

Learn Higher Project 2006-2007 University of Brighton, School of CMIS

Developing critical and visual literacy skills in photography: working with Year One University of Brighton students from the Division of Information Studies (LM 161 Digital Photographic Imaging)

Learn Higher Project

Over two semesters I have worked with 62 first year students on the elective module *LM 161 Digital Photography*. My first cohort took the module from October 2006 to January 2007 (I taught the module twice during this period due to many students wanting to take this elective); the second cohort took the module from February 2007 to May 2007.

None of these students study photography as a main subject. The total cohort group was made up of 12 students on the Information Studies/Information Management course (librarianship); 40 students from the Media & Communication course; and 10 students from the Communication & Digital Media course. All courses are theory heavy and essay/exam based, and the students have few opportunities or outlets to explore their own creativity.

Learn Higher provided funding for two digital Fuji SLRs and an Apple Mac to run a small, ongoing project throughout the academic year. The project's aim was to give students space and time within the module to be fully creative and to use photography as a tool to find out more about themselves and their transition into adult life.

Visual awareness

A structured learning approach was offered that gave students a framework for developing visual awareness and visual literacy skills. Students were encouraged to learn to observe, imagine, express and record their ideas visually and in workbooks.

They were taught to consider visual design when composing an image, and to reflect on what they want to communicate when framing a subject. Photographic creativity and technique are inseparable from each other. The first creative decision a student has to make is what to photograph. The first technical decision is: how to best frame it?

Basic technical skills taught included understanding how the camera works; being aware of the photographic frame and its edges; knowing how to set the depth of field for desired effect and controlling a camera's aperture (light & time).

Visual Literacy Skills

The kinds of visual literacy skills I wanted the students to gain can be summarised as follows:

1. For students to understand that *real seeing* is actually an acquired skill, rather than a given fact. I therefore wanted students to learn to carefully observe their surroundings, to learn to imagine, and then to express their ideas visually.
2. For students to understand that the image making process is complex; that images are made, rather than taken. To consider authorship and the photographer's intentions as well as the context of a photograph; and to gain the necessary skills to analyse images and read them as texts. To ask the 'why' questions: who, what, why etc.
3. To gain the technical skills needed to achieve specific outcomes, but to understand that image meaning is more important than technical information.
4. To understand that practice is essential to developing a unique photographic language.
5. To convey that having a creative mind can be useful in many parts of their lives as well as other areas of study.

Jack Isherwood, one of my first year students summed up these objectives at the end of the module when he commented that: "I learned that there is more to photography than just pushing a button to take a picture. I now think before taking a photograph, asking myself: what do I actually want to communicate with that photograph".

In addition to the above objectives, I was also interested in examining my own teaching practice, and in exploring how I, in my day-to-day teaching, try to facilitate the process of non-arts students acquiring visual literacy skills.

The process

To get the students to explore their identities and to "map the self" and the culture of the Brighton student community I decided to ask them to produce a series of self and/or group portraits, and to record their ideas in a workbook and/or to use one of Luce Choules' ideas' maps.

Through a combination of short presentations on portraiture and self portraiture we explored the work of photographers such as Cindy Sherman (staged fantasy self portraits/female archetypes), Nan Goldin (personal, raw, “witness” photography), Daniel Meadows (then and now: portraits across time), Jo Spence (self/identity), Andy Warhol (identity boxes) and Martin Schoeller (‘making strange’ portraiture/close ups of celebrities showing them without make up etc).

We covered basic photographic theories and history as they relate to representation (Benjamin, Barthes, Semiology, Sontag); image ethics and visual perception exercises. Students were given take home tasks, and had many opportunities to reflect on their relationship to photography and the photographic image, and how they wanted to communicate “the self”.

We also explored the students’ relationship to constructed narratives around the family album and how they relate to found photographs, objects and stories; and discussed “instant/snapshot” mobile phone photography in order to examine what stories and myths may underpin everyday photography. Why do we take pictures of ourselves and at what occasions? What is the main intent of those family portraits? Can we explore alternative representations of the self? More layered, complex ones?

