THE MOST IMPORTANT PICTURE – LESSON PLAN

Standards Addressed

"There is one thing the photograph must contain, the humanity of the moment."
-Robert Frank

Documentary photographs are primary texts. In today's highly visual world, students exchange photographs through social media on a regular basis and, at times, with little forethought to the permanent trail they are leaving behind. Taking the time to build skills to critically examine images and understand the capacity for an image to tell the human story is more important than ever.

Teachers can integrate the use of documentary photographs throughout many units of study in World History, Social Studies, English/Language Arts, Civics (and in their Advanced Placement equivalents). Documentary photographs, particularly ones recording current issues, can play an integral role in International Baccalaureate programs and interdisciplinary courses such as Global Studies and International Relations to address the following standards:

6-12 Anchor Standards for the Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
- Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

6-12 Standards for Speaking and Listening

- Initiate and participate in a range of collaborative discussions.
- Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis and tone used.
- Present information, findings and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning.

6-12 Standards for Writing

- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts and information clearly and accurately.
- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

- Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish and update individual or shared writing products.

Preparing Students

This series of lessons invites students to view and analyze photographs taken by young Syrian refugees as they seek ways to express and understand their lives while living in exile in refugee camps. Responsibly preparing students to engage with images of the Syrian refugee experience requires them to have a general understanding of the current conflict in addition to access and an awareness of tools to use if emotions emerge.

Openly acknowledging and discussing with the class that images from conflict and war may trigger emotions for both students and teachers is critical. Build time into the class to process emotions and information and create available safe outlets such as individual journals or small group discussions for this purpose. If you are aware that students in your class have a personal connection to this content, speaking with them and their families prior is a thoughtful and sensitive step to take. If helpful, read together this New York Times blog post outlining ten foundational ideas to foster safe classroom environments.

Building Background Knowledge

To build background knowledge for students unfamiliar with the geography, history and current refugee crisis in Syria, consider integrating these activities prior to introducing and analyzing Fatima and Hani's photographs.

Defining Terms:

Language matters and terms used to refer to this content have particular power. Read as a class this article from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees that

- After reading have students create working definition* of these terms: ***refugee, migrant, refugee camp, asylum and civil war***. (*A working definition exercise asks students to use prior knowledge, associations and context clues to come up with a definition.)
- Discuss what is the difference between a refugee, a migrant and someone seeking asylum? Why are these distinctions important?
- What factors and circumstances force families to flee and leave their homes and their communities?

You may also direct students to explore current photographs documenting the refugee experience:

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What does it mean to be a refugee?
https://annenbergphotospace.org/exhibits/refugee

"The Hidden Scars All Refugees Carry", Viet Thanh Nguyen, New York Times, Sept. 2, 2016.
http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/03/opinion/the-hidden-scars-all-refugees-carry.html

Putting a Humane, Dignified Face on Refugees
http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2016/04/18/blogs/photography-pulitzer-for-coverage-of-refugee-crisis/s/18-lens-refugees-slide-8AS8.html

UNICEF project
https://medium.com/photography-and-social-change/lost-identities-838ef13c57f5#.y349f65iu

What story does this tell?

- Distribute this map illustrating the migration of Syrian refugees in 2015 from the UNHCR and included in this BBC article.
- Ask students to discuss in pairs or small groups these prompts and be prepared to share out a summary of their conversation.

  What do they notice about the geography of Syria?
  Why does this matter?
  What new information does the map offer?
  What story does this map tell?
  What questions surface from looking and discussing this map?

