

BEYOND THE IMAGE

THE INTERSECTION OF EDUCATION FOR DEVELOPMENT WITH MEDIA LITERACY

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THE DICE conference's challenge is a daunting one. The invitational brochure stated:

In educating active global citizens the use of audiovisual media necessitates an education that stimulates a critical attitude towards the messages conveyed through diverse digital and other media. This critical attitude should empower children to see behind an image or a text and ultimately to understand the issues faced by our interdependent world.

In responding to that challenge, my contribution is a modest one. It is based on a relatively simple premise. To assist children and young people in developing this desired critical attitude, an analysis of individual still images is an important starting point. Furthermore, images such as photographs are versatile learning tools that can be used with relative ease in both traditional and hi-tech classrooms, by all teachers irrespective of their technological sophistication. In contrast to the more complex images from television, film or web-based virtual reality games, single images by 'standing still' are more easily interrogated, though, as I hope to demonstrate, are also highly complex.

IMAGE FOLDERS

This paper is based primarily on reflections from my own experiences as a second-level teacher and, more recently, my experiences as a teacher-educator listening to feedback from my students, particularly in the area of civic, social and political education (CSPE).

A starting belief is that when teachers build up their own individual 'image-folders', they have at their fingertips a valuable and versatile

resource for learning and teaching. Photographs culled from newspapers, magazines, calendars and other sources add an immediacy and an urgency that, by their very nature, textbooks cannot capture. Such image folders are especially relevant in the area of development education where immediacy and urgency are important values.

A somewhat old-fashioned ring binder with dozens of images, pasted onto sheets and housed in transparent envelopes or laminated, continues to offer the teacher extensive opportunities. It facilitates both collective and differentiated student responses to the images. Wall displays and deskwork can be used to engage individuals and small groups in a variety of learning activities. Transferring the image-folder concept to an electronic format extends the possibilities further, where massive databanks of images can be accessed instantly.

IMAGES AND DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION

As well as presenting teachers of development education with rich opportunities for classroom learning, image folders also present challenges. Major challenges arise from the intersection of development education with media literacy.

For many in the West, our conceptualisation of the developing world, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, is, I suggest, strongly shaped by individual still images. In Ireland 40 years ago, much of the public interest that led to the foundation of Concern was generated by searing images of Biafran children, their stomachs swollen with kwashiorkor. TV images from Michael Buerk and Mohammed Amin in Ethiopia in 1984 triggered the Live Aid response. That famine also provided further unforgettable images of Africa. These cumulative images of hunger, disease, suffering and death continue to impact on our collective consciousness and so influence not only development educators but also the picture editors of newspapers, the editors of TV news programmes, the compilers of non-governmental organisation (NGO) promotional literature, and the developers of educational resources.

A predicament for the teacher of development education compiling an image folder centres on whether to include such images. Might they be reinforcing stereotypical conceptions of ‘underdevelopment’? Might the use of such images – often taken without the subject’s permission – be classified as exploitative, even abusive? Could the use of such images be contradicting other ‘messages’? These enquiries prompt another question: how much is development education about controlling the

messages? If I decide to include such images in a folder, how might I use them in a classroom?

As I was compiling these thoughts, the May 2008 Concern newsletter, in electronic format, arrived in my email box. The lead item was about drought in Ethiopia. The accompanying image foregrounded three people – including a man – digging what looked like poor soil. It was a sympathetic picture, emphasising hardworking people at the mercy of forces greater than themselves. The accompanying report identified the three by name. How different is this approach to that of 40 years ago? Perhaps more importantly, what factors have influenced the shift? If a picture is more ethically acceptable, does it have the same fundraising, or consciousness-raising, power?

One marker of an increased awareness of the complexity of images relating to development is the approval in 2007 of the *Code of Conduct on Images and Messages* by Dóchas, an umbrella organisation of many NGOs. According to Dóchas, the choice of images should be based on three paramount principles:

- Respect for the dignity of the people concerned
- Belief in the equality of all people
- Acceptance of the need to promote fairness, solidarity and justice (Dóchas, 2006).