Students could then borrow the Fuji SLRs in small groups and work on portraiture projects. They could download and further develop their resulting images using the Apple Mac that was installed in our digital media room at CMIS. This enabled the students to familiarize themselves with digital SLR cameras, gain Apple Mac skills, and, most importantly, acquire visual literacy skills and engage critically with the photographic medium.

Student tasks

The two main tasks I set were to

- **Keep a workbook**
- **To make self-portraits/portraits.**

Workbooks:

Students were asked to keep a workbook throughout the module in order to record ideas; write down stories and storyboards; make drawings and ideas maps; take technical notes. This provided them with a space to organize and keep all material related to photography and to critically reflect on their work. It also helped students to develop their creativity, learn to make sketches and explore ways of visualizing and recording the world around them.

Self-Portraiture/Portraiture

Portraits and self-portraits have many different functions. Students explored different questions: what is the purpose of a self-portrait? What

constitutes a good portrait? What can we communicate in a single portrait? This activity allowed students to explore their sense of identity, and how they connect to the student community and the wider community. The underpinning idea was that there is no such thing as a fixed self-portrait, but that multiple ways and levels of expression could be teased out. These exercises attempted to establish and challenge identity; they developed collective relationships and documented everyday experiences.

Student photography work

I am including, in the appendix, a set of handouts; a visual literacy quiz and a reading list which I prepared. They all proved useful and were given to students in both the autumn and spring modules. Student mind mapping and ideas work is also included in the appendix.

After seeing that the first years responded well to the self portraiture briefings, I extended the opportunity to work with this theme to some of the students studying in years two and three, who were already beginning to make identity-related work (LM 270 and LM 351).¹

Below, I am featuring images from students. I have selected their work as they all use slightly different approaches. The first four examples are by year 1 students, followed by examples from year two and year three.

Lara: writing on the body, exploring the self through portraiture

¹ Over both semesters I had 39 students in year 2, and 12 in year 3.

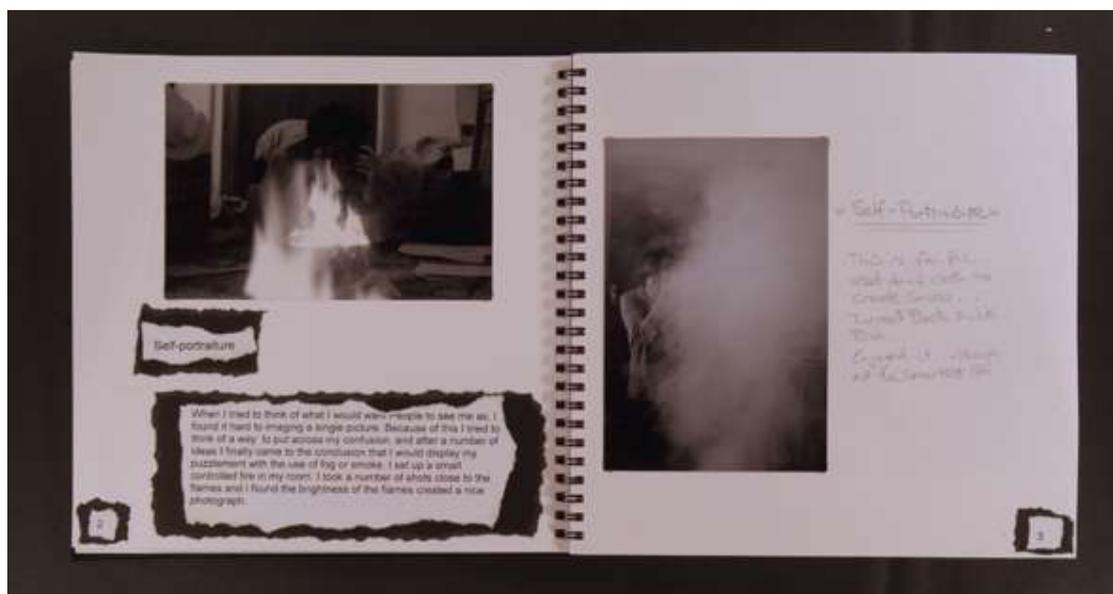


Lara: "For this topic the brief was to get someone to take ea planned photograph of one-self showing something about you that many people don't see day to day. I found this brief exciting and brainstormed a few ideas before deciding on my final idea... I intend the pictures to show my more creative, confident side that people cannot see from the surface. I

have always had a love for drawings and tattoo designs since a very young age I have always been drawing all over myself.. The photographs I have taken each have a different meaning behind them but overall it shows a different side to my character... to think how many people may be creative in so many ways we do not know is an exciting concept”.



