



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2006 Volume III: Postwar America: 1945-1963

Dorothea Lange and Documentary Modes of Expression

Guide for Curriculum Unit 06.03.10
by Crecia C. Swaim

This is an eighth grade social studies unit that develops and expands language arts skills assessed on the Connecticut Mastery Test. This will be done in the context of the life and work of photographer Dorothea Lange. After introducing Dorothea Lange as a person, focusing on her childhood and early career as a point of reference with which students may identify, we will use her photography as a springboard for content, reflection, and analysis. Students will use these resources to practice the CMT skills of forming a general understanding, developing interpretation, making reader/text connections, and examining content and structure.

We will explore the craft of documentary photography, including the questions that cropping and posing raise in the debate over whether or not a photograph reflects a truthful reality, as well as the idea of social responsibility and the power of documentary photography to effect social change.

I want students to understand the importance of documenting life as it happens, of creating a record that represents multiple voices. The next part of the unit will set the students to the task of exploring their own voices as they relate to the world around them. The unit will culminate with students choosing their preferred artistic mode of expression to create an original documentary work. Students will summarize and explain the meaning of their piece, and will write a persuasive letter to someone they think needs persuading on the issue.

This unit is meant to augment standard required social studies curriculum addressing the Great Depression and World War II.

(Developed for Social Studies, grade 8; recommended for Middle School Social Studies, grade 8)

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2021 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>