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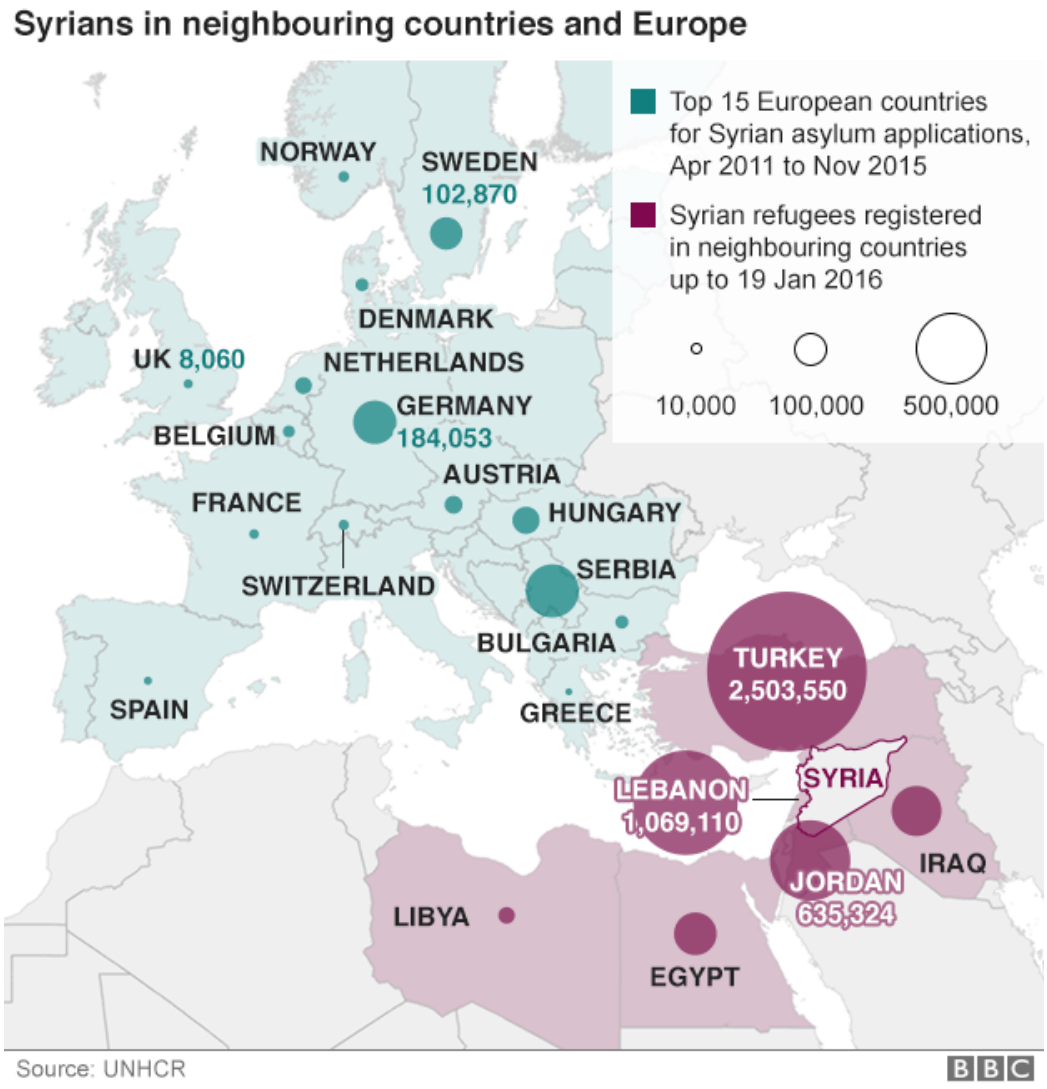


Lesson One - Exile: Syrian Refugees

"Think about others. Don't forget the people of the tents."
-Mahmoud Darwish

Lesson one provides background information on the current Syrian refugee crisis in order for students to understand the context of the photographs taken by Fatima Ahmed and Hani Al Moulia, two students in Brendan Bannon's "The Most Important Picture" workshop.

Background for Teachers and Students

Since 2011 Syria has been embroiled in a civil war resulting in a mass exodus of its civilian population to the neighboring countries of Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt. Unlike other Arab nations like Tunisia, Egypt or Libya, Syria's ruling family did not step down as a result of the popular uprising often referred to as the "Arab Spring." Instead the Al-Assad family retained its quasi-dictatorial rule leading to further opposition groups emerging and violent fighting continuing throughout Syria. As a result, thousands of Syrians fled their communities, seeking safe refuge in neighboring countries and surviving in refugee camps.

Activity

1. View photographs from Set #1 and use these discussion prompts to analyze the images.
   Describe what you see.
   Describe what you don't see.
   How do these photographs inform your understanding of life in a refugee camp?

   Set #1 are from The Aftermath Project website and have these captions:
   Image 1A: The fence and the people are woven together into one fabric. Fences are the fabric of our lives.
   Image 1B: A different kind of life.

2. Ask students to discuss as a class these two questions:
   - How does knowing the context of a photograph affect how you view it?
   - What types of information change your interpretation of a photograph? Why?

3. View Set #2 photographs and use these discussion prompts to analyze the images.
   Compare the first set of pictures to the second set of pictures.
   What do you notice as similar and what is different?
   How do these photographs inform your understanding of life in a refugee camp?