Craig's work: creative self portraiture

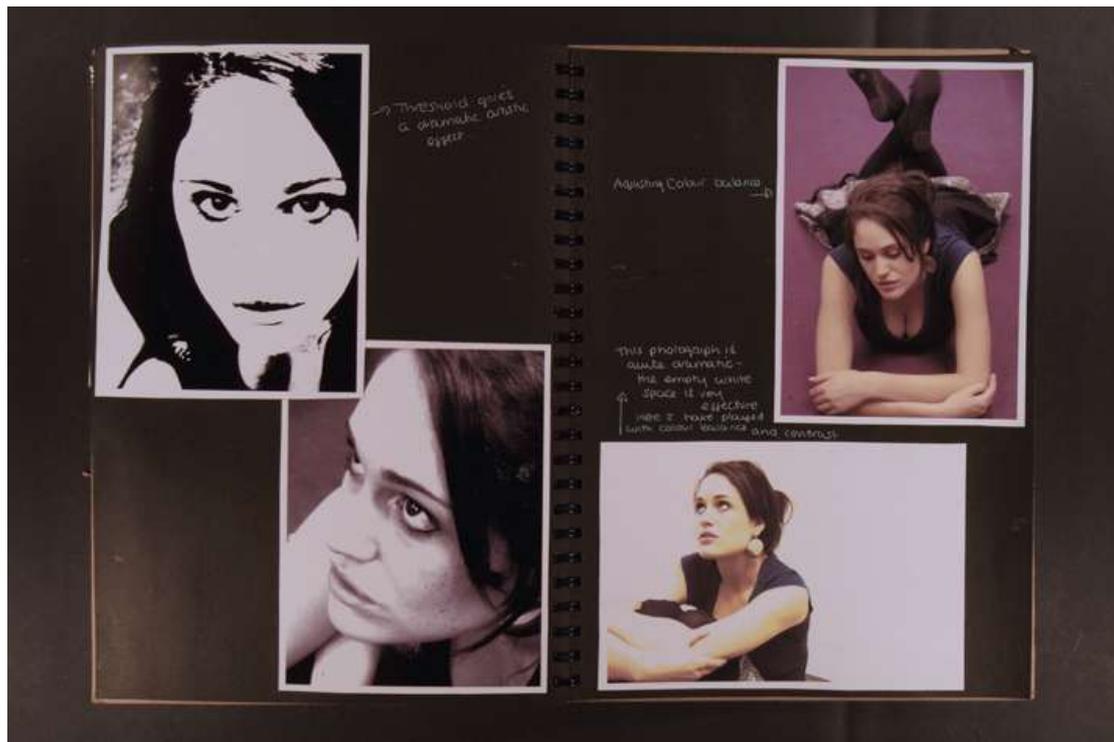


Craig:” When I tried to think of what I would want people to see me as, I found it hard to imagining a single picture. Because of this I tried to think of a way to put across my confusion, and after a number of ideas I finally came to the conclusion that I would display my puzzlement with the use of fog or smoke. “



Louisa and Charlie's work: exploring the self (using digital manipulation)





