

toward a comprehensive curriculum in photography

IN DEFENSE OF A K-12 RECOGNITION OF THE CULTURAL PRACTICE OF IMAGE-MAKING.

By: Rachael Hulme

Historically, photographic education served as a technical means to educate students into the profession of photography, which was defined almost entirely through the lens of advertising and commercial work. As a result, many educational programs still reflect this mindset by offering courses that teach students to produce head-shots, images of sporting events, and studio-lit product work for commercial purposes — a practice that altogether ignores the act of image-making as a reflective, personal practice in the way that drawing, painting, sculpture, or any other visual art media are often viewed. In this article, I am proposing a fundamental switch in the way we approach (or don't approach) photographic education in K-12 classrooms. Examples of different ways in which this can be successfully implemented at different age levels will be highlighted.

When surveyed, students of photography in higher education can be apologetic, feeling the need to joke that they had an interest in the field because they “can’t draw”. Although lighthearted, this commonly perpetuated notion must begin somewhere in their education, where the distinction has been made for them (implicit or otherwise) that photography is a “lesser” of a visual practice, meant to be separate from the personal practice associated with other art media.

“ It was a commonplace of my initial discussions with students that they would automatically, when asked their reasons for studying photography, reply with a negative reason - 'because I can't draw'. The replies had the character of (unsolicited) apologies, a point of embarrassment that needed to be cleared up at the outset before discussion could begin. I suggest that this indicates an implicit recognition of the low cultural status of photography, a visual art lacking in the...skills that are associated with painting or sculpture. ”

(Newbury, 1992, p. 429)

Many argue that this lack of legitimacy is reinforced by the ubiquity of cameras in everyday life — a phenomena that can be traced back to 1888, when Kodak introduced the slogan, “*You Push the Button, We Do the Rest*” (“George Eastman,” 2002). This desire for immediacy and convenience as a catalyst for productivity in the home and in life became characteristic of the mindset of the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and can be seen to parallel the development of art education during this time. Early public school art education focused on student production of industrial drawings and handicrafts — it was not until World War II when visual propaganda began to emerge as a topic in education (Freedman & Stuhr, 2003). Today, we grapple with more than media imagery, as the rise of the personal computer and hand-held smart phone have made it possible to create, store, and share our own images at the touch of a button.

Our students make images.

While I see this as a largely-contributing factor to the ubiquity of photography, I don’t see ubiquity as a downfall to the legitimacy of teaching the medium in the least. Rather, I argue this to be extraordinary evidence as to why photographic education is absolutely critical in the complete education of a 21st century student. In his lecture at the MAEA conference this past October, Jacob Cecil spoke about the importance of developing River Hill High School’s photography program. “Our students may never pick up a paintbrush or drawing pencil again, but they will most certainly continue to make

images.” (Cecil, 2014, MAEA Conference conducted at River Hill High School) Whereas photography has been regarded in history as a niche of a practice reserved for those who invested in the equipment, our students are proving the practice to have taken a new form. Increasingly, students are coming to the classroom with devices that have cameras built-in to them and are naturally using these devices to document their days, themselves, and those around them.

By allowing students to grow up doing so with little to no acknowledgement of this cultural practice in their formal education, we are doing them an enormous disservice, allowing them to enter the world engaging in this practice without formal knowledge of what they and their peers are doing so instinctively.



We have an enormous opportunity to address the practice of creating images with our students, and to do so repeatedly from an early age through high school, so that they are best equipped not just to tell their own stories, but also to look critically at the stories being told through the images of others.



“With people more actively using images, visual literacy becomes an important thing to talk about. Everybody pays a lot of lip service to visual literacy but very few schools teach it. There’s not a lot of discussion about what photography is. What’s a photograph? How does it work? Photographs are useful to you in different ways than they are useful to me (Heiferman, 2013, p. 1). ”

Ideas in practice for K-12 through the lens of constructivism

In a 2006 study completed by Darlene deMarie and Elizabeth A. Ethridge, researchers compared the depth at which preschool students were able to speak reflectively about their school day in two tests: one in a verbal conversation, and one using photographs the children had taken throughout their day. They discovered that the dialogue was enhanced exponentially through the use of the children's images.