Set #2 are from The Aftermath Project website and have these captions:

- Image 1C: Yes, our life is hard and filled with difficulty. We are in an unbearable crisis. Despite that we still exercise and build skills for sports. We will improve ourselves. We will run, climb fences, lift weights, play football and ride the bikes that no one cares for. We will even pull rope. We won't give up. We will prove to the world that we are still children, adults and old men. We are Syrian refugees.
- Image 1D: We are in an unbearable crisis. Despite that we still exercise and build skills for sports. We will improve ourselves. We will run, climb fences, lift weights, play football, ride bikes that no one cares for. We will even pull rope. We won't give up. We will prove to the world that we are still children, adults and old men. We are Syrian refugees.

4. Depending upon access to technology, reading level and background knowledge choose from the following source materials that provide important background information on the current Syrian refugee crisis.

- Video background explaining Syrian Refugee Crisis from 2013
- Video background on Syrian Refugees and the European Union from 2015
- Comprehensive Timeline
- Map of Al Zaatari Refugee Camp, Jordan
- United Nations High Commission on Refugees data

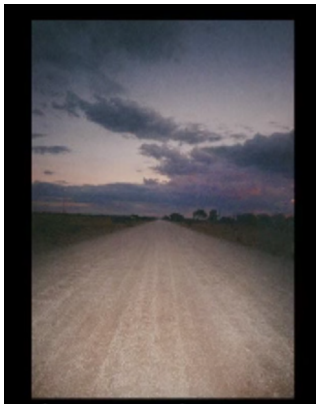
5. Have students create a Push/Pull chart identifying historical details, actions or decisions by leaders, or domestic and international events that propel a crisis such as the Syrian refugee crisis to accelerate. One format to follow could resemble the following:

	Major Events	Push Factors	Pull Factors
2011-2012			
2013-2014			
2014-2015			
2016-current			

6. After completing the table, ask each student to select one new piece of information they did not know about the Syrian refugee crisis before completing this lesson. Go around the room and have each student share what they chose.

Lesson Two

A Photography Workshop: Creating Images with Children Living in Refugee Camps



A journey of a million miles begins with a single step, a road.
Who knows what a road means?
This road was traveled by humans.
During war the road was traveled in a way
that even the road was tired.
Human beings have traveled millions of miles during war.
-Mazimpaka, Osire Refugee Camp, Namibia

Background for the Educator and Students

Brendan Bannon conducts photography and writing workshops around the world with children living in refugee camps in partnership with the United Nations Refugee Agency and the International Rescue Committee. These workshops are an outlet for youth to tell their own stories and express their lives after being uprooted and displaced because of civil conflict and war.

Activity: A Workshop

There was a sense of compassion that was extremely moving to me.
- Brendan Bannon

1. Introduce Brendan Bannon and his workshop philosophy by showing students this video, reading this blog about the workshop from The New York Times or if technology is not available, a summary below from Brendan Bannon describing his workshop. Have students share their reactions to what they saw, heard and learned about this workshop and its role in the lives of children in a refugee camp.

The photography assignments were designed to allow the kids to fully explore the range of human experience and chronicle the full picture of refugee life. People in refugee camps live in a small community in a small part of the world, but their experiences are not small. They are as expansive as the human experiences anyway. They miss their parents when they don't see them. They love their siblings. They exercise, cook and

sleep and dream. They fall in love and flirt and form families of their own in refugee camps or in their home countries if peace can be found. Life continues. . .

People have an incredible capacity for renewal and regeneration. This project is about people facing a situation that is seemingly impossible to cope with, and then defying expectation by dealing with it in a positive and creative way.

At the end of the course the children gathered and said, "Thank you for not only teaching us photography, but also for giving us a chance to understand ourselves better. We were able to talk to our parents for the first time about our past. Finally, we understood why and how we came to be refugee children. For the first time the children opened a dialogue with the past and understood themselves better."

2. Read a selection of Brendan Bannon's blog posts (See Appendix I) from his workshops in Lebanon at the Za'atari Refugee Camp.

3. Transition students to looking at other example of student work by going to the Project section in Bannon's "The Most Important Picture" website. Scroll down to the Student Work section from the Osire Refugee Camp in Namibia and explore the photographs posted. Note: If computer access is limited, select a handful of photographs from these projects to engage students.