Christie and Rupinder's work: debunking the librarian stereotypes





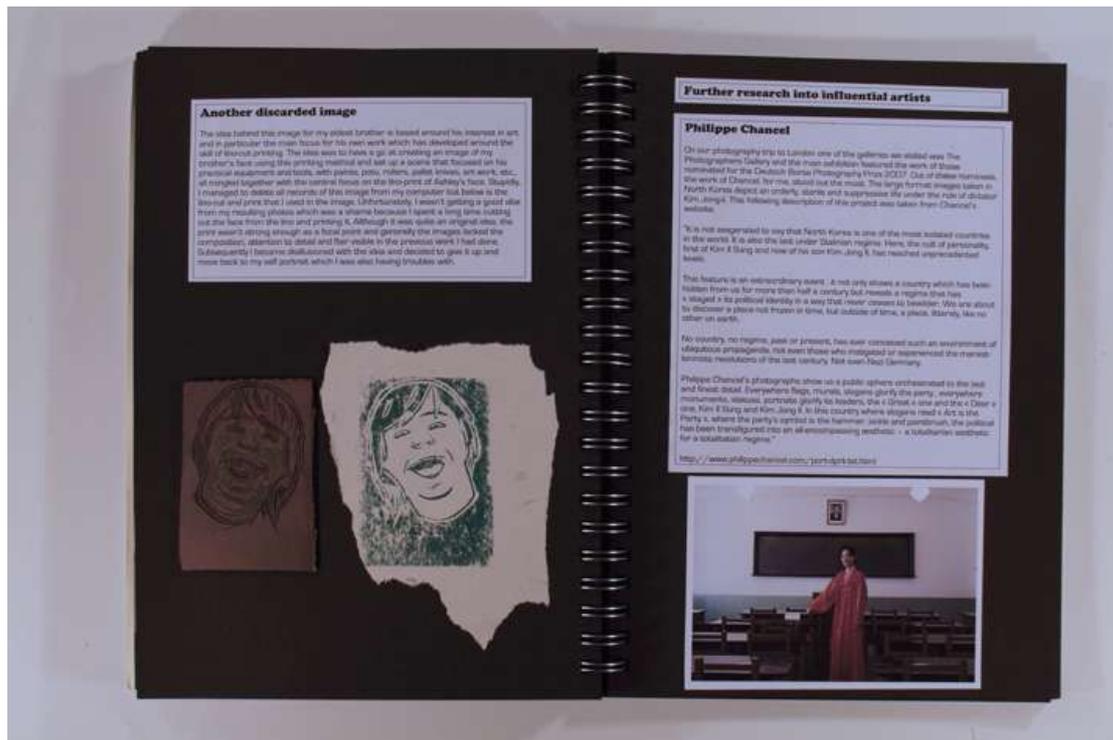
Kerry: exploring self portraiture/portraiture





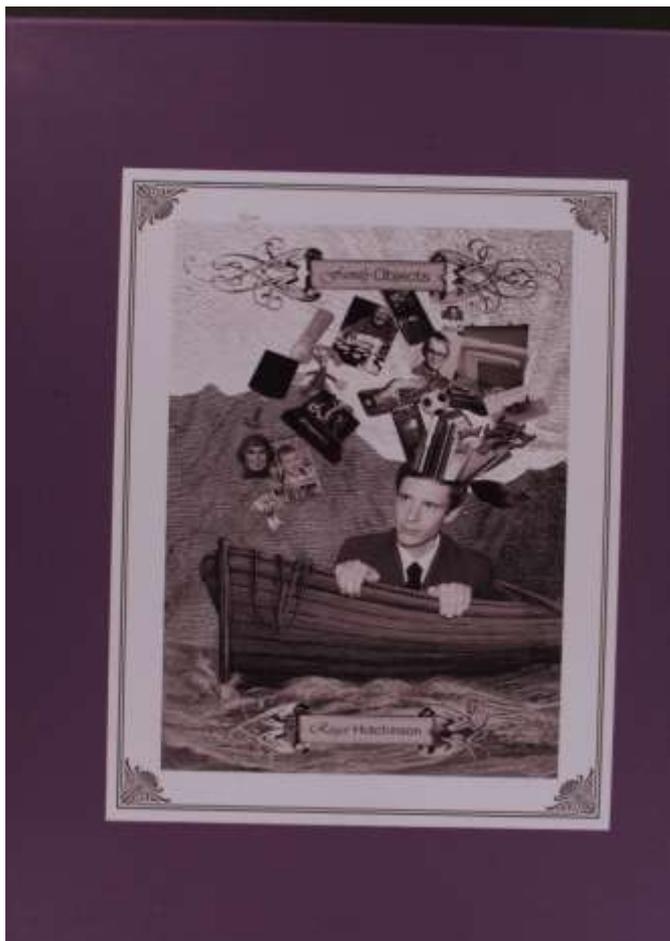
Roger: exploring self and family through personal objects





Roger with his family portraits, depicting each member, including himself, through objects only.





