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Building a Just and Sustainable World

EDUCATION CONNECTION | VISUAL LITERACY

Images, photos, and pictures stimulate the mind. For the viewer, they offer a chance to connect and question. They also offer potential for play and imagination, and pulling the observer into purposeful messages.

Most often, newspaper and magazine readers quickly glance at photos and their captions. With this YES! lesson plan, you and your students can luxuriate—and pause—to truly understand an image, its message, and why it's interesting (or not).



EDUCATION CONNECTION | VISUAL LITERACY

Step One: What do you notice? (before the facts)

Ask your students to make sense of the photograph by trusting their instincts of observation and inference. In doing so, the photograph offers possibilities and interpretations beyond a typical reading where the reader glances at the picture to reinforce their interpretation of the picture's title or caption. Do not introduce any facts, captions, or other written words outside of the image. You may hear: lots of blankets, bed, black dog, sleeping bag, plastic bin, shelf.

Step Two: What are you wondering? (thinking about the facts)

After you've heard what your students are noticing, you'll probably hear the peppering of questions: Does someone live here? What is the tent-like item draping down? Why are there so many blankets? Is that camping gear on top of the shelf? This is a good time to reveal the photo's caption, accompanying quote, and facts about the actual situation. Watch how the conversation shifts from what they believe to be true to discerning the facts about the photo.

Photo caption:

"The "Cone of Silence" is made from a mosquito net hoop and heavy blankets, designed to trap body warmth around the handmade straw mattress on winter nights." Photo by Brian Liloia.

Photo facts:

The heavy blankets and netting are atop a built-in bed platform in one of many cob houses in the Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage of northeastern Missouri. Communities like Dancing Rabbit value practices, such as Natural Building, that are based largely on minimizing negative ecological impact and using locally available, renewable resources. They believe that it is functional, enjoyable, and healthy to live a lifestyle that is alternative to the U.S. status quo.

Cob, a material commonly used for house frames in Natural Building, is a mixture of straw, clay, and sand similar to adobe. Lumps of cob are applied wet to build up a wall, bench, or as thermal mass around stoves.

A "living roof" allows plants to grow on top of a roof. Soil is placed over a waterproof membrane on an extra-sturdy roof. The soil and plants can help a building cool in summer and warm in winter by evapo-transpiration, thermal mass and insulation.

A fabric tent can trap body heat during cold winter months. This natural method of keeping warm has proven to be very effective, raising the temperature from 40 degrees to 60 in just 15 minutes.

More resources around the image

EXPLORE: Building a Handmade Cob House

READ: Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage

LEARN: Keeping Warm Without Warming the Globe

Step Three: What next? (jumping off the facts)

Learning more about a photo leads to bigger questions and an opportunity to discuss broader issues and perspectives.

1. What kinds of skills would you learn by building your own house? Is building a house something you'd be willing to try? Why or why not?
2. What are some of the natural resources available for building and creating in your community? What lifestyle would you have if you were limited to using only natural resources available in your own region?
3. What *does* "the U.S. status quo" look like to you? Is it something you're happy to be part of or would you prefer to live differently? Could you see yourself living in a community like Dancing Rabbit?

