

Lesson Four – When Feelings Exceed Words



I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn't say any other way... things I had no words for.

– Georgia O'Keeffe



CREATIVE ACTIVITY – Photography Walk

Lesson Intention:

In her work supporting survivors of trauma with their creative writing, social science researcher Patti Lather borrowed the German poet Rilke's term "Too Big" to describe those experiences that are so intense that they exceed words. She called these stories "Too Big Stories." Most people have experienced something in their lives that feels overwhelming because of the emotional size of it; the grief almost swallowed them whole, the fear was indescribable, the anger vibrated with energy but exceeded language. When young people are walking through emotions like sadness, anger, or loneliness, it is our role as educators to help them feel heard and seen. **In this activity, students are invited to explore emotions that feel too complex or large for words by using metaphor and photography. This will help students to express the experiences that feel unspeakable.**

Learning Goals:

- Recognize that emotions are complex and transcend distinct labels.
- Understand the possibility of feeling more than one emotion at once.
- Learn to use art and metaphor as tools to express the experiences and emotions that feel unspeakable.

Materials for Lesson:

- [Featured Videos \(2\)](#) – Dr. Neha Chaudhary
- [Additional Videos \(5\)](#)
- Lesson Plan (this document)
- [Lesson PowerPoint](#)
- [Student Examples of Creative Projects](#)

In Preparation for Lesson:

Prior to teaching this lesson, watch the expert and guest artist videos and take an example photograph to share with your students.

Map out the route for the photography walk ahead of time. Your students will be taking this walk as they look for images to represent the way they feel. This walk could be indoors or outdoors.

Students can use the cameras on their cell phones for this lesson. If they do not have phones to use for this purpose, shared tablets can be good alternatives. Please make sure you know what your students' technology needs are ahead of time.

For a tech free option, you can supply your students with paper and pencils or pens, and they can draw the images and write what they see.

Featured Videos:

Dr. Neha Chaudhary explains that emotions are complex, that they can transcend labels and that it is possible to feel more than one emotion at the same time. She shares the way photography helps her represent complex emotions.

Additional Videos:

1. Courtney Payton describes the way photography allows him to express emotions.
2. Cristina Sullivan discusses the 'Three V's' of photography – Vent, Viewpoint, and Voice – and how photography can be a tool to help express emotions and shift perspective.
3. Jazzell describes the way photography helped her express the emotions she doesn't know how to put into words.
4. Ian explains how photography helped him express the mixed emotions he was feeling when he transitioned to high school.
5. Yikia Xu describes his experience with loneliness as an immigrant in the United States and offers that taking photographs allows him to acknowledge and accept these emotions

Lesson Plan:

Display the 'welcome slide' from the Lesson 4 PowerPoint as you begin.

**Slide 1*

As discussed in the teacher training, remember to make the suggested language below authentic to yourself and meaningful for your students.

Launching the Lesson:

* Slide 2

Introduce the concept that emotions can be powerful, and sometimes these emotions are so big that it is impossible to label them or put them into words. Explain the idea that students may feel more than one emotion at once.

Example of What You Could Say:

“Most people have experienced something in their lives that feels overwhelming because of the emotional size of it; whether it be grief, fear, anger, or another strong emotion, sometimes, our emotions are just too difficult to put into words. I was thinking about an experience in my own life (refer to an experience in your own life that you can share).... the emotions felt complex for me. I found that I was feeling multiple emotions at once, and it’s not so easy to put those emotions into words. Have you ever had this experience where you can remember feeling more than one emotion at once or couldn’t label exactly how you were feeling? This idea, the potential to feel multiple and contradictory feelings, is what we are going to explore together today.”

- Explain that they will watch a mental health expert describe the complexity of emotions in a short video.

Notes on What You Plan to Say:

Example of What You Could Say:

“Let’s start with a video from a mental health expert who is also a photographer, and she will talk a little more about this idea of the complexity of emotions.”

Notes on What You Plan to Say:

Play Expert Video:

The expert describes the way photography can express complex emotions. She references the way metaphor can be useful in illustrating emotions without having to label them, sharing one of her photographs that serves as a metaphor for two conflicting feelings that she was experiencing when she took the photograph.

Introducing the Guest Artist Video:

After watching the expert video, introduce the guest artist video you have chosen for your class. Connect the expert video to the guest artist video by noting their shared message: the importance of honoring complex emotions and the power of photography as a medium for emotional expression. The expert described the important role that photography can play in supporting people as they seek to represent complex emotions. The guest artist offers an additional illustration by explaining the way photography helped them in their life.

