Exploring the Concept of Power Through the Photography of Jacob Riis

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**Subject/Grade Level:** English Language Arts, Grades 11-12

# **Unit Overview:**

The following unit will ask students to examine the nature of power and power’s opposite, powerlessness. The unit will begin by asking students to examine their own definition of power and lead to the story of photographer and social activist, Jacob Riis. Students will use their knowledge of power and powerlessness to analyze and connect to the work of Riis. The unit will culminate with a project that asks students to use their power as artists to give voice to an issue that they feel is important.

# Objectives:

Students will examine the concept of power and use their understanding of the concept of power to inform their thoughts on Jacob Riis’s photography

Through an in-class exploration activity, students will explore Jacob Riis’s immigrant story and photography and use the information that they gain to better understand the world that they live in.

Students will visit to the National Park Service exhibit of Jacob Riis’s work in order to analyze and make connections to Riis’s work and continue to grow their knowledge of the power that Riis wielded in initiating social reform.

Students will consider the way in which Riis used photography to influence the public’s understanding of immigration in the United States and apply the knowledge gained to the world that they live in.

Students will be able to give voice to an issue that they feel the public should be better informed about by creating a project to give voice to an issue of the student’s choosing.

# **Standards Covered:**

***CCSS: ELA 11-12***

***Writing:***

2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences

***Speaking and Listening:***

1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively

2. Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

***Language Standards***

3. Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

# **Procedure:**

***Day 1:*** The Concept of Power

***Materials:*** Journal 1 & *TED Talk*

***Objective:*** Students will be able to generate a personal definition of power and describe power’s opposite—powerlessness.

1. Discuss the definition of power as a class. (10 Minutes) Note: The teacher could use the following activity to introduce power:
   1. Have students talk with their elbow-partner or table to discuss personal and known definitions of power. Then, have the groups share out the definitions.
   2. Share known definitions of power with students (the teacher’s personal definition or famous definitions).

Introduce the Eric Liu *Ted Talk* on power (from a Civics Perspective) as providing one definition of power and its characteristics. [How to Understand Power TED Talk](https://www.ted.com/talks/eric_liu_how_to_understand_power?language=en)

1. Distribute **Journal 1.** Read the directions with students. (5 Minutes)
2. View the video (8 Minutes)
3. Ask students to share important details that they wrote down with elbow-partners or with the class as a whole. (5-10 Minutes)
4. Assign **Journal 1**. Students will use **Journal 1** to explore their personal definition of power and power’s opposite—powerlessness. (15-20 Minutes)
5. Before students leave, have students verbally share one definition of power that they agree with.

***Day 2:*** The Story of Jacob Riis & the Power of Riis’s Work

***Materials:*** Jacob Riis Article, Google Slides, “Jacob Riis, Photo Response” Sheet

***Objective:*** Through an in-class exploration activity, students will explore Jacob Riis’s immigrant story and photography and use the information that they gain to better understand the world that they live in.

1. The teach will collect **Journal 1** and provide feedback to students by Day 4. (1-2 Minutes)
2. The teacher will read with the class the Jacob Riis article from *The New York Times,* “Jacob Riis Photographs Still Revealing New York’s Other Half.” (10-15 Minutes)

[New York Times Article Jacob Riis Photographs](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/23/arts/design/jacob-riis-photographs-still-revealing-new-yorks-other-half.html)

1. The teacher will select two of the photos from the story and instruct students to respond to the selected photos. Students will use the **Jacob Riis, Photo Response** to generate responses. (10-15 Minutes)

Questions (Also on the **Photo Response Sheet**)

* 1. What are the details that stand out in this photograph? Why are these specific details important to the image as a whole?
  2. What effect might this photograph have had on the American public? Discuss?

1. Students will be assigned a discussion group to share their responses using the discussion format provided. (15 Minutes)
2. Students will share the major thoughts or findings from the group discussion. (5 Minutes)

***Day 3:* The Jacob Riis Exhibit**

***Materials:***  The Jacob Riis Exhibit Note Sheet & The Jacob Riis Exhibit

***Objective:*** Students will visit to the National Park Service exhibit of Riis’s work in order to analyze and make connections to Riis’s work and continue to grow their knowledge of the power that Riis wielded in initiating social reform.

