

Writing with a Camera: Teaching Student Authors to Compose both Words and Images



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Guiding Questions

The following questions provided the framework for my research.

- What does a 21st century text look like? What about 21st century literacy?
- In what ways can photographs and words work together to create understanding?
- How can photography be used in writing instruction?
- What social justice applications might the use of photography in writing instruction provide?

Participant Outcomes

Throughout this workshop, participants will:

- Create a working definition of what “text” and “literacy” mean for the 21st century learner.
- Compose a text using both images and words.
- Identify potential applications of photography within the teaching of writing.
- Determine ways in which photography/writing lessons can reflect a commitment to social justice teaching.

Teacher Inquiry Workshop (TIW) Outline

The agenda for the 90-minute session is listed below.

1. **Preliminary Writing** (10 minutes)
 - Respond in writing to the text displayed (either image or writing). Share responses.
 - Then, after viewing them together, discuss how the pairing of the two influences interpretation.
2. **Introduction to workshop, inquiry origins, context, and guiding questions** (10 minutes)
3. **Thinking about the universe as text** (10 minutes)
 - Complete the statements with a partner: “A _____ is a text because _____ .”
 - Think and share ideas about 21st century literacies, texts, and learners

- Intrinsic similarities between the composition of texts of all kinds
 - Practice scaffolding by analyzing a photograph (models teaching methodology)
 - Other support for visual literacy before composition
4. **Practical applications: Composition activity**
 - How do photos and words work together: motivation and multimedia messages
 - With group, plan and compose an image to answer “What does it mean to be a teacher?” (10 minutes)
 - Take and upload photos. View. (5 minutes)
 - Individually, compose a written narrative to complement your group’s photo. (10 minutes)
 - Share compositions, with image and words acting as one, new text (10 minutes)
 5. **Reflection** (15 minutes)
 - What was our experience like as writer/photographers? What felt new? What worked? Why did it work? Partner discussion, then whole group.
 6. **Social justice element:** Examples of ways in which students can create and publish photo texts in order to change our classrooms and community for the better. (5 minutes)
 7. **Extensions and adaptations** (5 minutes)
 - Accessibility solutions
 - Across disciplines
 - Across grade levels

Theoretical Statement

Inquiry Origins and Context

I am fascinated by the often overlooked connection between student image-making and written composition. As a lifelong art lover, I understand the deeply felt stirring that pictures create within our minds. Sometimes, we are at a loss for words. But more often, I think, we are *moved* to speak, to sing, or to write about what we’ve seen. This is a uniquely human experience, fundamental to knowing who we are. It is something that harmonizes perfectly with the teaching of writing.

In my teaching experience, I’ve found that creating visual art can prompt, guide, and enrich student writing, and I’ve experimented with this idea in varied ways, from illustrating grammatical constructions to using drawings as an alternative notetaking technique. However, one type of visual art hasn’t yet been used in my lessons—photography. From this unfamiliar territory, my TIW began to take shape. What photography-related possibilities, I wondered, might exist to expand and improve my writing lesson repertoire? I then started thinking about how the composition of a photo and the composition of writing share many traits, such as focal point or mood. I felt that that illuminating and working with these similarities would make students stronger, more mindful writers.

There’s also the simple fact that my students, both in high school and middle school, often have cameras with them. Whether on their phones or in a shiny silver case, most students have some type of picture-taking device. And they use them. The ease of the digital camera has turned many of my students into amateur photographers, who have *at least* taken a self-portrait or two for their Facebook account. Adolescents live in photographs. They are constantly taking, sharing, and posting digital pictures—this is how they record their lives. If implemented well, I

surmised, translating this tendency into classroom work may help students become impressive, image-savvy writers of today... and tomorrow. My TIW describes my initial findings about how to combine the composition of both words and image to create a whole new type of 21st century text.

What does a 21st century text look like? What about 21st century literacy?

One of my first, instinctual responses when I am asked why images are important in writing instruction is: “To help students work with 21st century texts.” However, as I reflected on that response, I started to question my own understanding of that buzz-word. Before I could feel secure about touting photography/writing combinations as “21st century texts” or tools for building “21st century literacy,” I needed to clarify those terms, determining what they mean at large as well as for my own classroom.