Analyses of educational photopacks can illustrate how these principles present their compilers with predicaments. The *Wananchi* photopack illustrates this well. The compilers of that pack demonstrate a clear consciousness of the need to move away from ‘images of disaster’ towards ones that challenge preconceptions and move towards greater analysis of development issues (Ireland Aid, 2001, p. 7). Careful study of the visual images used by Irish Aid (2007) in its various publications can also illustrate the difficulties posed by having to select a small number of images to convey the complex realities of Ireland’s development programme.

In attempting to support classroom teachers in using images as part of development education, two particular concepts may be useful: (1) experiential learning and (2) denotation and connotation.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The first concept comes from the work of David Kolb. Kolb makes a number of incisive points about learning that are relevant to using

images with children. His perspective that learning is a continuous process grounded in experience leads him to contend that, put simply, ‘all learning is re-learning’ (Kolb, 1984, p. 28). He is keen to emphasise that the learners enter learning situations with some ideas – and varying degrees of articulacy – about the topic. Like Freire’s critique of ‘the banking concept’ of education, Kolb also rejects the idea of teacher as ‘depositor’ of knowledge and the students as empty depositories (Freire, 1970, p. 53). As Kolb puts it, everyone is a psychologist, an historian, an atomic physicist: ‘It is just that some of our theories are more crude and incorrect than others’ (Kolb, 1984, p. 28).

When we focus on the refinement and validity of these theories, Kolb asserts, we miss the point. Rather, he contends, we need to recognise that the people we teach have held these beliefs whatever their quality and, until now, have used them in whatever situations they found themselves in that required thinking about psychology, history or atomic physics. Thus, children at every stage of development have already formed ideas about ‘development’, ‘Africa’ and a range of associated concepts. For Kolb, one of our challenges as educators is not only to try to implant new ideas but also to assist learners to modify or even dispose of their old ideas. Much resistance to learning stems from learners clinging to old beliefs, especially when they see new ones that are inconsistent with them. Thus, for Kolb, an important starting point is bringing the learners’ beliefs and theories to the surface. In that sense, images can be used in a diagnostic sense, to elicit children’s understandings of ‘development’ and the lives of people in developing countries. Critically, they can also be used to unpack underlying attitudes. To do this well, teachers need to listen carefully to how children ‘read’ photos. For example, children often focus on the familiar and on incidental details; their interpretations can be quite different from how adults ‘read’ images.

Every teacher who has attempted to engage a class in development education will probably recognise the validity and relevance of Kolb’s remarks about learners clinging to old beliefs. In my experience, teachers frequently remark on the persistence of young people’s negative beliefs about developing countries. Incidentally, teachers of CSPE, in particular, often make similar remarks about their students’ views on immigrants and Travellers.

Kolb’s views also offer a useful introduction to the concept of ‘perspective consciousness’, as highlighted in Comhlámh’s 2008 guidelines for primary educators when working with photographs from around the world.

DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION

The second perspective comes from semiotics. Semioticians offer an instructive approach to photographs with their exploration of denotation and connotation. The familiar distinction often used with linguistic signs is between the 'literal' or 'obvious' meaning (denotation) and what might be the specific socio-cultural and sometimes more personal meanings associated with the sign (connotation). Current examples include 'tribunal', 'September 11th' and 'Lisbon'. Of course, connotations also vary depending on the age and social class of the interpreter.

Applying denotation and connotation to photography, Fiske states that 'denotation is what is photographed, connotation is how it is photographed' (1982, p. 91). Now – and for teachers this is a key point – in photography, denotation is foregrounded at the expense of connotation. Hence, many people regard the signifier (the image) as virtually identical with what is signified (the actuality). A major task for the media educator is to go beyond the image by exploring the connotations – the 'how' as well as the 'what'. In development education, analysis of photographs that explores connotation as well as denotation can be especially powerful.