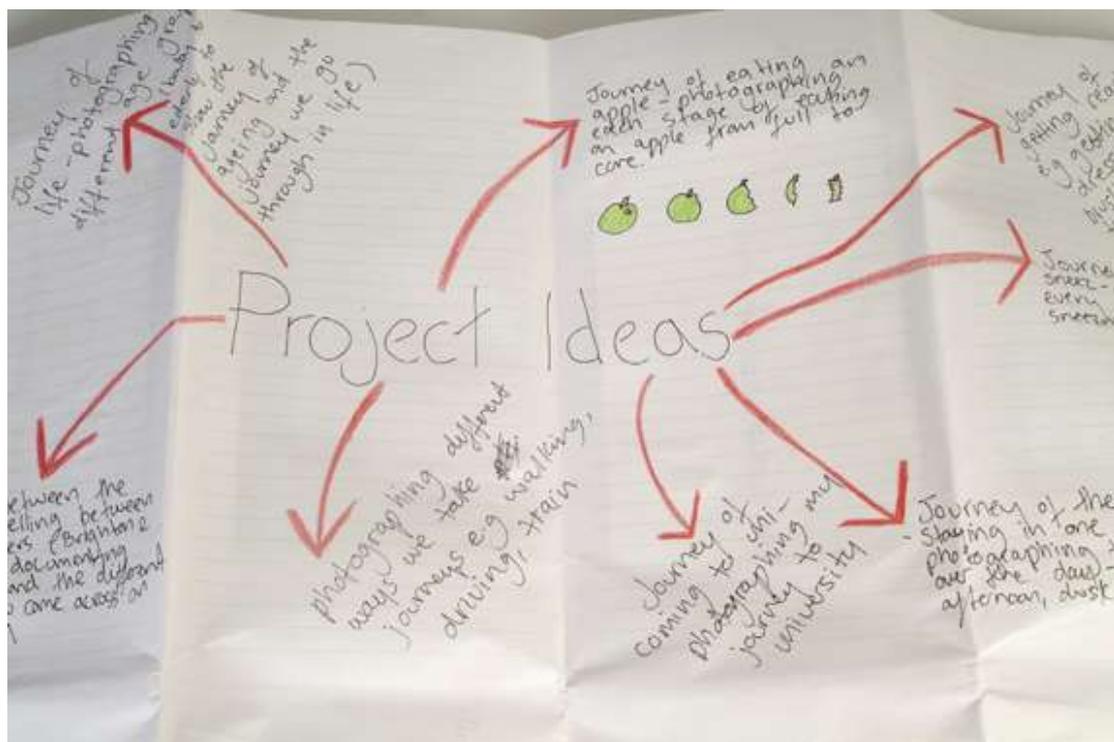
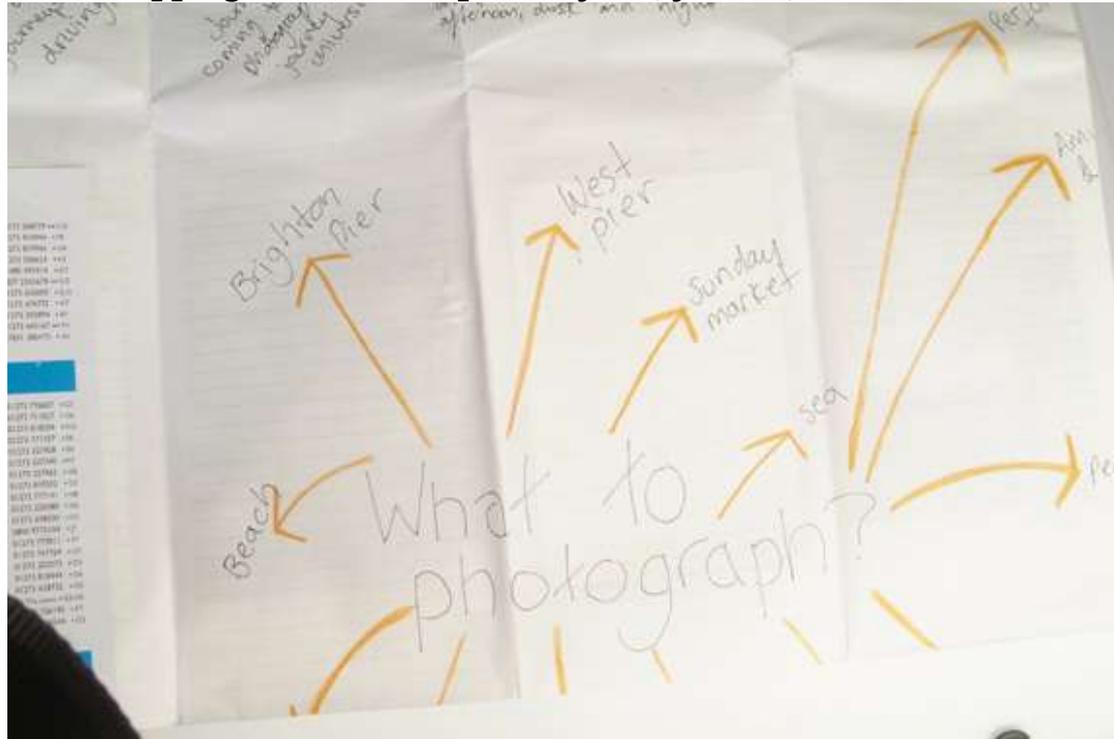
Roger: Creative self portrait