“Adam described preschool by telling about something he usually did...he made a comment about how he had forgotten his blanket at home that day.

Yet, through his photography, Adam could tell his family about his friends, his teachers, and several things he did at preschool during the day. The transcript containing Adam's explanations of his photographs was more than four pages long. He labeled all but one of his pictures (DeMarie and Ethridge, 2006, p. 102).”

In discussing the children's imagery, deMarie and Etheridge found that the photographs provided an insight into what the children valued in their lives — they naturally photographed things they found meaningful and interesting. As a result, the research showed that young children who are asked to make images benefit from an enhanced ability to communicate about their day (DeMarie & Ethridge, 2006).

In a second study done in a Kindergarten classroom in 2010, Stephanie Serriere photographed children engaged in free play

with one another. She then imported the images to her computer, and called students over to discuss the images of themselves, asking them to explain what they were doing and how they felt in each image. This allowed for the students to see themselves from the perspective of another person, and although the students were not the ones who made the photographs, the resulting dialogue and introduction to the analyzation of the images was incredibly meaningful.

The practice of teaching that celebrates the students' active acquisition of knowledge, social construction of their learning, and the creation and re-creation of ideas is known today as *Constructivism*, an approach championed by the influential American educational reformer and researcher John Dewey (Perkins, 1999). In direct opposition to the traditional, purely technical aspects of photographic education highlighted by Newbury in his 1992 survey of the identity of the photo student, I argue for a constructivist approach to teaching students about the practice of making, interpreting, and sharing images — one in which they have autonomy over materials, subject matter, and ideas.

At the upper elementary and middle school level, rather than beginning to see photography as a means to produce a sellable “product”, as is often the expected trajectory of the student photographer suggested by Newbury, students might be asked to reflect on their role in their larger community and/or family relationships through the lens of a photo-documentary. In her 2001 book, “I Wanna Take Me a Picture”, Wendy Ewald discusses the great success she encountered with this method of working with students at this age level in impoverished urban areas of

India, and later bringing her ideas to classrooms in the United States, through a project called LTP: Literacy through Photography.

Ewald (2001) says, “A kid realizes, ‘This is not just worksheet #74; this is about me’” (p. 120).

Using the camera as a tool to enter, view, and make choices about representing a familiar space challenges students to think critically about their everyday environments and their places in the world -- two things especially important for learners of this age group to consider.

By High School, some schools offer photography as an elective course. It is during this time that technique can be refined to include more technical knowledge, but maintaining an emphasis on meaning-making is absolutely critical, particularly at this stage in students’ development, as they further refine their identity in the world. Juan Carlos Castro reflects on this in Holistic Monograph #1, a study group of Art Educators facilitated by Peter London (2004):

“Typically, photography is approached from a technical point of view. I wanted to find out how to make instruction in this medium, from the very beginning, one that would enable students to create eloquent and authentic work...The key is not teaching how to make something, but how to think about something...While authentic work happens in many art classes, it is less common in photography assignments or projects where emphasis is placed on step-by-step solutions rather than thinking as an artist” (p.53-55).

Some of the prompts that Castro provides include:

- ➔ If you were to be struck blind tomorrow, what pictures would you take today to share with us how you see the world?
- ➔ What is your strongest memory?
- ➔ If you had to make a portrait of yourself, what would it look like if the camera was unable to take a picture of you?
- ➔ If your mind was a room, what would it look like?

When students reach their 3rd year in photography, Castro (2004) says, “they are responsible for asking their own questions” (p. 56).

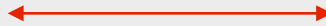
Moving forward

If students’ K-12 experience with photography were scaffolded in this way, by being introduced to photographic practice as early as preschool and emphasizing the importance of making, presenting, and analyzing images with deep, meaningful ties to students’ experiences throughout their primary, middle, and secondary years, I believe our students will enter their post-secondary lives with the tools and language necessary to be strategic, thoughtful, and reflective participants and practitioners of visual culture. It has never been more important than it is today for a recognition of the immense possibilities for deep learning brought about by the practice of image-making.

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