Most of us are used to thinking of a “text” as something created with words: a novel, an article, a poem. This interpretation of the word worked just fine for English teachers for a long time. English was strictly about language and the many beautiful, wondrous ways in which it could be used. But in today’s world of rapid-fire, image-saturated information shooting across global screens large and small, the 21st century text has emerged. It opens the definition of the word “text” into other media, including visual images. In fact, the link between images and learning is strong—they help our brains construct meaning in innovative, non-linear ways and, like language, create a symbolic representation of the world (Jensen 2001; Faigley, 2004). They are also a key element in many 21st century texts.

Far from being one definable thing, a 21st century text can appear in many modes and media. A true 21st century text typically still contains words. However, it also relies on one or more additional methods of communication (such as image, audio, video, or design) to transcribe its meaning, therefore ably suiting the wired multitaskers of this, the iGeneration (Rosen, 2010). Twenty-first century literacy, then, is the ability of students to effectively “read,” interpret, and create their own 21st century texts. Being literate has a new meaning, which now extends to demonstrating the capability to work with highly visual, hybrid texts (Faigley, 2004). Composing writing alongside images develops students’ abilities to decode the messages found in these image-based artifacts (Tucker, 2002).

This emergence of new texts and a new type of literacy is more than just kids playing too many videogames. Scholar Larry D. Rosen, Ph. D. insists that the students of today literally learn differently than their predecessors due to the media-rich environment into which they were born (2010). These students need to know how to work with texts that send messages, simultaneously, in different ways. Photographs juxtaposed with words create a 21st century text, and this combination represents a fairly simple way that educators can take writing pedagogy into the 21st century. As Rosen reminds readers, we do not have to completely revamp our educational methods. We do, however, need to “capitalize on our children’s amazing high-tech knowledge and skills” (pg. 5). Student photographers, experts at snapping photos, publishing on the web, and commenting on the messages they perceive from these images, have a lot to bring to photography-writing activities.

In what ways can photographs and words work together to create understanding?

If photographic images can truly qualify as texts worthy of our students' study, it would follow that they have many of the same qualities as traditional writing. At heart, the tenets are simple. We create meaning when we create texts. We understand meaning when we read texts. This requires us to teach our students to examine photographs as texts that are rhetorically driven—a means of communication, not just as decoration. Once we think of images as containing rhetorical choices, we can begin to see the similarities between the composition of an image and the composition of a written text. The following rhetorical choices must be made both by writers and image-makers alike (Faigley, 2004, pg.15-19):

- Point of view—who is the voice behind the pen or lens?
- Purpose—what does the author want to communicate?
- Subject—what is the text about?
- Audience—who is the intended reader or viewer?
- Organization—how is the text organized? What is emphasized/recurring?
- Tone—is the author's tone formal? Fanciful? Serious? Witty?
- Mood—What emotional response does the text evoke?
- Context—What historical, cultural, economic, and social contexts frame our understanding of the text?

To incorporate photography effectively into writing instruction, students must be made aware of the fact that photographers make *choices*, as do writers, about what, how, and why to compose. Once the image has been given an equal value as a written text, the two media can be united in a parallel process of composition. The end result is a glorious 21st century text, mirroring the vision of W. J. T. Mitchell: “Effective rhetoric is... a two-pronged strategy of verbal/visual persuasion, showing while it tells, illustrating its claims with powerful examples, making the listener see and not merely hear” (Qtd. In Faigley, 2004, pg. vi).

Words and images together can create messages that could not be achieved by either one alone (Faigley, 2004). This is a visceral experience that can be jarring to the mind and soul. For example, consider the reaction of a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reporter after seeing the photographer Dawoud Bey's “Class Pictures,” a gallery of student photos displayed alongside their own short autobiographies:

Every teenager, shown close-up with a shallow depth of field, becomes an elegant and shifting series of angles, patterns and colors. [...] But perfect clarity and dazzling color are not enough to give the project depth. We feast on the images, but the success of the work lies beyond that visual frame. We step to the left and read the text accompanying each piece. [...] Each youth's personal assessment, along with the idiosyncratic bits of personal history, makes us re-encounter and reconsider what we've seen. (Brehmer, 2009).

Using text and image together can create special experiences of viewing, reading, and authorship that combine the faculties of mind and eye to understand purposeful messages. It's not just a 21st century text. It's also an extremely effective form of thematically unified composition.

How can photography be used in writing instruction?

Once I had enough theoretical knowledge spurring me on and exciting me about the possibilities of combined photography and written texts, I moved on to the investigation of practical classroom applications. How exactly does one *teach* writing alongside photography?

