

LESSON SIX: UNDERSTANDING PHOTO ESSAYS

Enduring understandings:

Photo essays, images that form a story when viewed as a group, are a meaningful method of documentation that inform and shape public opinion. Russell Lee's *Study of the Spanish-Speaking People of Texas* is an example of an influential photo essay with compelling subject matter relevant in the past and today.

Essential questions:

What is a photo essay?

How can a photo essay be used to inform and shape public opinion?

TEKS:

- 7.7 understand how individuals, events, and issues shaped the history of Texas during the 20th century
- 7.21 (A) differentiate between, locate, and use primary and secondary sources such as computer software, databases, media and news services, biographies, interviews, and artifacts to acquire information about Texas
- 7.21 (B) analyze information by sequencing, categorizing, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, comparing, contrasting, finding the main idea, summarizing, making generalizations and predictions, and drawing inferences and conclusions
- 7.21 (C) organize and interpret information from outlines, reports, databases, and visuals, including graphs, charts, timelines, and maps
- 7.21 (D) identify points of view from the historical context surrounding an event and the frame of reference that influenced the participants

Materials:

1. Internet access with bookmarked link to *Spanish-Speaking People of Texas* Web site: <http://www.cah.utexas.edu/ssspot/>
2. Computer for each pair of students
3. Handouts of articles from *The Spanish-Speaking People of Texas* Web site: Background of *The Study of the Spanish-Speaking People of Texas*, *Why Russell Lee?* and the outline given to Russell Lee for the project [1 per student]. Alternately, students may read the online versions of the articles, available at <http://www.cah.utexas.edu/ssspot/study.php> and <http://www.cah.utexas.edu/ssspot/why.php>
4. Exploring Themes in *The Study of the Spanish-Speaking People of Texas* handout [1 per pair of students]
5. Overhead projector

Objectives:

- Students will identify the goals of the Russell Lee's *The Study of the Spanish-Speaking People of Texas* photo essay.
- Students will use *The Study of the Spanish-Speaking People of Texas* Web site to explore the major themes of Russell Lee's photo essay.

Anticipatory set:

Display first image from the San Angelo series of Russell Lee's photo essay *Study of the Spanish-Speaking People of Texas*. Have students identify the subject of the photograph. Next, display the other five images from the series, and ask, "How does this change your perception of the first photograph? What story do the pictures tell when they are viewed together?" Inform students that the photographs are part of photo essay created by Russell Lee during the 1940s to document the lives of Mexican-Americans in Texas.

Procedure:

Explain to students:

The purpose of today's lesson is to study a photo essay, Russell Lee's *Study of the Spanish-Speaking People of Texas*. A photo essay is a group of photographs that are taken to tell a story, describe emotions, or explain the lives of others. Sometimes photo essays are accompanied by text, such as an article or essay. Text and photographs can work together to reinforce the point the author or photographer makes with their work.

Distribute copies of articles about Russell Lee's work: Background of *Study of the Spanish-Speaking People of Texas* and *Why Russell Lee?* and the outline given to Russell Lee at the outset of the project. Ask students to read the items. After reading, discuss the passages with class, addressing several questions, including:

- Who asked Russell Lee to make the photo essay?
- How many photographs did Russell Lee take for the photo essay?
- What did Sanchez want to accomplish by undertaking the project?
- What subjects did Sanchez want Russell Lee to photograph?
- Why did Sanchez ask Russell Lee to take pictures in Corpus Christi, San Antonio, and South Texas? Why would it be important to have pictures of the same place taken over a period of time?
- Why do you think Professor Sanchez wanted to combine his work with that of Russell Lee? Is text more powerful when it is combined with photographs? Can you think of an example?
- When were the photographs made? What historical events preceded the project? What events occurred after the project? Why is this timing important?
- What happened to the photographs that Russell Lee made? Did Sanchez end up using them for his study? Why do you think he didn't use them?

Explain to students:

Next, we will explore Russell Lee's photo essay and examine the subjects he documented with his work.

Distribute handout Exploring Themes in *The Study of the Spanish-Speaking People of Texas* handout [1 per pair of students].