(3) After reviewing these images share with students the following explanations of workshop exercises that Brendan Bannon draws upon when working with his students. It is vital to emphasize to the class that Bannon's work with students is a process and not a prescriptive lesson or workshop. These explanations, written by Bannon, cannot convey the full power of the process or the profound importance that place holds in developing the workshop.

The main goals of my workshops are to give refugee children an opportunity to explore and explain their lives through photography and writing. We often hear stories of crisis and calamity as told by outsiders. Rarely are the people living through these upheavals of history empowered to tell their own stories. Least of all, the most vulnerable among them, children are often silenced in a tragedy.

Most Important Picture workshops aim to give youth a transformative experience by listening to them and giving them an environment where they can express themselves freely and safely among peers.

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We use photography as a means to teach problem solving, curiosity and communication. I don't know that any of these kids will be photographers in the future, I do know that they will face problems and need the tools to advocate for themselves, to address problems creatively and productively and to communicate clearly with others on their own behalf.

Students in these workshops ranged from 10-20 years old. Half were male and half female. There was a variety of educational experience and attainment. Some were still in school and others had dropped out in Syria during the war and hadn't returned.

We had two volunteer course assistants and two translators. Everyone was available to help the students during the writing components.

When students struggled with the content or practice of writing another student or assistant worked with them to be sure that they were able to describe the pictures they made and tell their stories in writing.

If the student struggled to write about the picture someone would interview the photographer and the answers in the interview led to the description of the picture.

We meet in class from around 9 am- 4pm daily for two weeks straight.

Here are a sampling of workshop exercises explained by Brendan Bannon that he uses to engage students during these two weeks.

Faceless portrait

During the first workshop in Za'atari Refugee camp in Jordan we faced a series of delays in handing out the cameras to the students. Camp security were worried about kids with cameras running around the camp. What will they photograph? Who will the photograph? What information will the pictures contain?

Many societies are suspicious of the power of photography to identify and reveal information.

I needed to get the students moving after a few days of waiting or I would lose them and their interest. I knew if security would look at their pictures they could find almost anything troubling. So, I decided to give as innocuous an assignment as possible to begin with.

I told my students, "Faceless is synonymous with anonymous, and as refugees you are anonymous. Let's make portraits of people that show and reveal something essential about their character without showing the face. You can use gesture, shadow, cropping, reflections, silhouettes, hands, feet, any element or expression of a person without revealing the face. If security looked at these pictures they would not see any identifying elements and likely

interpret the work as harmless if not simply ineffective photography for every one knows pictures should include the face, should identify the person, should reveal in the most direct way possible the information they seek to convey."

The kids loved the idea and the challenge and understood the reasons for it. I expected it would give the kids a fun way to start making pictures. What surprised me is how much it shaped the language of their photography going forward. Faceless pictures became a thing, one of the myriad possibilities and strategies for making meaningful pictures. In order to make wonderful surprising pictures we have to veer away from that and other conventions of snapshot photography. We have to break rules, be free and express a sense of wonder and engagement. The faceless portrait assignment gave the kids a tool to make meaningful unexpected images straight out of the gate.

Scavenger hunt

We make a list and challenge the students to find and photograph as many items on the list as possible. This is what William Eggleston called photographing democratically: "I had this notion of what I called a democratic way of looking around, that nothing was more or less important.". Or what Garry Winogrand talked about when he said "I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed."

Two of the great 20th century photographers explained picture making as a compelling curiosity about the camera's ability to interpret and transform the world in a picture. We are teaching curiosity, engagement and problem solving as much as photography and writing.

Having kids photograph the youngest and the oldest, a person with the same name as you, the color blue or red, night, the moon and the sun, texture, hands, a clock, a dog, a window, a worker a meal and other random items teaches them to see photographic possibilities in everything and at anytime.

In addition to expanding the language of our young photographers we get feedback from them about their environment and life. Throughout this exercise they make surprising images that can be included in the final exhibit.

A self/refugee self portrait

I always give a self-portrait assignment. Not a "selfie" assignment. From the faceless portrait assignment the students know portraits are descriptive pictures that show something essential about the person being photographed.

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This is a chance for the photographers to tell their own stories directly. If you could tell the world about yourself what would you say. Would you shout it or whisper it? Would you say it directly or poetically? What symbols would you use, what stories would you share?

While giving the assignment in Namibia years ago I was interrupted by a student asking – do you mean our refugee self or our normal self?