My theory, based on my own classroom sensibilities is that simply calling attention to the parallel rhetorical choices that are made during the process of composition, whether that is composition of a photograph or of a piece of writing, would be a perfect place to start. This is how Ewald begins her teaching about photography as well—she presents students with a variety of photographs and asks for their observations about the details in the image. Then, she begins to question students about what these details might reveal about the rhetoric of the photograph, such as “What does the image tell us about this community of these people?” or “Do you think the photographer is an insider or an outsider?” (2002, pg. 20). As any English teacher can see, these are questions that we can use to discuss a written text as well. Faigley also stresses the importance of working with students to explore how every author brings their own perspective to a piece to make a certain impression. As students hone their skills at reading both visual and written texts, they become more aware of how their own rhetorical choices can express a message to their audience. Essentially, Step One is teaching kids how to read photographs (and words, too)!

Step Two is allowing kids to experiment in the composition of photographs in order to create their own visual texts. Depending on the teacher’s preference, this could involve starting with a cardboard “viewfinder” to frame the world around them for specific purposes (Foster, 2002 pg. 60). Other teachers might ask students to stage or sketch a concept for a photo. In the end, the students must ultimately get behind the lens and create some images! The teacher and class can then give feedback on their perceptions of the student photographer’s choices, so that he or she can recognize a successful piece.

As luck would have it, writing seems to flow easily and naturally when photography is around. Even reluctant writers tend to engage in writing once they have gotten a chance to get behind the camera (Foster, 2002). Photography is a medium that naturally spurs thoughts, stimulates ideas, and creates word-images to match their visual kin, resulting in an “untamed brainstorm of words or brief phrases” (Hyatt, 2008). Writing comes naturally, responding in a conversation with the image (Foster, 2002). The students’ writing, in these situations, does not take a backseat. Rather, it develops the writing, pushing it to a higher level: “Writing exercises that draw upon visual art as a starting occasion have the potential to make students more sensitive to the visual arrangements of words and the imagistic capacities of language” (Foster, pg. 93) This kind of work is “stimulating and productive” for student authors, especially as 21st century kids who are already so adept at juggling—and even learning—multiple media at once (Pg. 68). With these possibilities in mind, the teacher can model, support, and assign writing that corresponds thematically with the students’ photographs. More successful pieces of writing tend to be short narratives, poetry, auto/biographies, or reflections—a piece of writing which includes rhetorical choices similar to those in the photograph (175-185). Just as the picture should be more than just a decoration, the writing should expose the story behind the picture, rather than provide mere description. It should complete the message that the photo begins.

Step Four is sharing the results of the project. Photography is meant to be viewed; writing is meant to be read. Most of the educators that I read about had some type of display, whether online or in a physical gallery, where the community could come to appreciate and ponder student compositions. This instilled a sense of pride in the students and teachers, and made deep impressions on the audience. The photography and the stories within them often gave unique, powerful voices to students, even those who were rarely recognized in past academic endeavors. (Foster, 2002).

What social justice applications might the use of photography in writing instruction provide?

Before I called my inquiry complete, I wanted to investigate how side by side photography and writing composition lessons might fit into a social justice curriculum. Knowing the power of a single image or poem in stirring human hearts, I expected that the combination may hold significant power when it comes to students changing the world for the better.

In her essay “Photography Changes the Way we Read the World”, Sharon J. Washington writes, “An image contains a story, a narrative, a life of its own, and what we see is influenced by our individual perceptions and perspectives at a given point in time” (2008). Photographs help show the world from different perspectives, expanding our vision of what it means to be a part of our global family. Photos are static images, frozen moments in time from the world we live in, that give us a rare chance to take unlimited time to question what we see. Necessarily, this results in the reader raising questions about what assumptions *we* bring to our own “reading” of the world (Washington, 2008). Bell Hooks calls this “the politics of seeing”, and recalls her own experience of viewing images that unveiled the beauty of black women as one that changed her, that turned her into a witness to the powers of the “visual universe” and what it could mean for changing people’s minds, perceptions, and attitudes (Qtd. in Foster, 2002 pg. 33). How certain people groups are represented through photographs and writing plays an important part in how a culture is perceived, both from the inside and the outside. Photographer Elaine Reichek expresses this idea elegantly:

In a limited way, the camera catches so accurately what’s in front of it that you think that’s all there is to say. In fact, of course, the very idea that *that’s all there is to say* is part of an attitude, a cultural stance, a politics, an ideology, a whole mental structure of which the camera is only a small part” (Qtd. in Faigley, 2004 pg. 400).