Explain to students:

In completing the photo essay, Professor Sanchez wanted Lee to capture several key aspects of the lives of Spanish-speaking people of Texas, including the church, family life, healthcare, schools and education, housing, employment, and leisure activities. Today, we will explore how Russell Lee used his photo essay to capture these subjects.

Work through the first item on the handout (religion) as a whole group, explaining expectations for completion of each item. Be sure to demonstrate the use of the search function of the Web site. After clarification of expectations, send students to computers to complete the handout.

When students have completed the handout, call the group together and discuss their answers, then ask:

- Do you think that Russell Lee successfully documented the themes of family life, religion, healthcare, education, housing, employment, and leisure activities? Was there anything missing that you would have included if you had taken the photographs?
- Were there any images that stood out from the others? Which ones and why?
- Do you think that the images could have been successful in changing public opinion? Why or why not?
- If you were going to make a photo essay telling the story of your life, what subjects would you include?

Closure:

Review the meaning of the term “photo essay” and the importance of Russell Lee’s photo essay in documenting the lives of Mexican-Americans in Texas during the mid-20th century.

Evaluation:

Evaluate student responses to handout.



Grade school children at play rw114233r3_0010



School children rw114233r3_0015



Sharpening pencil rw114233r3_0019



School boy rw114233r3_0025



Serving hot lunch rw114233_0026



Reading class rw114233_0029

Background of *The Spanish-Speaking People of Texas* project

The *Study of the Spanish-Speaking People of Texas* series consists of more than 900 images taken by Russell Lee between April and July 1949 in Corpus Christi, San Angelo, San Antonio, and El Paso. The photographs include images of the many poignant, proud, exasperating, joyful, and intimate moments in the lives of people in these Mexican-American communities at a very specific point in time. The images represent a unique visual record for that period, and are unparalleled in their variety, scope, and quality. Among the many subject areas are families, children, schools, churches, housing, migrant workers, professions, trades and vocations, businesses, community organization, health and homecare, politics, and leisure activities.

The photographs were commissioned in 1948 by University of Texas professor George I. Sanchez to illustrate the *Study of the Spanish-Speaking People of Texas*. Directed by sociologist Lyle Saunders, the multi-year, socioeconomic study aimed to fill substantial gaps in the data then available about the expanding Spanish-speaking population of Texas. Sanchez and Saunders hoped to educate public officials, bureaucrats, and other powerful and influential Texans, as well as the general public.

Sanchez wanted to investigate social aspects of prejudice and discrimination. He chose Saunders to direct the study, assured by his colleague's credentials, previous success in the field, and knowledge of the specific areas to be surveyed. The work of experts in health, housing, education, and labor was to be coordinated and woven into a thorough analysis consisting of many points of view. Sanchez believed that this broad-ranging survey approach would leave no significant aspect of social or economic conditions among the Spanish-speaking people unexamined.

Photographs as Social Documentation-Sanchez believed in the power of photographs to portray environmental conditions, social milieus, and cognitive states such as aptitude, language ability, and learning- and employment-readiness of children and adults. Sanchez shared the belief of many of his colleagues that photography was a powerful means by which to communicate important social and physical problems. In a revealing letter to Russell Lee, Lyle Saunders expressed his own conviction that "a good set of pictures would do far more than any number of words in conveying the realities of the social and economic situation of Spanish-speaking Texans."¹

Sanchez made repeated use of photographs in his publications to illustrate and to complement his arguments. His careful and effective selection of images is evident in such publications as *Forgotten People: A Study of New Mexicans* (1940), and in the 1947 publication "*The People*": *A Study of the Navajo*. For "*The People*", Sanchez borrowed photographs from Milton Snow, a photographer with the Division of Roads of the Navajo Service, and from the U.S. Air Force. For earlier publications, Sanchez had provided his own camera work. These photographs included portraits, panoramic landscapes, as well as still life, architectural, and industrial compositions. In a scrapbook he mounted in 1934, Sanchez displayed photographs he had taken to record the conditions of schools in New Mexico, where he taught for several years before continuing studies for advanced degrees in education.