I asked the others what they thought and was answered with an excited chorus of kids saying they wanted to do both. I give them a choice of whether they want to do one or the other or both.

I love this assignment on a practical level because it teaches kids to collaborate in picture making and to communicate about the intentions behind the pictures they want to make. Often we think pictures are inevitable but they are the result of many decisions- where to stand, what angles to try, when to press the shutter, what to try next. Good pictures are the result of planning and improvising and serendipity. This assignment requires a good blend of all of these elements.

Practical note: Students work in pairs to make self-portraits. The photographer instructs his partner where to stand and how to pose. He then makes the picture and shows the example picture to his partner. They trade places and the partner makes the picture as instructed by the photographer.

The Most Important Picture
The workshops are named for a student I had in Romania who was HIV + .

Carla made a self-portrait in the train station and wrote “This picture is the most important because it is my picture. And when I am going to die they are going to look at it and remember.”

As with many assignments I share an example of my own. My most important picture is an image I made of my mother before she died. My mom was a refugee from Ukraine. She and her family fled during Stalin’s purges. It is a strange irony that without Stalin’s persecution of my family I would not have existed.

My mother was sick for years with multiple sclerosis and in the end couldn’t leave her bed. So we brought the world to her - in the shape of pictures and visits.

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This picture is the most important to me because it is about my family and the people I love. My nephew Josh struggled to hold himself up on the bar and my mom watched in amazement. The picture is about struggle and wonder. It is about the cycles of life and it is one of the last pictures I made of my mom before she died. The picture was one of the first in my career as a photographer, something I'd dreamed of being for many years. A dream deferred to the more urgent matter of helping my mom survive and flourish in difficult times.

I ask my students to review all of their work and to pay attention to each picture. Look at the progress you made from all of the hard work. See the presence of people you love and the influences of new friends. Appreciate and congratulate yourselves for how hard you have worked.

While you do that try to identify the most important picture you made.

It can be important to you for any reason at all.

You are free to choose the picture.

Then write a new caption or description that explains why it is the most important picture for you.

The results are important and the alternate captions enrich the meaning of the images. We read these to each other on the final day of class and each student has a chance to take the stage and say what matters most to them.

Lesson Three - Through Fatima's Eyes: Trauma, Grief and Recovery

Lesson Three introduces Fatima Ahmed and a selection of her photographs that emerged from her participation in Brendan Bannon's "The Most Important Picture" workshop. By reflecting on Fatima's words and viewing her photographs, students are able to consider how the process and creation of photographs provided an emotionally healing role in her life.

Background for Students

In 2014 Fatima was a 19-year-old war widow and mother of three children living in the Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan. She enrolled in one of the two week courses taught by Brendan Bannon in the refugee camp. He notes, "I was really moved by the way [she] went from the dark of [her]dreams and found so much more to express."

Activity

(1) *In her own words*

Read aloud the following passage written by Fatima and discuss their reactions and interpretations.

> I started thinking about the meaning of life before I even held a camera, because I see the suffering in my life and other refugees' lives every day a million times. . . But the camera has become a friend that I discovered recently. We talk to each other silently, we agreed that together we would tell the world about what's inside us.[1]

Following this discussion, pass out a handout with these statements from Fatima excerpted from a UN interview.[2] Ask students to choose one compelling statement and using this selection, respond to the prompts below.

- What connections did you make with Fatima's words and sentiment?
- What inferences can you make about the role of photography in her life?
- What question would you ask Fatima if you had the opportunity?

"When I got the camera it expanded my imagination."

"My suitcase became the box of my grief. I can't tell my secrets unless I'm inside of it. . . "

[1] http://www.fastcoexist.com/3043325/young-refugees-from-syria-go-behind-the-camera-to-tell-their-stories-in-photos. Accessed May 5, 2016.

[2] These statements transcribed from UNHCR video, "Young Syrian Mother, Rescued by Photography. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qyy7A3gGV8. Accessed May 2, 2016.

"I like to show the reality we live in. . . . I also feel this freedom. I put all obstacles aside, fear, shyness. I lost all inhibitions when I hold the camera."
"I saw a different world. I mixed with people, different people. It brought something new to my life. . . . This has given me a lot of confidence. . . to photograph and leave behind the isolation and sorrowful state I was in."

"I dream . . .that I will teach. Teach and train adults in photography. I dream . . .that I will have an exhibition . . . that people will pay attention to my photos."