Reichek understands, as we should help our students to understand, that the powers of a photograph can be far more complex and subjective than just being a simple visual representation.

The strength of photo-writing composition lessons is that they put a unique power into the hands of students—the power to use their own lives as material from which to create, the power to show the world as they see it, the power to choose their own truth, and the power to send influential messages to an audience. As viewers stand mesmerized at the double compositions of student authors, they may find it impossible not to heed students’ messages about who they are, what they value, why they should be heard, and what they want to change.

Access to Technology, Extensions, and Adaptations

Access to Technology

Accessibility is always a concern when dealing with technology—not all teachers have digital cameras in their classrooms, and it is an unreasonable assumption that each student will have a camera or be able to buy one. Luckily, this can be compensated for in several ways. If a teacher is seeking a digital camera or set of multiple cameras for classroom use, he or she may simply need to present a rationale to an administrator to use a portion of the technology budget or department budget for this purpose. If the in-school avenue is unavailable, teachers can apply for technology-based grants offered by foundations or even camera companies themselves. Teachers may also consider the fact that, in our current society, many non-camera devices have

cameras built into them. Phones, MP3 players, and laptops all have the potential to serve as image making tools if necessary. While classroom technology can have significant startup costs, they are counterbalanced by the fact that digital images are free and simple to self-publish, display, and share. Digital cameras also happen to be increasingly affordable, with some point-and-shoot models selling for about thirty dollars.

Grade Level Extensions and Adaptations

While my TIW focused on the grade level range of students I taught last year, which ranged from grade seven to grade twelve, side by side photography/word composition is not limited to the secondary level. In fact, in *I Wanna Take me a Picture*, Ewald asserts that it is critical to begin teaching photography and writing skills side by side from a very young age (2002). As elementary students begin to form ideas about the creation of a written piece, they can also experience the first wonder of designing an image from the world around them. Due to the fact that pushing a button is simple even for those with emerging motor skills, young children or students with physical disabilities can focus on the composition of their images without feeling frustrated or embarrassed about being able to wield a paintbrush or carving tool, as they might during other art-making activities.

One project idea that would draw on student prior knowledge and personal experience which could produce meaningful results is a “My Neighborhood” exposition. Including student photographs of what (or who) makes up their neighborhood, paired with poetry or reflection about these different aspects could have potential across grade levels, as the subject matter comes from student’s own lives. The complexity of the compositions, though, could increase and complicate depending on the age of the authors.

Cross-Disciplinary Extensions and Adaptations

The following are just a few ideas for applications of side by side photography/word composition in areas outside of language arts and visual art:

- Chronicle growth of plants or the behavior of animals in biology.
- Use compositions as evidence or to monitor the outcome of an experiment in any of the sciences.
- Chronicle social behavior in psychology class.
- Create compositions that reflect family history, culture, or traditions in social studies.
- Interpret historical photos from a specific era, penning imagined thoughts of the pictured figures in history class. Possibly take some photos designed after the historical ones, in the style of Annu Palakunnathu Matthew (Faigley, 2004 pg. 270).
- Photograph and explain patterns, angles, or structures found in nature and man-made environments in geometry.
- Use photography and writing to create portraiture and mini-biographies of musicians to generate public interest in a choir, band, or orchestra performance.
- [Insert your own idea here!]

For those who are seeking additional, specific language arts applications, the books *Picturing Texts* and *Third Mind* are an outstanding place to begin (Faigley, 2004; Foster, 2002).

Standards

This workshop reflects the following standards from the Common Core Standards for Language Arts—Writing, Grades 11-12.

Text Types and Purposes

3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.
 - Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
 - Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

Production and Distribution of Writing

5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.
6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.

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1. Respond to the **IMAGE ONLY** that is displayed at your table. Note any observations about it; give your interpretation of the underlying meaning, theme, mood, or perspective.
2. Does the writing beside the image influence the way you interpret it? Why or why not?

1. Respond to the **WRITING ONLY** that is displayed at your table. Note any observations about it; give your interpretation of the underlying meaning, theme, mood, or perspective.
2. Does the image beside the writing influence the way you interpret it? Why or why not?