

Reading photographs

David Leat sees three 'rich seams' to exploit in photographs:

- To get students to look more carefully at photographs to see more of what is there, not just to skim them.
- To encourage students to go beyond what they can see and make connections between what is visible and what they already know
- To get students to hypothesise and speculate using the evidence in the photograph – the essence of the enquiry process

The use of photographs has a major role in differentiation because students do not need to read large amounts of text so they remove barriers for some students.

Different approaches to reading photographs:

- Providing a range of different photos that appear to be very different geographically, and ask students to pair them up by making connections between them. It gets more difficult to find links after the first few, and students will have to 'read' the photo carefully for evidence. It can be used in many different geography topics from Y7 to AL.
- Use photographs on a theme – for example zones of urban land use – and ask students to categorise them in relation to a model.
- Use photographs for storyboarding – they must put the photos in a sequence of events or to explain something
- Use a photo to recap lessons or topics – give a photo stuck in the centre of a large sheet of paper. Students make connections to what they have learned in previous lessons on the topic.
- Unfreezing – the photo is a point in time. What would happen if the image was unfrozen? What are people feeling or saying or what might they do next?
- Use the 'most likely to' scenario – in which photo are you most likely to

Hints for managing thinking with photographs

- You cannot assume students can naturally 'read' photographs, so you will need to model this for them perhaps using a large photo projected on the screen/whiteboard. Encourage them to use stages to analyse such as:
 - Search for evidence in the photo
 - Form an initial theory or deduction based on the evidence
 - Look for confirming or conflicting evidence by cross checking with other photos
 - Draw a possible conclusion
- Ask students to do the photo activity in pairs, and then join the pairs into a 4 to compare conclusions. This brings together new ideas and increases discussion, especially if they have reached different conclusions.

- When working in fours, tell the groups you will be asking them to explain the reasons from the other pair rather than their own – this will encourage them to listen to the others!
- Listen to the thinking from the pairs – it can be very useful to share with the class later.
- Have another activity with the photo to do for those that are quick finishers.
- The teacher needs to resist imposing their ideas on the students about what they see – there are a wide range of appropriate answers in these activities!
- If you have good photographs that you want to keep, consider how to preserve them (plastic wallet, laminate) or make copies of them.

Reference

- Leat, D. (1998) *Thinking through geography*. Cambridge: Chris Kington Publishing

Case studies to illustrate

- Leat's examples are: Geography; urban land use models; the impact of tourism
- The SchoolsWorld website has a video – <http://www.schoolsworld.tv/node/454>– which includes examples of reading photographs in a topic on migration and refugees; and discussion about the activity.

(Last updated June 2021)