Perspectives on Famine in Africa

Lesson Overview: This lesson focuses on how different sources of information shape one’s opinions about issues and crises. Students will investigate an issue from a number of different media sources and discuss how each source’s viewpoint shifts their understanding of the situation. Finally, students will be asked to consider what their responsibilities are as 21st century citizens with profound access to information. This lesson is based on information presented at the 2012 University of Chicago Teacher Institute, “Feeding the World: Challenges to Achieving Food Security.”

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Subject(s): Humanities, History, Writing, Technology, World Issues

Suggested Grade Level(s): 6–10

Time Duration: Two to three 45–50 minute class periods

Common Core State Standards Addressed:
Common Core Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies

Key Ideas and Details, Standard 2
- Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions (Grades 6–8)
- Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text (Grades 9–10)

Craft and Structure, Standard 6
- Describe how a text presents information (e.g., sequentially, comparatively, causally) (Grades 6–8)
- Analyze how a text uses structure to emphasize key points or advance an explanation or analysis (Grades 9–10)

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Standard 8
- Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text (Grades 6–8)
- Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author’s claims (Grades 9–10)

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Standard 9
- Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources (Grades 9–10)
Objectives:

- Students will consider how a particular source of information portrays a situation or issue and provides information on the topic.
- Students will utilize critical analysis and investigation skills to dissect media sources and understand the underlying message of media pieces.
- Students will discuss how coverage of an issue in a particular media outlet affects one’s understanding of that issue.
- Students will consider their responsibilities as global citizens in the 21st century and as a media consumer.

Materials:

- “The Hunger Season, A Cynical Cycle” -- Sam Loewenberg’s PowerPoint presentation from the University of Chicago Center for International Studies 2012 Institute, “Feeding the World: Challenges to Achieving Food Security.”
- Projector and screen and laptop to project images
- Laptops or computers for groups of three to four students to work in groups on the Internet OR printed copies of the articles listed below and information about the media source of each article
- Optional Background for Teachers: Sam Loewenberg’s video lecture given at the University of Chicago Center for International Studies 2012 Summer Teacher Institute, “Feeding the World: Challenges to Achieving Food Security.”
  http://cis.uchicago.edu/outreach/summerinstitute/2012/resources.shtml

Activities and Procedures:

Introductory Activity:
1. Begin by inviting students to offer their reactions to a series of images of children. One at a time, project three images. Start with image #3 of the young girl in pink from http://society.ezinemark.com/largest-charities-in-america-77367dfd6a5a.html, followed by #5 with the girl holding a dinner plate from the same web page. Then project the image from slide #24 from Sam Loewenberg’s PowerPoint presentation, showing a crowd of children. (You may want to cut/paste these three images onto a single document prior to class, to be able to efficiently show students each one, rather than scrolling through the two web links.) Inform students each image comes from a source focused on issues of food security. Then, going one image at a time, ask the students the following Visual Thinking Strategy (VTS) questions:

   - What do you see in this image?
   - What makes you say that?
   - What more can we find?
2. Once a number of students have had the opportunity to respond and a variety of answers have been proffered, tell them the source and location of each photo (Feed the Children, USA; Food for the Poor, Caribbean; independent journalist Sam Loewenberg, Kenya). Provide brief information about each source (Feed the Children, Food for the Poor, Sam Loewenberg) and ask students why each source might post each image and what purpose each source might have in presenting the images.

3. If any students thought the children in the images seemed malnourished or were incorrect about from which regions of the world the children came, invite the students to think about their preconceived notions of the hungry. If no one raises the aforementioned point, ask the group if any of the individuals pictured strike you as food insecure or hungry? Going back to the VTS questions, push them to support their thoughts based on what they see in the picture. Though we often think that the majority of food insecure people are in sub-Saharan Africa, the reality is that there are more in South Asia. (The only African children in the presented images are not malnourished and live in a self-sufficient collective in Kenya.)

4. To segue into the activity, point out that a piece of media or image is not always what it appears, and that there may be other perspectives not obviously or clearly represented.