(2) *Recovering from trauma*
Transition from discussing her words to viewing a background video on Fatima created by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees. After viewing this clip, ask each student to pick one word to describe Fatima and share this word as a class.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qyy7A3gGV8

Today Fatima reports that she is concentrating and dedicating her life to raising her children and to educating the children in the camp. She works on encouraging them to express themselves, express how they feel without fear or worry.

(3) *Expressions*
In the workshops facilitated by Brendan Bannon, the opportunity for students to tell stories through photographs while documenting their lives is very important. Project each image for the class to view together. After viewing the image and reading the caption, ask students to discuss in pairs or small groups the following prompts:

- What story do they see being told in each image?
- If they could ask Fatima a question about the image, what question would they ask?
- If they could give the photograph a title, what would it be?

[These are the captions of the images on The Aftermath Project website]
Image 3A, Caption: This is the most important picture to me because it is for my husband who was killed. "You are the cause of all crises. You are everything in my life. I have to see you even if you are far from me. Inside of me there is a picture no one but I can see, a fire burning my heart a hundred times. I can't tolerate its flame anymore. I have no choice but to picture my agony and transform it into a little picture the whole world can see." Her original text was, "Fire burned my husband and now it wants to burn me. This crisis and pain I have endured. This anguish didn't want to have mercy on me. It burned my husband. Oh I hear his voice in pain and

in my dreams. Only fire. It wants to burn me and eat my body, so my soul could embrace his soul."

Image 3B, Caption: Absence From the Family. He is the grandfather of this family. He was the one who produced hope.

Image 3C, Caption: My Child's Smile. I wish this smile were always on his face, so that my heart continues to beat.

Image 3D, Caption: This picture is the only way I can tell the whole world: "I don't ask for anyone to have mercy on me or take care of me. I only ask you to look at this picture, which shows my reality and tells the story of my life. A life which became full of funeral shrouds and grief." The Kaaba is Black. Nothing compares to it's beauty, but this coffin is white and nothing compares to its ugliness. After so many crises in life, and the ones wrapped in white, during my dreams I can only see my son shrouded in in white.

Lesson Four - Through Hani's Eyes: Creating Stories

Lesson four looks at the photographs and writings of Hani Al Moulia as an example of powerful storytelling. Hani, like other students, discovered how images coupled with his own point of view, provided a meaningful form of storytelling. In this lesson students will view Hani's photographs and point their keen eye to analyzing ways his images collectively create a narrative.

Background for Students

Hani Al Moulia, a 20-year-old refugee from Homs, Syria, is a young scholar who had planned to study at the Sorbonne in Paris on a scholarship before the war changed his life. First living in a tented settlement in the Bekaa valley in Lebanon with his parents and four siblings where he taught theater to children and studied literature, Hani now lives in Regina Saskatchewan, Canada and studies English as a second language at the University of Regina. After completing his ESL coursework, Hani will aspire to study computer engineering at at Ryerson College in Toronto.

Activity: Telling Stories with Photographs

Hani tells stories through each of his images. He says, "I take the pictures in my mind first and then try to apply the image with the camera. I want people to feel other humans, especially in extreme living conditions like in a camp or escaping war or leaving home because of natural disasters. I want them to see truth which is my goal as a photographer."

In this activity, students will view, analyze and select several of Hani's images taken for "The Most Important Picture" project and create a unique story using his photographs as their touchstones.

Process:

(1) View each image without reading the caption. Engage in a visual analysis of the images in pairs or small groups using these prompts to stimulate the discussion. It may be helpful to have one note taker to capture the main ideas from your discussion.

- What do you see in his photograph?
- What questions do you have about the image?
- If you were to give Hani's image a title, what would it be? Why?
- What emotions emerge when looking at his image?

(2) Return to each image and read aloud each caption written by Hani. Reflect and discuss in pairs or small groups how the caption shifts or changes your understanding of the image.

(3) Organize Hani's images to tell a story. Feel free to use his captions or elect to create a unique story based upon what emerged from your discussion of each image. If time allows, students can storyboard their narrative using a graphic organizer or online tools such as Storyboard That.

Once finished, students can share their stories with one another in small groups. Alternatively, a class can organize a reading event in which community members within and outside the school can come and listen to each students story.

Image 4A, Caption: A Tearful Laugh. It was simultaneously funny and sad when I asked my mom: "Why did you bring the house keys with you?" And without an answer everyone began to laugh, because these keys are useless. They are the keys to a house that is almost completely destroyed. My mom's laugh quickly turned into tears that paved their path onto her cheeks and silenced the sound of that brilliant laugh… I also cried after that scene.