1. The teacher will provide students with **The Jacob Riis Exhibit Note Sheet**, an extension of Day 2’s activity, and bring students to the Jacob Riis Exhibit at the National Park Service. (1 class period)
2. Students will record their responses on the sheet as they take in the exhibit.

***Day 4:* A Voice for the Voiceless**

***Materials:*** Journal 1 & The Jacob Riis Exhibit Note Sheet

***Objective:*** Students will consider the way in which Riis used photography to influence the public’s understanding of immigration in the United States and apply the knowledge gained to the world that they live in.

1. The teacher will return **Journal** 1 to students. Students will review **Journal 1** and add any important details that they wish to add in order to update their definitions of “power” and “powerlessness.” The teacher will remind students to consider the previous two days when adding additional detail. (10 minutes)
2. Students will discuss the updates to **Journal 1** and their findings on **The Jacob Riis Exhibit Note Sheet** with elbow partners or in small groups and share out the details. (5-10 minutes)
3. The teacher will ask students to share important details of their conversation with the class. (10 minutes)
4. The teacher will collect **The Jacob Riis Exhibit Note Sheet**. (1-2 Minutes)
5. The teacher will discuss the ways in which Riis was able to give voice to the voiceless through the work of exposure journalism. (5-10 Minutes)
6. The teacher will ask the students to continue the exploration of the concept of power through the use of artwork. The teacher will ask students to share ideas of modern issues, both local and universal, that the public may not understand as well as the student wishes.
7. In small groups, the class will brainstorm ideas for the modern issues that the public may not be as informed about or understand well. The groups will share to begin Day 5. (10-15 minutes). **Day 5: Creating Awareness Through Artwork**

***Day 5***

***Materials:*** “Creating Awareness Through Artwork” Worksheet

***Objective:*** Students will be able to give voice to an issue that they feel the public should be better informed about by creating a project to give voice to an issue of the student’s choosing.

1. The teacher will pass back **The Jacob Riis Exhibit Note Sheet** with feedback. (1-2 Minutes)
2. The teacher will ask the student groups to share their responses to Day 4’s Brainstorm with the class. (10 minutes)
3. The teacher will distribute the **Creating Awareness Through Artwork** assignment. The teacher will read the assignment with students and discuss the due date, amount of class time that students will be given to work on the assignment and any other questions that the students might have. **Please read the “Note on the teacher’s philosophy regarding this assignment” below**. (10-15 minutes).
4. The teacher will place students in discussion groups to brainstorm ideas for the topic and genre for the project. If time permits, the teacher will allow students time to begin researching or working on ideas (15-20 minutes)
5. The teacher will do a “whip-around” where students share an idea that they have or ask a question about the project. (10 minutes)

***Note on the teacher’s philosophy regarding this assignment:***

To begin, the teacher should, if possible, generate an example assignment for the class to view, then score the assignment according to the rubric.

That said, the teacher should be clear that the rubric is not specific to any genre because of the nature of the assignment. Students are encouraged to choose a genre that they feel suits their topic. For example, some students may want to write newspaper editorials or articles while others will want to create graphic artwork or a collection of original photographs. The opportunities are truly endless. However, you may want to have students have their project idea approved by you before allowing them to move forward.

On another note, the quality of the projects will be somewhat dependent on the amount of time that the teacher allows for completion. The teacher will use their discretion in whether or not to provide in-class time to complete the project. Some teachers might allow up to a week of time for completion while others will allow only a few days. Keep in mind that the amount of time allowed should be considered when grading the projects.

Finally, it is highly recommended for the teacher to provide a day for students to display and/or verbally present their work in groups or in front of the class.

**Journal 1**

Ted Talk Notes

**PART 1:**

**Directions:**

Consider the Ted-Ed talk by Eric Liu: “What is Power?”. Then, generate a list of at least five details that informed your understanding of power.

***Detail 1:***

***Detail 2:***

***Detail 3:***

***Detail 4:***

***Detail 5:***

**PART 2:**

**Directions:**

Eric Liu’s definition of power is, “To make others do what you would have them do.” Consider varying definitions of power. In a one-page journal write, discuss a definition of power that you feel is accurate. Also, consider the opposite of power. Attempt to name and describe the opposite of power.