Looking at Media Pieces:
1. Divide students into small groups (two to four students per group, depending on the number of available computers). Inform the groups that they will be reading an article about the food crisis in the Horn of Africa: if students need information on African geography, project a map of the region here. For lower grades, it would be advisable to provide some background information.

Assign each group to read a different article from the list below and learn about the source from which it comes:

Global Food Crisis Takes Heavy Toll on East Africa
(about The Lancet: http://www.thelancet.com/aboutus)

The Famine Next Time from the New York Times

Horn of Africa
(about UNICEF: http://www.unicefusa.org/about/)

‘Triangle of Death’ In Horn of Africa: Famine Grips Somalia
(about National Public Radio: http://www.npr.org/about/aboutnpr/)

U.N.: Famine in Somalia Killing Tens of Thousands
Famine Ends, yet 31% of the Population Remain in Crisis

East Africa: Reports of Somali Famine Exaggerated? How We Wish That Were True...
(about AllAfrica: http://allafrica.com/)

2. Direct the groups to spend some time reading the articles aloud and research the source of the article. On a board or projector screen, list the following questions and have a group recorder jot down their answers:

1. What is the main event or topic of the article?
2. What is the article’s attitude or main point about the topic or event discussed?
3. Does the author of your piece express any opinions about the topic or event? If so, what are they?
4. What is the source of your article? What kind of publication or organization is it? How does that explain the tone or content of the article? Do you think they have an agenda?

3. Bring the groups back together and ask each group to share:

   a. The topic of their article
   b. The attitude of the article about the topic
   c. The source from which it came and any information about the source they found that was interesting or useful in explaining the attitude or tone of the article.

Ask students to reflect on how their particular source described the topic, including the tone of the article and any specific language that stuck out to them. Ask them why their sources would present the topic in the way that it did (e.g. is the language and attitude of FEWSnet’s coverage different than UNICEF’s? What about The New York Times v. The Lancet?) Finally, ask students how they feel the coverage in their news source would influence one’s understanding of the issue or topic (e.g. is it a major or urgent problem? Was it handled well? Could it have been avoided? Who is to blame for the crisis?).

Final Thoughts and Thinking:
1. Pose a question to the group about how they learn about things going on in the world. Read the following questions and have students raise their hands in response:

   a. How many of you learn about what’s happening in the world primarily from a print newspaper?
   b. How many of you learn about what’s happening in the world primarily from the radio?
   c. How many of you learn about what’s happening in the world primarily from an online news source?
   d. How many of you learn about what’s happening in the world primarily from trends on social media sites?
e. How many of you learn about what’s happening in the world primarily from your parents or other adults in your lives?

f. How many of you learn about what’s happening in the world primarily from your teachers and classes in school?

g. How many of you learn about what’s happening in the world from multiple sources?

2. Ask the group, “What have we learned today in our analysis of the news about why it might be problematic to only get our information from one type of source? What might be the benefit of seeking out multiple sources?” Remind them that even reading about a single crisis in different sources (such as a food crisis in Africa—an event reported and hard to argue did not happen), garnered various perspectives.

3. Have students turn to their neighbor and discuss two or three ways they can personally broaden exposure to information (current events).

4. Finally, ask the group what they think it means to be a global citizen in the 21st century. Offer the following statements and ask them to agree or disagree, supporting their point of view on the matter:
   a. As global citizens who strive to be informed about what is happening in the world and have access to broad amounts of information (via the Internet, newspapers, radio, etc.), we have a responsibility to seek out balanced accounts of events and sources that hit multiple angles of news stories to be best informed.
   b. As global citizens who strive to be informed about what is happening in the world and have access to broad amounts of information (via the Internet, newspapers, radio, etc.), we have a responsibility to take action on issues about which we learn about in the media.

Optional Assessment:

Assign students to find another news piece about the famine in the Horn of Africa with a different point of view than the article they read in class. Have them investigate the source of the report, as well and write a paragraph that contrasts the source’s attitude to the one read in class, focusing on the why each source might take the point of view it does.