

Visual Literacy in American Indian Studies 101

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This lesson plan was designed for the course American Indian Studies 101: Introduction to American Indian Cultures. For a research assignment, students locate and describe images that authentically represent aspects of a Native American culture that they are researching. Students gain experience locating, interpreting, and describing images of Native American culture and history. This lesson is a companion to course instruction about stereotypes of Native Americans and concepts like cultural appropriation.

Interactive discussion of images

Display a series of images that may inform research about a culture and its history.



Clockwise from top left:

Untitled photo of participants in 2010 He Sapa Wacipi. Creative commons licensed image by [el_gallo](#) via Flickr:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/jmm7/5063262419/>

"Totem pole of Thlinget [sic] Chief Ki-an..." Created by Sir Henry S. Wellcome. Public domain image via Wikimedia Commons:

<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Totempfahl.jpg>

"Two Indian Girls in Front of a Tipi." Department of the Interior. Bureau of Indian Affairs. Creative Commons licensed image posted by National Archives to Flickr:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/usnationalarchives/4171933707/>

Questions for discussion

- Who or what do you see represented in this image? Describe what you can actually see (not your feelings about it).
- Do you have any personal knowledge that helps you to interpret this image?
- Can you draw any conclusions about what this image represents?
- What else do we need to know?



Introduce tools for locating images

- Ask students to call out information they need about the image
- Using a database/image repository, show students how to find available information about the image (i.e., creator, title, date, etc.)
- Brainstorm ways to learn more about the image



A selection of tools for locating images of many Native American cultures is available at this LibGuide: <http://libguides.uwec.edu/aisimages>

Partner activity

Working together, students search for an image related to the Native American culture they are re-searching. Together, they discuss and answer questions for photographic analysis:

Describe what you see in the photograph – the forms and structures, the arrangement of the various elements. Avoid personal feelings or interpretations. Your description should help someone who has not seen the image to visualize it.

Describe your personal feelings, associations, and judgements about the image. Anchor your subjective response in something that you see. For example, “I see..., and it makes me think of...”

Summarize what you already know about the situation and time period, and the people and objects that appear in the image.

Say what you can conclude from what you see.

What questions does this image raise? What are some sources for finding out more about the image?



Source: Library of Congress, <http://frontiers.loc.gov:8081/learn/lessons/98/brady/photo.html>

In-class assessment

In the final ten minutes of the classroom activity, I ask students to complete a web-based worksheet embedded in their LibGuide. Students locate an image in a digital repository and spend three minutes writing observations about the image they select and how they would learn more about the image. The worksheet is created in Google Forms, which consolidates all reflections into one spreadsheet for my review.

Learning outcomes

- Students will be able to evaluate an image and describe how it would inform their research.
- Students will be able to integrate their cultural and historical knowledge into their interpretation of an image and its meaning.