

***Fulbright-Hays Summer Seminar 2011:
Thailand and Vietnam
Curriculum Project***

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Introduction:

In the summer of 2011, I traveled more than I had ever traveled before: I was lucky enough to spend 5 weeks traversing the fascinating cities and stunning landscapes of Thailand and Vietnam. During my travels, I took a number of photographs—about 1400, to be exact—as photography is my main hobby. For my project, I wanted to use the photographs to extend and offer new curricular experiences to my students. Visual rhetoric and image analysis are increasingly prominent fields in Language Arts education; the majority of learners are visual by nature; and teenagers live in a time of perpetual image and sound stimulation.

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**Curriculum Project #1:
“Truth” and Vision in Images and in Tim O’Brien’s
*The Things They Carried***

Essential Questions:

- How does the book define “truth”?
- What does it mean to analyze an image?
- How can images offer us, the viewers, “truths” that a written text cannot?

Objectives:

- to enhance students’ understanding of the concept of fictional truth in Tim O’Brien’s book *The Things They Carried*
- to introduce students to methods of analyzing visual images
- to connect real world images to the literary text that students are currently studying

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- to foster connections between students' perceptions of the "real world" and a textual world that is unfamiliar to them
- to compel students to become more critical "readers" of the images and experiences that they encounter on a daily basis

Background Information:

This project is designed for use in a high school classroom; specifically, the project is aimed at 11th-graders in an American Literature class who are studying Tim O'Brien's Vietnam War novel *The Things They Carried*. This lesson would most likely be enacted following the reading and discussion of "How to Tell a True War Story," a chapter near the middle of the book in which O'Brien is most explicit about the definition of "truth" in his fictional book: truth is the emotional effect or meaning that a story communicates despite its fiction or exaggeration. The projects require the use of a computer, an LCD projector, and access to the Internet.

Procedure and Student Activities (estimated time frame of 2-4 days):

- Students will be presented with one "starter" image from my Thailand and Vietnam travels. The rationale behind using my travel photos will be explained because we are working on deciphering the truths and stories beyond the surface of a text, whether that text is a chapter, a book, or an image. Travel images present less familiar stories and thus can be more open to analysis.
- As a class, we will discuss our initial impressions of the starter photograph (slide 1 on "Truth Images" PowerPoint), making a list on the board adjacent to the image.
- Then, students will be introduced to the "7 Questions for Analyzing Photos" that will guide them throughout this project. These questions were adapted from <http://education.eastmanhouse.org/discover/kits/files/10/analyze.php>. The questions are as follows:

1. *What is the purpose of the photograph itself (advertisement, news, etc.)? Who is intended to see it?*
2. *What and/or who are pictured in the photograph? List visual fact, not interpretation.*
3. *What is the 'mood' of the photograph? What do you see that makes you think so?*
4. *Does the photo show an event or use a symbol that you recognize? Explain.*
5. *What seems to be the story of the photograph?*
6. *Does this image show about the issues, values, beliefs, and everyday life of its culture?*

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7. *What would you change about the photograph? Why? What do you want to know that the photograph does not offer?*

- Students will be presented with a series of photographs that feature people from Thailand and Vietnam. Photographs will be first viewed as a whole class via LCD projection onto a large screen. Then, students will choose one image from the series to focus on; full color copies of the photos (5x7s or 8x10s) will be available so that each student can take the photo for his or her own for closer scrutiny.
- Students will answer the “7 Questions for Analyzing Photos” for their chosen photos.
- Then, students will expand upon their 7 answers by writing a paragraph or multi-paragraph response to this question: what is the “truth” represented in your photo? We will discuss how we don’t know anything other than what the photo gives us, so there’s no way to certify the facts of the photo, and yet there still is truth to be found there.
 - Example: We will return to the starter image and analyze how it produced the following “truth” paragraph:

What’s true about this photo is that what may seem spectacular and astonishing to some—here, the act of riding an elephant, and the act of having a career as an elephant trainer—may simply be “another day on the job” for others. The relaxed posture of the mahout in blue shows that he is comfortable with what he does, and the similarly relaxed position of the elephant, who casually chews on grass, shows the truth that trust can clearly be established between man and beast. Also, because the observer can see more bare feet and hints of elephants’ backs beyond the foreground of the photo, it seems true that such symbiotic relationships can flourish and be fostered rather than exist as the exception to the rule.