*You may journal on a separate sheet of lined paper and attach it to this worksheet.*

**Jacob Riis, Photo Response**

**Directions:** For each of the photographs selected in your classroom, write the title of the photograph and respond to the following “***Analysis Questions”***:

* What are the details that stand out in this photograph? Why are these specific details important to the image as a whole?
* What effect might this photograph have had on the American public? Discuss?

| (Answer the analysis questions in the space below.) |
| --- |
| Title of Photograph: |

***Analysis Questions***

* What are the details that stand out in this photograph? Why are these specific details important to the image as a whole?
* What effect might this photograph have had on the American public? Discuss?

| (Answer the analysis questions in the space below.) |
| --- |
| Title of Photograph: |

**The Jacob Riis Exhibit Note Sheet**

**Directions:** During your time at the Jacob Riis Exhibit, take a moment to respond to two photographs that you find interesting. For this activity, you will generate notes inspired by the questions below (similar questions your responded to yesterday). Then, **use your notes to write a one-page reflection** on your experience at the exhibit. Be prepared to share your thoughts with your class.

**Photograph 1 Title:**

* What are the details that stand out in this photograph? Why are these specific details important to the image as a whole?
* What effect might this photograph have had on the American public?
* Why did you choose this photograph? What details resonated with you? **Photograph 2 Title:**
* What are the details that stand out in this photograph? Why are these specific details important to the image as a whole?
* What effect might this photograph have had on the American public?
* Why did you choose this photograph? What details resonated with you?

**Creating Awareness Through Artwork**

**Directions:** After brainstorming ideas with your classmates, consider a societal issue that you believe you could give more attention through the use of art. Choose a topic to inspire your art, and attempt to draw attention to the nuances and complexities of the topic. The topic must be related to a concern that you have about society. Your goal will be to create a piece in a genre of your choosing that gives voice to the issue that you chose.

***In order to complete this assignment successfully you will:***

* 1. Create a piece of artwork that successfully depicts the topic that you wish to explore and its complexity and nuances. The artwork may consist of a collection of original photographs, an original painting, a newspaper editorial, poetry . . . the opportunities are endless. Share your idea with your teacher for final approval.
  2. Ensure that the method you choose to use to convey your topic’s complexity is tailored to your audience in mind. Remember, the audience consists of your classmates.
  3. **Includes a typed, one-page reflection** that discusses the following ideas:
     1. The topic that you chose and why.
     2. The type of artwork that you chose to explore your topic and why.
     3. What you learned through the creation of this piece.

|  | **A** | **B** | **C** | **D/E** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Uniqueness & Creativity**  **The use of original ideas and unique thought is present in the project.** | The student produces an ***in-depth original work*** that is a credit to the method of presentation and showcases a ***unique perspective***. | The student produces an original work that satisfactorily completes the goals of the method of presentation and presents a unique perspective. | The student produces an original work that satisfactorily completes the goals of the method of presentation. | The student did not complete the goals of this category in a satisfactory manner. |
| **Organization**  **The student completes the project in a manner that enhances the purpose of the project.** | The student’s final piece is ***highly organized and considers the audience and the norms of the method of presentation***. The details of the piece are ***organized to enhance the audience’s understanding***. | The student’s final piece is organized and considers the audience and the norms of the method of presentation. The details of the piece are, for the most part, organized to enhance the audience’s understanding | The student’s final piece is somewhat organized and shows an attempt to consider the norms of the method of presentation as well as the needs of the audience. | The student did not complete the goals of this category in a satisfactory manner |
| **Critical Thought**  **The student showed an ability to give voice to the topic chosen in a meaningful manner.** | Student shows ***excellent critical thought*** and consideration in both the written and project portions of the assignment. The student connected their project in a meaningful way to the world that they live in and informed the audience on an important issue impacting society. | The student shows critical thought in all or most parts of the assignment. The student’s project drew connections to society. | Some components of the assignment showcase critical thought and consideration. | The student did not complete the goals of this category in a satisfactory manner |

**Sources Used**

Liu, E. (2014, November). Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/eric\_liu\_how\_to\_understand\_power?language=en

Roberts, S. (2015, October 22). Jacob Riis Photographs Still Revealing New York’s Other Half. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/23/arts/design/jacob-riis-photographs-still-revealing-new-yorks-other-half.html

Yochelson, B., & Czitrom, D. J. (2014). *Rediscovering Jacob Riis: exposure journalism and photography in turn-of-the-century New York*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.