Image 4B, Caption: My tent has become my university, a lab, a studio, a theater… And in it I have become the teacher, the professor, the student, the guard, the actor, the dancer, and even the photographer…

Image 4C, Caption: I always try to look and listen to the camp from a distance, from a high point, as if I'm an orchestra conductor. I stand for a long time, listening to those tunes… To those amazing musical pieces that carry the sounds of children crying… parents' anger… laughter… kitchen utensils… food… birds nearby… wood being broken… The musical pieces end with the beginning of the night.

Image 4D, Caption: I, too, am like these caged birds, but they are in a cage, while my chain is the present moment. I no longer know who I am in front of these birds.

Image 4E, Caption: Pain... Missing...Distance...Adoration...Beauty... Tents...Cold... Hunger...Identity...A Student...An Actor...A Dancer...A Photographer...A City...A Country...A Question...An Exit...No Answer...Hope...A Future...Loss...A Writer...Being away from home...Society...Routine...Return...And a right...Do you hear what my hand is screaming?

Further Resources to Explore Using Photography as a Tool and Process for Social Change

http://www.mostimportantpicture.org/
Founded by Brendan Bannon, *The Most Important Picture* offers both photography workshops and specialized training for individuals, communities, international aid organizations and NGO's.

The Most Important Picture teaches at risk children, youth and adults to use photography and writing as a tool for self-expression, discovery and problem solving. Through these intensive workshops, people who are often the subject of journalism become the storytellers, using their imagery and words to have their voices heard.

Photovoice.org
PhotoVoice's mission is, "to build skills within disadvantaged and marginalised communities. To achieve this, we utilise innovative participatory photography and digital storytelling methods. These skills enable individuals to represent themselves and create tools for advocacy and communication. Through this, and through developing partnerships, we deliver positive social change." This website includes examples from around the world and resources for using it in community based organizations and classrooms.

Liam Maloney's Text Project
Pairing the text messages with a photographs of the individual sending the text, photojournalist Liam Maloney creates an exhibition and opportunity for learning and reflection on the deeply connected yet alienating experience of Syrian refugees. You can also read about this project here.

This American Life: Project "Don't Have to Live Like a Refugee"

Appendix I-Excerpts of Blog Posts from Za'atari Refugee Camp, Lebanon
Brendan Bannon

DAY 1 - Zaahle, Lebanon
Communication, building bridges, sharing, opening doors, challenging perceptions are part of becoming a photographer.

Learning that a good picture can be made of anything is one of the most essential things to learn when you start photographing.

I was keen always to show the best work I could find, the most challenging, the most inventive and creative. As examples in the beginning I used my pictures and those of other professional photographers as examples.

Now I share work made by other students to inspire. Recently I've taught two groups in Zaatari refugee camp and have the example of many fine pictures made by other Syrian refugees.

They instruct in the possibilities of photographic expression. These students connected with the pictures. Sensed the others' suffering. And celebrated the ways that their peers confront and, even overcome, the pain of dislocation and disaster.

I promise the children on the day that we meet that they will also be my teachers and that for me that is the most exciting part of the course. What will I learn from my students? What special intelligence and wisdom do they each have?

It is important to look everywhere for learning and the best teachers are found in the most unexpected places.

During the Zaatari workshops Aala asked us to share a picture and message with the refugees in Lebanon.

Her picture shows two young girls chasing a football at night, lit by the flash of the camera. One girl is closer to the ball the other rushes from the edge of the frame, seeming to pause and smile at the camera.

Aala wrote to the Syrian refugees who she understands by shared circumstance: "I am sending you my greetings and I hope that all of us could go back to our country. I am a refugee like you and I am living in the same conditions regardless of our place of refuge. Despite the fact that we have a tough life we will never give up. I call on you to be strong in all conditions because you

are my brother and I take my strength from you. We are coming back our homeland!" - Aala, refugee , Zaatari camp, Jordan.

According to Nadine, a translator in the first course, Aala, whose education was disrupted by the war, was inspired by her progress in the workshops. Emboldened to continue her gains in writing, she returned to school in Zaatari Camp after the workshop ended.

Blog 2 session 2
The introduction to photography is a bit slow. We don't give out the cameras for the first couple of days. Photography in this context is about much more than pointing the camera and clicking off a bunch of random frames. It's about imagining, thinking, planning, seeing and connecting with the world around you in new ways. In focused and considered ways.