Annabel: fantasy self, dream self



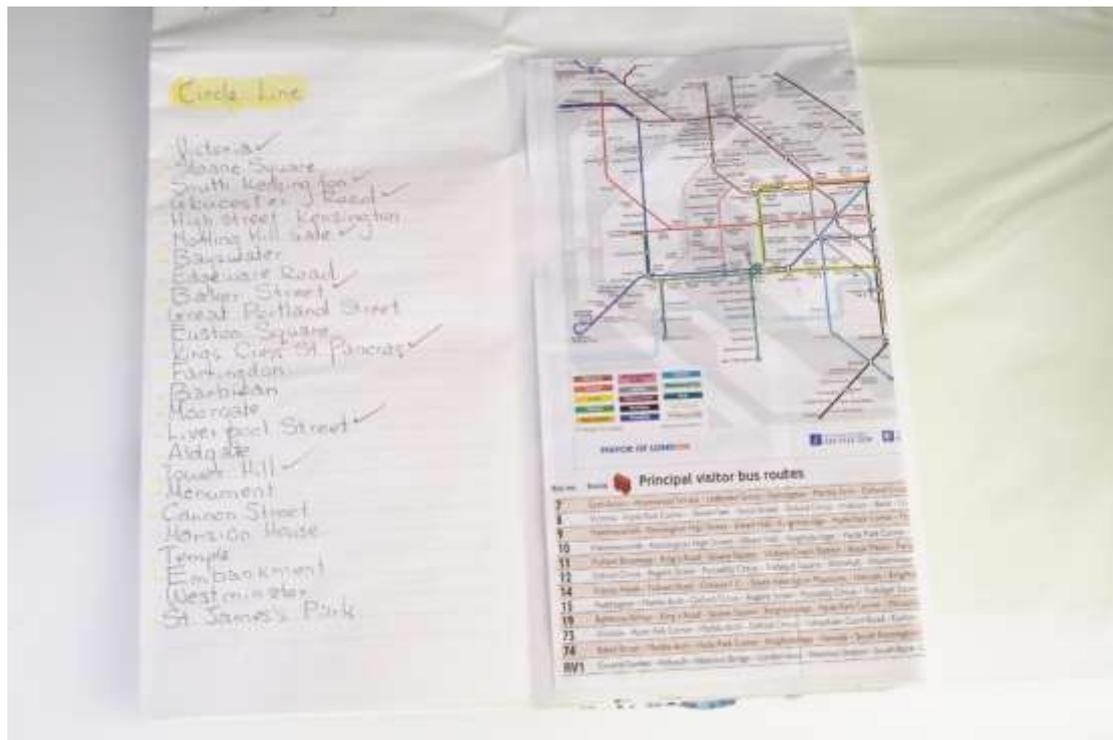
Annabel wrote extensively about the power of self-portraiture. She felt it gave her the control to decide how she wanted to be represented, and she claimed that power with great relish.

