

Rutherford - Statement of Undergraduate Teaching Philosophy in Photography

In order to foster the conditions and learning environment in which students/artists can best develop (and benefit from reflecting critically upon) their visual arts practice, I believe that 'specialising' should not be described or presented as a particular form of artistic expression, or as a choice of subject or as a style of composition, but seen instead as an *approach* to the subject.

In teaching photography, my five objectives are:

- i. *To create the pedagogical conditions necessary for the medium itself to contribute to the development of each student/artist's unique relationship with photography and the photograph.*
- ii. *To emphasise the largely intuitive and associative processes by which we 'find', 'recognise' or 'project' meaning in/onto the visual elements within the frame.*
- iii. *To present photography as a means towards greater self-awareness through the allegorical descriptions of our interior emotional terrain intuitively incorporated into our work.*
- iv. *To encourage students/artists' awareness of – and their involvement in – their responsibilities as both members and interpreters of the human community in which they live and work.*
- v. *To develop students/artists' abilities to express themselves in written form in order to contribute to and participate in the social dialogue and to improve their capacity to consciously reflect on the meaning and implications of the ideas, influences and objectives implied by all of the above.*

i. The pedagogical conditions necessary for the medium to contribute to the development of each student's relationship with photography/the photograph

I hold that part of the 'success' of a photograph is the consequence of the medium's unique (and I believe, occasionally magical) properties of translating the 3-dimensional world into a 2-dimensional 'code' of graphic relationships. In other words, I believe that when a photograph 'works', it does so in large part because of the 'photographic-ness' of an image that could have only been created because of the participation of the medium of photography *itself* in the creation of the resulting photograph. For this reason, I insist that students consider their work as *making* (rather than *taking*) photographs.

Students must be encouraged to actively explore these properties and their role in creating the photograph and to foster the conditions necessary to welcome the participation and active (act of?) contribution by the medium in the creation of the photograph. My conviction that this is not only a desirable but a *necessary* precondition for successful photographs ultimately obliged me to withdraw from commercial practise and its insistence on the photographer's complete and conscious 'control' over the final image.

ii. To emphasise the largely intuitive & associative processes by which we 'find', 'recognise' or 'project' meaning in/onto the visual elements within the frame

We make pictures in order to share our impression of a scene with an audience. We want to be able to say, "*It looked like this... and it made me feel this way*". If our photograph is to provoke the same response in the viewer that we had when looking at the scene, we must first understand the 'Story' we see in front of us – and then try to identify the combination of visual elements required to 'tell' it.

Before they release the shutter, students/artists should be able to recognise:

- What their photograph is intended to be 'about'. I refer to this as *The Subject of the Photograph*. This necessitates the ability to identify the basis of their attraction to the scene or event in front of them (or what I call the 'story' they 'see' in the scene).

- The specific visual elements of the scene they will use to tell this 'Story'. I refer to these as *The Thing(s) In Front of the Lens*. One of the first and most significant obstacles in learning to photograph is the tendency to confuse *The Things in Front of the Lens* with *the Subject of the photograph* (to confuse the *words* in which it is composed with the *meaning* of a poem).

In emphasising this distinction, one of my primary objectives in this post would be to lead students/artists to make a distinction between seeing the world around them according to what we have been taught that it 'Is' – and what it can be *made to be*.

- The most appropriate way (through exposure, depth of field, contrast, lighting, etc.) to record or represent these elements in the photograph. I refer to these as *Photographic Syntax*.

In teaching photography, I place great emphasis on the necessity of knowing how to manipulate these pictorial aspects in order that students/artists are able to achieve the same instinctive (deliberate but non-rational) control over *their* tools that a Chinese calligrapher must develop over the brush.

- The most appropriate way to position, combine, arrange and juxtapose these elements within the frame within a meaningful code of graphic relationships. I refer to this as *The Composition of the Photograph*. This requires that students are able to anticipate the contribution of the medium of photography (as defined in point i. above) in 'interpreting' these in the image.