- After students write their paragraphs, they will present their responses informally in a share session where they hold up their photos (and subsequently pass them around) and discuss the truths they have determined.
- Next, students will build on their photographic truth exploration and progress to a photographic medium more overtly connected to The Things They Carried: photographs taken during the Vietnam War. Students may peruse the suggested websites (listed below) or find a

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photograph on their own via the Internet or a book (librarians can be consulted for resources as needed). Students will again first apply the “7 Questions for Analyzing Photos” and share responses within small groups and with the whole class. Then, students will write a paragraph or multi-paragraph response that answers the “What is the truth in this photo?” question.

Websites with Vietnam War Photo Galleries:

<http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/vietnam/photoessay.htm>

<http://www.vietnamgear.com/gallery.aspx>

<http://www.life.com/gallery/23010/image/50465368/vietnam-war-disturbing-images#index/0>

- To finish this project, student photos and responses will be displayed in or around the classroom to present a gallery of visual “truths” to accompany our study of the rest of O’Brien’s book.
- As a possible extension to this project—one that may work with higher-level or advanced classes—students may write a chapter based on their Vietnam War photographs that can “fit” into O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*. In this activity, instructors will be able to teach about style, particularly syntax, tone, and diction, so that students have a sense of how to mimic O’Brien’s writing style. Students will write a chapter that reveals the “truth” they have identified in their war photographs and that uses O’Brien’s characters, themes, and style as deftly as possible.

Curriculum Project #2:

This is Who We Are: Cultural Identity in Photographs

Essential Questions:

- How do commonplace objects and sights define a culture?
- How do Americans define themselves?
- How does America’s definition of itself differ from that of other cultures, particularly Southeast Asia?

Objectives:

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- Students will use a series of photographic images from an unfamiliar culture (Southeast Asia) to ascertain traits, customs, and values of that culture.
- Students will use the experience of analyzing a foreign culture to objectively evaluate the traits, customs, and values of American culture.
- Students will compose photo essays that evaluate and represent their conceptualization of contemporary American culture.

Background Information:

This set of activities is designed for use in an 11th-grade American Literature class that is part of the American Studies curriculum, which is a team-taught U.S. History/American Literature course. As part of the course, students are often asked to think about their place in the world as American citizens and to evaluate and discuss what it actually means to be an American. This project is designed to enhance and expand their critical thinking by juxtaposing images of a foreign culture against their own perceptions of American culture, and then it asks them to synthesize those perceptions by actually composing a series of images.

Materials required include computer access, an LCD screen and projector, and student access to cameras (preferably digital) and developing facilities.

Student Activities and Procedure (estimated time frame of 3-4 days):

- Students will view a series of photographs taken during the summer of 2011 in Thailand and Vietnam. Photographs will feature objects, items, and events that seemingly represent everyday life. For each photograph, students should write down initial impressions of what the photo seems to reveal or express.
- After viewing the slideshow and writing initial reactions and interpretations, students will work in groups and focus on analyzing 2-3 specific photographs. Students will address two discussion questions:
 1. What does the photo contain? Be descriptive.
 2. What does the photo reveal about the Southeast Asian culture? How did you arrive at your answer? Explain.
- Students will reconvene as a large group and share their assessments.
- Students will then brainstorm—first individually, then in small groups, then as a whole class—what defines America in two categories: Traits and Values. Then, based on this brainstorm and any other revisions students

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make on their own, they will tackle the assignment of composing a photo essay of 6-8 images (that they photograph and print themselves) that they feel represent the American spirit and identity. To accompany their photo essay, they will offer detailed captions that would explain to a cultural outsider what their photo shows, much like how they attempted to make sense of a foreign culture when they viewed the Asia photos.

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