It is about problem solving. So we start in conversation.

The kids expect cameras but the first items in the tool kit are our pens and notebooks where ideas will be brainstormed and project planned out, pictures pasted and stories written to go with the images.

The first pictures are taken with imaginary cameras.

Frames cut from cardboard to practice seeing the world the way a camera does. Specifically. Limited by the edges of the frame.

Some items, scenes and people are intentionally included and others excluded.

I love watching the kids smile as they twist and turn the frames and examine the contents. There's a real and amusement on their faces.

Play and reflection are integral to any learning that isn't rote or memorization. In this course play begins in the class with these cardboard frames.

They go home and explore their homes, markets and communities with the frame.

Mohammed Soleman, 14 years old, recounted his happiness with the cardboard frame. "I went around my caravan with my frame and some adults asked what I was doing with these box cartons.

I told them "I am learning photography."

"What! Are they kidding you with that thing?"

“Well, I told them ‘I can pick this up and take a picture anytime I want and for me it's a real picture."

The framing exercise is usually just about learning to see like a camera. But in the camp it is also a way that the kids prepare themselves and the community around them for the weeks ahead when they will be walking with cameras, seeking permission from others and photographing their daily life.

Lebanon Blog Day 3 - Many moons.
When we looked at the pictures from refugees in Za’atari Refugee camp the kids had a strong reaction to Mohammed's picture of the moon.

“It represents hope,” one boy said.

“It is a bright point in the darkness,” said another.

He’d communicated clearly. The new students felt his message without reading his caption.

"The moon lights our dark night. How can the moon, with its light from far away light our future? As sure as I can see this moon now I know my beloved one can also see it when we are apart.”

Not only did moon to brighten the darkness but it also connected people across great distances. Today the students returned with the first pictures of the course. There were many moons among them.

Telling Your Own Story

Refugees are used to being photographed, usually by journalists or NGO workers. According to Hany one of the students, “In the camps people are used to aid workers or journalists being the ones with cameras. So, as I went around with my camera everyone approached me and told me their problems. They were pulling me to their homes with the idea I could help them. I told them but I am with you. I am also a Syrian refugee.
Eventually, I had to bring my father who said ‘People, you know Hany. he lives here with us.’”

The Magic of Photography.

On the first day students begin using cardboard frames to practice composition. The following day they get the real point and shoot cameras. The cardboard frames are a bit silly looking and

always provoke an amused reaction.

Yesterday, my student Ahmed told me that he'd been teasing his young brothers telling them "If I put my cardboard camera in water it will grow into a real camera the next day. They called me crazy."

Ahmed with his cardboard camera

Today he said, " You should have seen it. My brothers were convinced that my cardboard camera turned real when I show them this one.
Now they want cardboard cameras of their own..."

Oula and Hevy with cardboard cameras.

Mohammed and Hasan with cardboard frame "cameras."

The profound. Ordinary and extraordinary. There are lots of ways to make interesting pictures. And there are many types of good pictures. Some pictures transcend or transform that which is photographed. Some make the simple complex. Others make the profound simple. The echo of plainly stated facts can reveal the interconnectedness of life.

There is a classic Paul Caponigro photograph where the spots on the apples skin resemble constellations of stars or the sweep of light through the galaxy.

In 15-year-old Farah's picture of an apple we find the history of science and the playfulness of youth all from a refugee camp in the Jordanian desert.

"The Apple. When I started photographing this apple I was thinking about how Newton discovered the secrets of gravity. After a long hard think I started to feel hungry and I eyed the apple, I ate it and it was very tasty..."

About this picture of a horse Mohammed Soleman wrote "This animal needs care." The picture grows in gravity as you read it.

The horse, so often a metaphor for man in images, symbolizes the weariness of a people and points to the compassion they still feel toward other beings.

Mohammed Naem's picture of the goalie and football in mid-approach is about as perfect a picture of football as I've ever seen.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PICTURE – LESSON PLAN

Such a simple thing really. A ball flies through the air toward the goalie. The shadowy spectators watch in anticipation.

The shadow of the ball has already entered the net. But in this frame there is still time for the goalie to reach out of this frozen moment and make a last second save. And because it is a still photograph there always will be.

If we take a moment to appreciate the implications of a picture we can be transported into another persons experience or simply invited into a deeper relationship with our own experience.