Mind mapping/ideas development: Julia, Jessica, Mel



Jessica's project: Jessica used the opportunity to revisit her fear of the London underground. She had been working in London on 7/7/05 and was caught up in the bombings. She had not used the underground since then. For her project, she decided to revisit the regular stations she used to pass through before the bombings, and confront her fears by using photography as a tool to overcome them. Below are some mind mapping pages and images she took on the underground, using the Fuji DSLR.





Conclusion

To summarize, the project has been very successful, and the exercises were also used with some year two and year three students who expressed an interest in using photography to explore their own lives.

Having had access to an Apple Mac computer (which also has a Photobooth feature which proved popular) and two new Fuji DSLRs made it possible for me to give the students this added option. Feedback on the computer and the cameras has been extremely positive and I am hoping to be able to further develop the Learn Higher Project next semester.

Julia Winckler, July 10th, 2007

Book references

Visualization

Photography and the Art of Seeing. A Visual Perception Workshop for Film and Digital Photography by Freeman Patterson, 2004, Keyporter Books

Visual possibilities

Photographic Possibilities: The Expressive Use of Ideas, Materials and Processes by Robert Hirsch and John Valentino, Focal Press, 2001.

Deconstruction

Understanding the Visual by Tony Schirato and Jen Webb, Sage Publications, 2004, London.

Photography: A Critical Introduction edited by Liz Wells, Routledge, 1997, London, in particular "Photography in the age of electronic imaging", pp. 251-289 by Martin Lister

Criticizing Photographs: An introduction to understanding images by Terry Barrett, McGraw Hill, 2005.

Visual Methodologies by Gillian Rose, Sage Publications, 2006 edition, London.

Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices Edited by Stuart Hall, Sage Publications, 2003 edition.

Additional References:

Winckler, Julia. 2007 Curriculum Highlights TOE 2006 My Light "Connecting Self and the World & "Image-ing" Community

Winckler, Julia. 2007 Returning the gaze: imaging body, identity, community. University of Brighton

Winckler, Julia. 2001 Working with Students' Personal Memories in Education: Opportunities within Photography Teaching. City College Brighton & Hove

Appendices:

1. Hand out on producing *Image Meaning* and *Developing Criteria* that will affect the *Meaning of an Image*

“Seeing comes before words. We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Images were first made to conjure up the appearances of something that was absent. Gradually it became evident that an image could outlast what it represented; it then showed how something or somebody had once looked”.

(John Berger: ***Ways of Seeing***)

Criteria to consider/discuss with the students are:

Image Meaning:

Image description – interpretation - evaluation

Reading/Meaning:

The effect the image will have on other people

“Rather than the notion of looking, which suggests a passive act of recognition, we need to insist that we read a photograph not as an image but as a text” (Clarke: *The Photograph*)

Denotation and connotation

Emotional influence (by the other photographers, surroundings)

Personal experience (trauma, loss, love)

Depth/range (close up, long shot, mid shot)

When was the image taken?

Universal meaning or personal meaning

Image composition has to fit the purpose of intended message/meaning

The photographer:

Photographer’s intention/mood

Point of view/viewpoint

Reflection of the photographer’s emotions within the image

Photographic editing

Angles/styles that the photos are taken in

Must consider camera techniques such as focus, lighting, angles

Taking a photo: purpose, relevance, changes in history

Framing, angles of shot, layering

Relevance of what is included in the frame?

Lighting

Focus

Perspective

Authorship:

The intertextuality between the work and the photographer

Theme conveyed

What/who is the target audience?

Personal reasons for taking the image/background meaning

Related pictures or a set of random images? Sequential?

