that each inference about an individual’s feelings, perceptions, beliefs, and experiences should be supported by an observation.
7. When students have completed their worksheets, give partners a few minutes to share.
8. Hand out a copy of the Dialogue Template to each pair. Tell students that they will work together to write a dialogue between the photographer and the subject based on their observations and inferences. The worksheet will scaffold this process for students by prompting them to consider what the photographer might have noticed about the subject, questions the photographer might ask the
subject, and how the subject might respond. Students will develop the voices in their dialogue using their observations and inferences.

9. When partners have completed their dialogues, provide an opportunity to perform them for the class. Project the image on which the dialogue is based, and ask students to point out details in the photographs that helped them to develop the questions, responses, and voices of the photographer and the subject. Ask them to reflect on any differences in perspective as well. Did your observations or inferences differ from those of your partner? Was there anything that surprised you about your partner’s perspective?

Assessment
1. Assign individual students to write a personal narrative telling the story of a person in a photograph. Using visual evidence to support the details of the narrative, they will write from a first-person point of view, describing what the narrator thinks, feels, believes, and has experienced. Any images provided for this lesson would be appropriate for the writing activity.

Differentiation
1. To adapt this lesson for younger students, simplify the written response. Scaffold students’ interpretation of a photograph by providing writing prompts such as: My name is _____; I am _____ years old; When you took my picture, I felt ____; and Right now, I am thinking about _____. You could also ask students to draw a picture showing the photographer and write a caption telling why he or she was inspired to photograph the subject.

2. The photographs listed under Supplementary Images depict only the legs and feet or hands of the subject. Because they do not show a face, they are a bit more mysterious and would be an excellent challenge for more advanced students.
Character Development Worksheet
For use with “Stepping inside a Photograph” lesson plan

**OBSERVATIONS ABOUT A PHOTOGRAPH**

Setting of the photograph
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

Person in the Photograph
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

**INFERENCES ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER OR THE SUBJECT**

What does this person perceive or feel?
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

What does this person know or believe?
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

What does this person care about?
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
Dialogue Template
For use with “Stepping inside a Photograph” lesson plan

Photographer: “I noticed . . . “ (Think about what the photographer saw that inspired them to take this picture.)

_________________________________________________________________________________________

Subject response:
_________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________

Photographer: “I wonder . . . “ (What do you imagine the photographer would like to ask the subject?)

_________________________________________________________________________________________

Subject response:
_________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________

Photographer response:
_________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________

Subject: “I’m feeling . . . , because . . . “ (How do you think the person in the picture was feeling in the moment that it was taken, and why?)

_________________________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________________________

Photographer response:
_________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________