Examples of What You Could Say:

“We have another short video that speaks to the way photography can help express emotions. *(Read the one sentence descriptor that describes the video you have chosen to play.)*”

Notes on What You Plan to Say:

Play Guest Artist Video:

Before you play the guest artist video, remember to give students a description of the video content, so that they can decide if they would like to view the video. The video descriptions are listed above each video. Prior to playing the video, you will remind students: “Stories hold potential for various forms of connection to the lives of those who hear them. This story may connect deeply to others who have had a similar experience. In this video...*(Read the one sentence description that is above the video.)*”

Introducing the Creative Activity:

After watching the expert and/or guest artist videos, introduce the creative activity by explaining that the class will go on a group walk (indoors or outdoors) to take pictures of objects or scenery that remind them of the way they feel. If students do not have access to technology, they can draw pictures of what they observe. Students will take a photo that represents the way they feel in this moment or the way they felt during an important memory or challenging event in their life.

Examples of What You Could Say:

“In this video, the guest artist explained the way photographs can represent feelings that are hard to put into words. Like this artist, we’re going to take photographs to illustrate complex feelings. For this activity, you might take a photo that represents a meaningful memory, a challenging experience, or any other important part of your life story. You could also take a photograph that represents how you are feeling right now. We are going to go on a group walk and take a photo of an object or scenery that represents any of those feelings, especially feelings that are complex or hard to name. You can take a picture or I have paper and pencils that you can use to draw what you are seeing.”

Notes on What You Plan to Say:

Creative Activity:

* Slide 3

Lead students on this group photography walk. Explain to students that when they return to the classroom, they will choose an image to display in a classroom art gallery. As always, students will have a choice about what they want to share with the class. Also, students can share their photographs anonymously. This should take approximately 15–20 minutes.

Introducing the Wrap-up Activity:

Share a few images you took on the walk and explain the way these images could have captions that describe the feeling (i.e. "I feel like this rock: weighed down and heavy.") Invite students to write a caption to go along with their chosen image or images.

Example of What You Could Say:

"I found a few objects that I think show the way I felt when... (*Refer to the story that you shared with the class or the way you feel today.*) Here is one of the photographs I took on our walk. I think it might be interesting if we write captions to our photographs. We don't need to name the picture. We can simply describe the feelings captured in our photograph. For instance, I took a photo of a rock because at the time I was feeling weighed down by the things that are bothering me and heavy in my heart. So I used those two words as my caption: *burdened and heavy.*"

Notes on What You Plan to Say:

Wrap-up Activity:

**Slide 4*

Upon their return to the classroom, students will work on their captions for their chosen photograph(s). Encourage students to be creative in the way they write their captions and describe the feeling. In this activity, students do not use the actual label for an emotion, but actually describe the feeling behind the emotion – the words that describe how they're feeling.

There are a few ways you can structure a classroom art gallery:

1. You could have students put the image on a word document on their laptops and write their caption underneath. Then, you could invite students to circulate the room looking at each other's work.
2. Another option is to have students email you their images and captions for you to project at the front of the room.
3. A third option is to print the photographs and captions to hang on the classroom wall.

As always, students are invited to choose whether or not they want to share their creative projects, and one option above may work better than another if students are more interested in sharing their work anonymously.

Lesson Closure:

Conclude the lesson by celebrating the students' photography. Share what you noticed as you looked at the photographs (i.e. maybe students used nature to represent feelings). Praise their creativity and bravery, and encourage them to experiment with more photography going forward

Supplemental Information:

If you or your students would like to learn more about the ideas in this lesson, additional resources and third party links are included below.

1. In her book *The Vulnerable Heart of Literacy*, Elizabeth Dutro illustrates methods for inviting emotion into the classroom. A central theme of this book is the idea that emotion is complex and cannot always be put into words. This book is highly recommended for teachers looking to learn more about the theories and research that inspired this curriculum, and this lesson, in particular.
2. Gordon Parks was a photographer whose photography captured the soul of Black America. Students will be inspired to learn more about him and to explore his photographs in greater detail. [The Gordon Parks Foundation](#) website provides a wonderful introduction to his art.
3. The artwork of Sally Mann, Willie Middlebrook, Nydaa Blas and Dorthea Lang are great examples of how photographers represent emotion in symbolic or metaphoric ways.
4. In the intention that introduces this lesson, we cite Patti Lather who quotes the poet Rilke in order to describe some stories as "Too Big" to be put into words. Lather's essay *Drawing the Line at Angels: Working the Ruins of Feminist Ethnography* offers greater detail on her creative work supporting women living with HIV/AIDS as they wrote their stories. The essay can be accessed through an academic article search in a library database.