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Over the last seven years I have taught a variety of photography (digital and analog), art history (including the history of photography) and contemporary theory courses at Southern California universities. Most of the students I teach are image or object makers, and so I direct my pedagogical material to prepare students to develop a life-long image-making practice. However, the skills that students learn in my classes are foundational in nature and will also stand them in good stead as they pursue other career or life goals.

Since the medium of photography is famously ubiquitous in contemporary society especially with regard to advertising imagery, visual literacy skills that allow students to read and interpret the onslaught of photographic images they encounter each day are vital to function effectively in our society. In the past, the camera has been understood as a “neutral” or “transparent” tool for the truthful recording of events in the world. Now, we understand that photographic imagery is as subjective in nature as any other artistic medium, and I gear classroom discussions to promote attitudes of curiosity and investigation toward the meanings embedded in photographic media. Often these meanings relate to messages about gender, race and class. Giving students tools to decode these messages allows them to engage with the world in an empowered way.

I require that all my students view and analyze a variety of photographs, both verbally through in class discussions and group work, and through written assignments. Students analyze their own photographs by handing in written statements with each assignment. They attend gallery exhibitions and analyze the work that they encounter, and also respond to in-class lectures showing contemporary and historic artwork. The critique process becomes important both to develop the student’s ability to articulate their own creative concerns, and to promote their conceptual understanding of other’s photographs.

Photographically, we are experiencing the transition from analog to digital image making. Students fortunate enough to have access to both a wet darkroom and digital facilities can take full advantage of the opportunities that both media provide in generating exciting new image making techniques. The abundance of emerging digital media, digital cameras, scanners, and other digital image-making devices combined with social media and software with ever increasing sophistication can make the world of digital technology seem both exciting and overwhelming. Creating an attitude of collaboration while empowering students to become experts in their own right promotes the lifelong learning habits that are required to keep up with new technology. No longer can the instructor claim to be the voice of authority in every situation. In my classroom, I encourage students to research and teach digital techniques to the class, and to take advantage of the shared wealth of knowledge possessed by the group as a whole.

Discussing and understanding historic artistic practice allows students to be better informed as they produce their own imagery and to enrich their own artistic practice. Understanding the ways that visual conventions are formed and interpreted historically allows contemporary viewers to question our own preconceptions of the meanings of images. Students who go on to become artists can only be effective in the current art market by understanding the work that has come before them. However, an historical perspective on image making again creates well-rounded empowered students, and is a useful foundational skill for any student.