INTERROGATING THE IMAGE

Elsewhere, I have attempted to draw up a series of questions that might assist the interrogation of a still image (Jeffers, 1997, p. 38). The questions were designed to demonstrate, first of all, how photographs are constructed. Secondly, the questions aimed to assist students in identifying aspects of the process that contributed to the meaning or 'the sense' they made of the image. The intention was to highlight the complexity of images, despite superficial simplicity.

A good starting point is to explore what is denoted in a particular image: *What do you see?* In encouraging clear and precise observation skills, it can be useful to attend to the details, to 'unpack' the contexts of the photo. Additional questions might include:

- *What's included?*
- *What's highlighted?*
- *What's left out?*

It is also worth extracting the impact the image has on the reader: *What is your immediate impression of this photograph?* This is an

important question because we process images so fast that we are often unaware of why we respond positively, negatively or otherwise to an image. Teachers need to be conscious that images elicit emotional and intellectual responses. When students say ‘I like that picture’, the act of inviting them to explore what exactly it is they like can also be productive, even if their initial response is to say they don’t know.

The next stage is to begin to explore questions relating to ‘how’ the photograph was taken. For example:

- *Is the subject aware of the image being taken?*
- *If so, how does s/he feel about being photographed?*
- *How posed is the photograph?*
- *What was the photographer’s point of view when taking the shot?*

These questions introduce in a very clear way the person behind the camera, a thinking person making deliberate choices from a range of options. Such interrogation is effective in promoting an appreciation of how images are constructed. In this, a central question worth revisiting regularly is: *What choices did the photographer make?* Keeping the focus on the choice of subject matter is crucial, for example, through questions such as:

- *Why this image rather than any other?*
- *What other images might have been made?*

One can then move on to exploring questions about ‘how’ the image was photographed; for example, questions about lighting such as:

- *Is the lighting natural or artificial?*
- *Is the subject lit from left, right, front, from above or behind?*
- *Is the lighting soft or hard?*

Other areas worth examining include the *context* in which the image appears (magazine, newspaper, as part of an advertisement, etc.), whether it is accompanied by a *caption*, what *other images* it reminds you of, and the *associations* the image brings about. However, pedagogically, a central focus should be on establishing a greater understanding of how connotations work, that the image is the end result of a complex series of deliberate choices, even if not fully conscious.

PERSISTENCE OF STEREOTYPES

Kolb's perspective brings into sharp focus the challenge many teachers face in development education, that of the persistence of negative stereotypes. Rosalind Duke's questioning of whether the discourse of development education is counterproductive is especially relevant when it comes to using images. She asks whether the discourse serves to perpetuate connotations of superiority and inferiority, reinforces negative stereotyping, and might even work against its own stated aim of challenging injustice and inequality by building up instead hierarchical images of Self and Other which undermine notions of equality (Duke, 2003, p. 201).

The value of this critical lens becomes evident when applied to particular images. The photograph of workers on the Ethiopian soil has already been mentioned. What is connoted by an image of an emaciated child photographed with the lighting that might be used for an advertisement in a glossy fashion magazine, the empty plate a lurid red? The clash of the slick world of advertising with the harshness of diseases of poverty is incongruous, though this may not be immediately obvious. The apparently simple image from Africa of a misspelling in a public place may bring a smile to the literate, but the teacher needs to ask whether beneath the humour lurks attitudes of superiority? Even a photograph of Irish volunteers building a wall that looks decidedly unsafe deserves critique. A shot from outer space that contrasts electricity consumption in Europe and in Africa can generate contrasting interpretations. What can be gleaned from the pictures taken by Irish tourists in developing countries? For example, what differences – particularly in how people are addressed – can be detected in 'snaps' from Soweto, Salou and Salthill? Why are we more comfortable taking images of people we have never met in some locations than in others? Teachers can also ask themselves how they might take and 'read' school scenes from developing countries compared to ones from nearer home? Dozens of other images could be selected for interrogation; by such interrogation the teacher develops sensitivity to the images' construction, to the possible meanings and interpretations and to our layered understandings of 'development' and 'development education'. A central concern has to be whether, unwittingly, in the taking and reading of images a sense of hierarchy is being reinforced, whether what is being emphasised in the Other as 'different' rather than what we have in common, particularly our humanity.

