

Photographic Diversity

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Subject: Art Education/Beginning
Photographic Media

Grade: Higher Education

"The unit is designed to provide a balance between making photographs and thinking about photographs. It leads toward an increased appreciation of the uses of photography in society as art and as information."

Purpose and Description of Project

Terry Barrett's program gives future art teachers an overview of photographic theory and practice, as it involves them in investigating the concepts behind photographs, whether their own or those of professionals. While his students learned camera and darkroom techniques, the course subordinated technique to expression, with the goal of having students understand and appreciate the range of uses and importance of photography in society.

Barrett had the students practice categorizing photographs taken by

others into six types: descriptive, explanatory, interpretive, ethically evaluative, aesthetically evaluative, and theoretical. Students looked at and discussed a large variety of reproductions of photos, made black-and-white prints and color slides of each of the six types of photos, and extensively critiqued each other's photos on the basis of their intended functions.

In explaining the balance he sought to provide his students, Barrett notes that "most students with an art background... tend to approach most photographs for the formal beauty of line, texture, balance, and contrast while minimizing the informational content. Most students from a humanities background... tend to concentrate on informational content and ignore the aesthetic qualities of the photographs. The students who participated in this course learned to attend to both aspects of photography."

Activities

In the first few class sessions, the students worked together and in groups to sort postcard reproductions into categories that they devised and to select their favorites and discuss the reasons for their selections. They began learning about how to use the camera and darkroom.

Barrett sorted photos into groups without stating his method and asked the students to figure out his system. Through discussion, they reached his six categories and discussed the cri-

teria for placing photos in this new system. For example, primary examples of descriptive photos are ID photos and medical X-rays, while war photos and advertising pictures fall in the *ethically evaluative* slot. While the categories often overlap, students learned to approach photographs with such interpretive questions as: Is this photo made to describe a person, place, or event, or is it made to praise or condemn what it pictures? Is this photograph made primarily to be beautiful or is it made to explain a natural phenomenon? Their studies carried them to photo exhibits on campus and in town and to the library.

After understanding the system, the students tried to place more photos in the new categories and debated with each other as to where each photo best fit. After more camera and darkroom instruction, they moved on to taking their own photos in each of these categories, with the first assignment being to take an ethically evaluative photo of some aspect of society about which they felt strongly enough to praise or condemn.

The final exercise required students to choose one category and make a 10-slide, silent sequence for projection. Among their choices: a descriptive sequence of going through a car wash, an ethically evaluative condemnation of graffiti, and an interpretive series showing colored golf balls on a putting green to "metaphorically show how human alienation results

from people's prejudices." The viewing session of these productions produced "animated discussions," reports the teacher, on such points as the "trial of translating ideas into still and silent pictures" and the "importance of having clearly articulated ideas before shooting."

Materials, Resources, and Expenses

The teacher provided 35mm cameras, darkroom chemicals, and enlargers, while the students provided film (black and white and color slide) and photographic paper. Other required equipment included a darkroom and a slide projector. The class also made extensive use of photo reproductions. (No specific cost data provided.)

Outcomes and Adaptability

Barrett reports that all his students "came to appreciate the diversity of photographic practice in contemporary society and the impact of photography on society."

Barrett says that this method of teaching photography may easily be used by others. He explained that "lacking darkroom facilities, this unit could be modified to a series of response, rather than production, activities by use of the categories with reproductions." He also adds that even elementary school children have learned to understand the categories once some of the terms were translated into simpler language—"right and wrong" for "ethical," for example, or "visually pleasing" for "aesthetic."