Genre:

Genre of photography

Type of portrait

Subject or focus of the image

Environment:

Tapping into human beliefs (religion, politics)

Lighting time of day/seasons

Setting or location of the image

2. Hand out: A short technical knowledge quiz

- What is the most important technical aspect you want to learn about your camera?
- What is depth of field?
- What controls the depth of field?
- What is the rule of thirds?
- What is the decisive moment?
- What is meant by white balance on a digital camera
- Can you give an example of a fast shutter speed?
- Can you give an example of a slow shutter speed?
- To achieve motion blur in a photograph what do you need to do?
- Why would you set your camera to a slow film speed?
- And why would you set it to a fast film speed?
- Why would you use a wide angle?
- And what is macro mode good for?
- File size: at what setting do you want to capture your image? (fine, superfine, medium etc)
- Do you know what dpi stands for and why it may be important?

3. Perspective and focal point exercises:

Exercise 1:

- Experiment with different camera angles: lie on the floor looking up; stand on something high looking down; take images from a cat's perspective etc
-

Exercise 2:

- Sit down on a chair and do not move: take images, over 5 minutes, of anything you see within the camera lenses reach: close-ups, landscapes etc. Include yourself: your shoes, your hands, the person sitting next to you etc.
-

Exercise 3:

- We all see the world differently, from the smallest details (how we perceive and then photograph a person's face etc) to the least detailed scenarios: cloud formations can be photographed in a million different ways. For this exercise get a group of students to all photograph the same thing (be it an object, a person, a street, a room) any way they want. Afterwards, discuss the different viewpoints. What does each student concentrate on in his or her photos? A great tool as an introduction to different personal (and therefore photographic) visions.

4. Hand out on Image Editing: thoughts about editing of photographic projects

Some key points to consider when thinking about editing, images and words and final sequencing:

- Images all colour or black and white? Or a mix of both?
- Are you using photographs only, or are there other kinds of materials involved (canvas, fabrics, paint on images, seeds, objects placed on images, or image rescanned with object or text on top etc)?
- Types of organisation: single images, a series of images, groups of images, diptychs or triptychs
- Text and images combined or text only, images only, text at the beginning or text at the end; or text broken up and interspersed throughout?
- The process of turning pages, or moving from image to image: how do we see the work/or the book? How do you want to direct the process? Is there a clear opening or closing image?
- Sequencing: use of transparency (tracing paper, see through materials etc), layering, the order of viewing, and the movement of the work, the focus or emphasis of the work
- Rhythm, gaps within the work: working with white pages or white space around the image; positioning of image on paper, pacing and flow
- Texture: what are the materials you are using? What kind of surface or printing papers are you using? Could the texture add to the content?
- Scale of your work: what size are the images going to be? Should they be small, or big, should they vary in size?
- Tonality and form; ask yourself whether the images work together in terms of mood, shape, content, tonal range etc.
- Display context: wall, gallery, public space, private space, book or portfolio box?
- Other considerations: Please add to this list here...

5. Handout: An example of a visual literacy knowledge quiz

(e.g. to help students understand about framing and composition; photographic genres and the art of seeing)

Hand out on Visual Understanding: Photography: Drawing with light!

What are some areas of consideration that we may want to apply to the composition of any photograph? List some key words

What are some important elements (both technical and conceptual) in the creation of *meaningful* images?

Photographic genres:

Name two different photographic genres, and think about what they may be used for?

Do you know what the source of colour is?

How do you feel about the statement: "A picture is a window into the world?" Discuss

What do you make of the statement: "The image is as much a reflection of the "I" of the photographer as it is a reflection of the "eye" of the camera"?

What did the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson mean by the "decisive moment" in photography?

Select one of your own photographs where you have given attention to the foreground. How did you achieve this?

Select one photograph where you have given attention to the background. How did you achieve this?

Select one photograph where foreground and background are equally in focus. How did you achieve this?

6. Hand-out for portraiture/self-portraiture criteria

Portraiture:

In your opinion what is a good portrait?

What are some areas of consideration when composing a portrait? List basic elements of visual design

Considerations for taking a portrait/self portrait

The frame

Filling the frame

Subject placement

Rule of thirds

Balance and lines

Vantage point

Depth

Light

Breaking the rules!

Colour/black and white

Discuss how one develops visual strategies and how an idea is turned into visual practice

What is a good portrait?

Collaborative effort between subject and photographer

Design/format

Attention to background/foreground

Depth of field has been considered

Interaction sitter/ photographer

Expression and posture

Value

Directing the subject

Are you revealing character?