While serving as consultant for the Inter-American Educational Foundation of the U.S. Department of the Interior, Sanchez also relied on visual images to demonstrate to public officials the effects of segregation on Mexican-American children in the New Mexico school systems. His work with several committees of the federal agency served as the springboard for the *Study of the Spanish-Speaking People*. In the grant proposal to the General Board of Education which provided the funding, Sanchez said the aim of his study was "to change the pictures of the Spanish-speaking people of Texas that now exist in the minds of...people."

Why Russell Lee?

At the time Lyle Saunders and George Sanchez were planning the Study, Russell Lee was both widely considered to be one of the most accomplished documentary photographers of his time and was living in Austin. Thus he was an ideal choice to provide photographic support for the project. Saunders and Sanchez were interested in data samples collected over long periods of time. Saunders noted that there was much to be gained by having Lee re-survey the Spanish-speaking communities in Corpus Christi, San Antonio, and South Texas that Lee had documented in 1939 as part of the Farm Security Administration efforts. During the course of his correspondence with Sanchez about the project, Saunders wrote, "We will thus have...a documentary record of the improvement, or lack of improvement, in the conditions of the Spanish-speaking during the past ten years."

Sanchez and Saunders provided extensive documentation with which to inform Lee of the intent of the study. This documentation included a historical overview of the various Mexican American communities; a four-part description of the study's aims, need, objectives and assumptions; and a detailed five-page single-spaced outline that was to guide Lee during his field trips. The documentation left no doubt as to how the photographs were intended to be used. However, for reasons that continue to perplex researchers who are aware of their existence, these photographs were not published in connection with the study.

IV. Institutions (continued)

B. The Community

4. Urbanization

- a. movement into cities
- b. movement out of cities
- c. net urbanization
- d. selective nature of migration

C. The Church

1. the Catholic church

- a. membership - members and distribution
- b. participation in Church activities (e.g., male-female differences)
- c. church-community relations
- d. church-family relations

2. other churches

- a. membership--members and distribution
- b. participation in Church activities (e.g., male-female differences)
- c. church-community relations
- d. church-family relations

D. Politics and government

1. the Spanish-speaking as a political issue
2. Spanish-speaking in politics
 - a. as voters
 - b. as political party members and workers
 - c. as office holders

E. Voluntary associations

1. social and fraternal organizations
2. clubs and societies
3. labor unions
4. protest movements

F. Other institutions

1. the Spanish language press
2. libraries
3. other cultural institutions

V. Education

A. Elementary education

1. enrollment and attendance
2. facilities
3. administration and personnel
4. age-grade status
5. special problems and difficulties of Spanish-speaking children

B. Secondary education

1. enrollment and attendance
2. facilities
3. administration and personnel
4. age-grade status
5. special problems and difficulties of Spanish-speaking children

Athletics - Boxing

C. Vocational education

1. kinds of training offered
2. enrollment
3. adequacy of training

Exploring Themes in *The Study of the Spanish-Speaking People of Texas*

Instructions:

Use the search box of *The Study of the Spanish-Speaking People of Texas* Web site to find images that document key subjects in the photo essay: religion, family life, healthcare, education, housing, employment, and leisure activities.

For each subject, choose two images that are especially meaningful to you.

Include the following for each image you choose:

- A printout of the image and its caption
- Image number
- Image title
- A description of what you see in the photograph, including objects, people, and setting
- Inferences that you can draw from the photograph
- Questions that the photograph raises for you
- Emotions that the photograph inspires

Finally, choose at least three images from one subject that tell a story. Write a brief paragraph explaining the story you think Russell Lee is telling with the photographs.

Hint:

When you are searching for images, try using keywords to find images.

Examples:

- Religion: church, Sunday school
- Family life: family, mother, father, children, child
- Healthcare: doctor, tuberculosis, hospital, health
- Education: school, teacher, student, boy, girl
- Housing: home, house, corral
- Employment: job, work, worker, business
- Leisure activities: shopping, swimming, play, playing

Use your own paper to record your responses.