

GUIDE TO

Making Photographs in Higher Education

1. Don't try to do this alone. Seek the help of trained photographers at your institution. Here are a couple of suggestions to get you started on the right path. You may find others who are experienced and up for collaboration.

- a. Your marketing/public relations offices most likely have staff whose job it is to make photographs of and about things that are happening in and around your institution. Hopefully, teaching and learning is one of the primary things happening at your institution. Show them examples of the photographs you'd like to emulate for your own purposes—photographs from *What Teaching Looks Like: Higher Education through Photographs*, for example.
- b. Faculty in your art department will no doubt be teaching documentary photography in one or more of their courses. Photographs documenting teaching and learning may make a great project for some of their students. In fact, the *Teaching and Learning Project* began as a shared student-faculty project in a photography class.

2. If you don't have colleagues who can help you, consult a few good books and practice making photographs on your own.

- a. There are many textbooks that cover foundational skills in digital photography. Some of these are offered freely as open educational resources. Take a look at *Introduction to Digital Photography* by Lawrence Neuberger, for starters. This is a comprehensive guide to operating a digital camera. It also includes exercises that help you think about how to make the photographs you want to make.
- b. Wendy Ewald's *I Wanna Take Me a Picture*, which Cassandra and I reference in *What Teaching Looks Like: Higher Education through Photographs*, is a book for photography educators. It includes many helpful exercises that guide the reader and their students in how to make meaningful photographs. I borrow heavily from this book when I conduct workshops for faculty who are interested in documenting their own teaching in photographs.

3. Use a real camera. Do not use your phone. I recommend a digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) camera with interchangeable lenses. Here are a couple pointers to consider as you get started.

- a. If the camera has the feature, silence the shutter to reduce noise and distractions in the classroom.
- b. Use the camera's automatic settings, including focus, especially as you are getting started. As you get started, it will be enough to concentrate on your subject, let alone all of your camera's controls. (See textbook above for more on those.)
- c. As you get used to using your camera, start experimenting with manual settings for aperture, shutter speed, ISO, and focus. You'll be amazed at the photographs you can make when you have complete command of all of those controls.

4. Be brave.

- a. Get close to your subjects. Robert Capa famously said, “If your pictures aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough.” This is almost always true when photographing people.
- b. Make *a lot* of photographs. If you’re a self-conscious person, this is going to feel awkward and horribly intrusive upon your subject. Just know that even after you get a feel for what you’re doing, you’ll probably only end up liking and keeping about ten percent of what you shoot. Try to remember in the moment of making photographs that there is no going back to that moment.
- c. One of my favorite movie moments is Francis Ford Coppola’s brief cameo in his own film *Apocalypse Now*, in which he plays a journalist instructing soldiers “Don’t look at the camera – just go by like you’re fighting!” People are going to notice you in the room. It’s unavoidable, no matter what stealth settings you’ve enabled on your camera. Push through the first five or ten minutes of making photographs and people will eventually forget you’re there. They will just continue doing as they normally do. This is especially true if you’re steadily clicking away.

REFERENCES

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Ewald, Wendy; coauthored by Alexandra Lightfoot. 2001. *I Wanna Take Me a Picture: Teaching Photography and Writing to Children*. Boston: Beacon Press.

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