Photography

Classroom Activities

These exercises were developed by Dan Saul for Campaign! Make an Impact.
This activity begins with a detailed look at particular photographs. The images used can be found in large format on the website.

There then follow two practical exercises that enable students to make their own photographs and posters for use in their campaigns.

Every Picture Tells a Story

As human beings we naturally search for narratives within pictures. When we see an image, we respond with our own subjectivity, values, and experience.

Photography is a powerful tool in the hands of a campaigner. We identify strongly with photographic images because we see a close representation of what we assume to be reality. However, photography is the selective framing of an event. In one brief moment, the photographer edits both space and time.

An understanding of photography can help us to make our own images, and help us make them persuasive to the viewer.
Picture 1

Cause of Death

John Hilliard, 1974

Image © John Hilliard

© The British Library Board
This image introduces us to the idea of the ‘frame’. The frame is the boundary (usually rectangular) around an image.

- Discuss how the framing of the photograph encourages the viewer to ‘read’ the image.

The composition of the image is crucial to its meaning. In this case the subject is a shrouded body. We assume that the body is a dead one and we invent reasons why the subject might have died. The body might have fallen from the building in the background. Alternatively, the rocks in the foreground might have crushed the body. The subject might have drowned in the nearby sea or have been burned in an adjacent fire.

The artist John Hilliard shows how the reading of the picture can be changed completely by simply moving the subject towards the top or the bottom, the left or the right of the frame.

What the photographer decides to select within their frame is critical to the meaning of the image. This is because we intuitively make associations between the elements in the picture, and this depends upon their arrangement within the frame.

- Discuss how the photographer presents us with a subjective point of view in a medium that we sometimes believe presents an objective truth.
Picture 2

Death of a Republican Soldier

Robert Capa, 1936

Image © Capa/Magnum Photos
This photograph is one of the most famous images taken during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s. It also went on to become one of the most controversial, as rival historians claimed that the image was staged, or that perhaps the man was simply falling rather than actually being shot.

This is also an image where the selection of a precise moment in time provides the picture with all its power.

- Discuss what the image might have looked like had it been taken a moment earlier or a moment later.

- Perhaps the soldier had been charging aggressively, just before this moment. Would this have given the image a completely different meaning?

- Perhaps other soldiers would have entered the frame a moment later. Again, would this change our perception?

Interestingly, a recent exhibition in London showed for the first time all the photographs that Capa took on that day and this did indeed change the power of the image. It certainly appears that the photograph was not staged but the presence of opposing sides in the conflict gave many new perspectives to that one image.
Picture 3

Czechoslovakia 1963

Josef Koudelka

Image © Koudelka/Magnum Photos
• Ask the question: What do we think is happening in this picture?

• Discuss the composition of this photograph. Why has the photographer chosen to take the picture looking down at the main subject? How does that affect the way we read the image?

• Ask the question: Who do we feel sympathy for in the photograph?

The main figure is very central in the composition and is huge in comparison to everyone else. He is possibly a criminal, but the high angle makes him look vulnerable.

The crowd, police, another photographer, and a threatening dog are all placed above the main figure, again making him seem vulnerable and trapped.

We cannot see the crowd's faces in as much detail as the central man. Does this mean that we sympathise with him?

• Ask the question: What about the pictures that the other photographer in the background of this picture is taking? What would those photographs look like?

• Would they tell a different story?
Picture 4

Campaign image for Barnardo's

Image: With kind permission of Kiran Master c/o Burnham Niker, and Barnardo's
Discuss the following questions:

- How has the photographer made a very simple image very powerful?
- What does the level position of the camera and the ‘square-on’ composition do for the image?
- Is the boy treated with dignity?
- How does his direct gaze into the lens affect us?
- How does the use of soft colours make us feel about the boy?
- How about if we could see more detail in the boy’s surroundings? For example, if he was holding a sinister object in his hand. Would these additions change our view of the image?

**Exercise 1: TAKING A POWERFUL PHOTOGRAPH**

The aim of this exercise is to produce powerful and imaginative images. It uses the ideas described in the above presentation.

This topic may follow on nicely from the drama topic beforehand. The role plays from that session may provide an interesting starting point for this next exercise.

If the class has identified a campaign theme, then that could be the starting point for this lesson. Otherwise, point number four in the drama topic has information on how to set up a scenario.

Split the class into small groups of maybe three or four. Each group should have a digital camera. The camera could be hand-held or on a tripod. The main advantage of a tripod is that the photographer can set the timer and also be included in the photo; however, this may restrict spontaneous creativity.

1. The students should choose a theme they wish to work on.

2. For ideas, students may study the pictures that resulted from the role-play exercise. They should analyse the emotions, ideas, and stories that are in the pictures.

3. Ask the students how they might improve on the photographs that documented the role plays.
4. The students should now think of how they can use the camera framing, the camera position, and the timing to create the most powerful images they can.

For example:

- What happens if the camera is very, very high? Or very, very low?
- Maybe one person should be very big and another very small within the frame.
- How about placing different people at differing distances from the camera?
- What happens if the camera is at a funny angle?
- Or if the camera is placed behind an object that gives a partly obstructed view?
- What happens if extreme close-ups are used?
- Or all the figures are very, very far away so that they appear tiny?
- Or can there be a combination of these things?

5. Using primarily themselves as subjects, the students should work out a new arrangement of themselves to give new compositions within the photographs.

6. The students should be encouraged to be as creative as possible.

A Note On Props

Props and locations may be used, but these should be minimal and not a distraction. If a particular prop is desired but not readily available, the students should be encouraged to draw a simple representation of it on paper and use that. The students can keep re-taking the photographs until they feel they have the most powerful and influential composition possible.

Finally, the students should discuss their work in groups and as a whole class.

They should be encouraged to have an honest discussion about the messages conveyed in their pictures.

© The British Library Board
Exercise 2: USING A PHOTOGRAPH IN A POSTER

The above exercise can be a practice activity for students to make their own campaign photographs. The students may use the techniques to make images that directly reflect the issues in their own campaigns.

These photographs may dovetail into a poster-making workshop. The central idea here would be to ask students to use their photographs in conjunction with big, bold coloured shapes. The students can then print out what they feel to be their most successful image. The image can be printed A4 size.

Using coloured paper, card, and scissors, the students can further experiment with the composition of their images. Can they combine their images with big, bold shapes made of flat coloured paper?

Using all the knowledge about composition described in Exercise 1, the students should now use coloured shapes to make their images even bolder. How can the figures in the photographs combine with large shapes to make an unusual design for a poster?

Finally, the students can use marker pens on the coloured card to insert captions or slogans that can add extra weight or meaning to their visual images.

Further Tips/Suggestions

The figures in the photographs can also be cut out to make silhouettes. If the school has a data projector the images can be projected onto large pieces of paper and the outlines or silhouettes of the figures can be traced.