A detailed description of this approach is provided in the essay: ***Photography as Storytelling***.

To achieve these objectives, students/artists must develop the basic skills associated with the commercial applications of editorial & illustrative photography – including both the ability to *produce* this type of image *as well as the ability to deconstruct existing commercial photographs*.

iii. To present photography as a means towards greater self-awareness through the allegorical descriptions of our interior emotional terrain incorporated into our work

Much more than just the rational application of method to medium, or of aesthetics to form, our photographs are the souvenirs we make of our encounters with the things we find significant in the world around us. At the touch of a button (and therefore without the necessity of a conscious decision), the camera gives us the means to compress the visible elements of the scene into a(n unconsciously) meaningful pattern of graphic symbols and relationships.

In our intuitive selection & arrangement of the visual elements found (or recognised) within the scene, the Right Hemisphere can use the camera to record, not what is in front of our eyes but the truth which lies just around the corner: that which we *know* but which the conscious mind cannot – or will not – see. Allegorical Self-portraits in the ancient picture-language of the unconscious dreaming mind, our photographs describe allegorically the way in which we see the world – and offer us a reflection of the Who we have become in response to the world we 'see' through the window of our metaphors.

A more complete description of this approach is provided in the essay ***The Shadow of the Photographer***, published in journal of the *Canadian Art Therapy Association* [Vol. 15, No. 2].

iv. To encourage students' awareness of and involvement in their responsibilities as both members – and interpreters – of the human community in which they live and work

Evolving naturally from the above, I would also strive to ensure that the curriculum and its constituent courses provide students with the opportunity to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the important social and cultural implications of photography and visual communications.

To achieve this objective, I am committed to working co-operatively with faculty colleagues in the creation (or enhancement of) a common pedagogical culture in which students are encouraged to recognise and explore the values and assumptions that inform contemporary society – through their reflection in the content and application of artistic, cultural and commercial expression, including the use of visual images to influence our perceptions of *The Product*, *The Politician* and the *Right Priorities*.

I believe that, in a society in which important information is increasingly conveyed through the visual media (particularly television and advertising), those trained in visual communication have, (like economists, scientists etc.), an important role in the public and cultural conversation.

*A description of my approach to this issue is outlined in the essay: **Visual Literacy: Priorities and Practices**.*

v. To develop students' abilities to express themselves in written form in order to improve their capacity to critically reflect on the meaning and implications of their ideas, influences and objectives implied by the previous four objectives

While the primary focus of the courses and projects in a photography programme are, by definition, those which strengthen students' ability/ies to externalise the workings of the Right Hemisphere, in keeping with the above-stated objective (to increase students' understanding of the social and commercial applications of photography and visual communication), it is equally important to simultaneously improve students' ability to articulate their ideas through written language.

I submit that there are five compelling reasons for doing so:

- i. The ability to communicate clearly, positively & effectively is consistently identified by employers* in all industrial sectors as a necessary requirement for most jobs;
- ii. The development of written language skills fosters the capacity for critical thinking & analysis, making students less susceptible to unsupported statements/assertions;
- iii. The expression of our ideas through language helps to bring to our conscious attention the assumptions on which our ideas are based, the manner in which we use & interpret them, and the implications of the conclusions that follow from them.
- iv. The ability to express ideas clearly will allow students to contribute to the social, cultural and political debate at a time when there is mounting pressure on the Arts and Culture Industries to explain their benefits to society and justify the support they receive from the public purse, and;
- v. In a society in which important information is increasingly conveyed through the visual media (particularly television and advertising), those trained in the practices and implications of visual communication have, (like professional economists, pollsters, scientists etc.), an increasingly important role in educating the public and facilitating an informed debate.

* Source: [Employer Satisfaction: Summary](#). By Lee Harvey and Diana Green, QHE Project, University of Central England