THE GLOBAL AND THE LOCAL

Two suggestions may help address any tendency towards seeing people in developing countries as ‘different’. One is to consciously juxtapose the local with the global so that children can make the connections, that they see the shared humanity rather than the emphasis on difference. Thus, development photopacks might illustrate local Irish examples of development alongside those from developing countries.

The second suggestion is to encourage young people to take and make their own images. Back in the days when the dominant technology involved 24 shots on a roll of film, I often found that the idea of ‘one photo per person’ was effective in focusing minds and prompting students to think imaginatively about what image or location they might select. It proved especially valuable in framing questions of representation and how people wish to be represented, and the control – or lack of control – they have over images of themselves. This opened the way for a broader discussion about positive and negative representations of people. This, in turn, can lead to addressing topics such as social class, ethnic groupings, national identities and stereotyping.

With digital cameras the possibilities are extended further, though the ease with which images can be discarded and, with computers, manipulated, adds further issues. As the FÍS Project and the Fís a Dó Project illustrate, primary school students adapt comfortably to using cameras (Barnes and Flanagan, 2007, p. 39), so involving children themselves with manipulating the technology – once available – should not be an inhibitor.

SALGADO AND SPIERS

Finally, from a teacher development perspective, examining the work of an individual photographer can be a practical way of exploring further some of the issues touched on here. I offer two suggestions.

Brazilian-born photographer Sebastião Salgado told *The Times* of London last year: ‘I have no claim to be a social photographer. People stuck that label on me, but I do a lot of commercial work like everyone else. I am not a political militant, I’m a photographer and that’s all’ (Sage, 2007).

It is not clear how much of this is tongue-in-cheek as, concerned about deforestation resulting from sugar-cane planting, Salgado and his

wife founded an environmental NGO called Instituto Terra. Hence, a question that arises, particularly for teachers who use the work of photographers in classrooms, is: is it possible for anyone to be ‘a photographer and that’s all’? If one is not familiar with Salgado’s work, is one’s response altered when his images are viewed? Salgado’s images are powerful and at times controversial; some of them are readily accessible on the internet.

The work of Irish photographer Derek Spiers illustrates very well how photographers can position themselves sympathetically in relation to their subjects. His work over three decades is, among other things, a rich chronicle of the humanity of the marginalised in our society. At the opening of Combat Poverty’s 20th anniversary photo exhibition in 2007, the social activist Fr Peter McVerry remarked: ‘Just using this montage of photographs by Ireland’s most renowned photographer of social scenes and social issues, Derek Spiers, could provide a major module in any civics or RE programme’ (Combat Poverty, 2007).

Thus, if Derek Spiers’ work is ‘sympathetic’, can other photographs be classified as ‘unsympathetic’? The answer seems to be a resounding ‘yes’ and so carries consequences, not only for the photographs we use in classrooms, but also for teachers to sensitise young people in seeing such differences.

CONCLUSION

For the media educator, deconstructing images as outlined here can offer powerful lessons in how people make and shape the world according to their own perspectives. For the development educator, any exploration of images of development and underdevelopment needs to be attentive to children’s exciting ideas and, indeed, such explorations can be attitudinally diagnostic. Additionally, teachers who appreciate denotation and connotation in photography seem more likely to be able to assist their students in developing more critical perspectives.

Image folders, whether in electronic or hard copy form, can be versatile tools for teaching and learning but need to be constructed carefully. Particular care needs to be taken not to unwittingly reinforce negative stereotypes. Close interrogation of still images can be effective in increasing the realisation that images are constructed in particular contexts, with particular agenda and perspectives. The ability to critique the construction of still images is a skill that appears to transfer readily to a similar critical perspective on film and TV images. Ultimately, the

educator needs to appreciate how complex individual images are and how contentious interpretations can be. Passing on the knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to such appreciation gives learners a resource with lifelong applications.

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