

Photography and Writing: Alternative Ways of Learning for ESL Students

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New Voice

This essay reflects on how one writing teacher incorporates photography in her practice to engage students of different backgrounds and experiences.

To writing, painting, drawing, and photography as artistic media, I would like to add teaching as a creative endeavor as well. Especially in a classroom where English is not the first language for many students, the writing teacher needs to be creative with assignments and activities that address nontraditional ways of learning. My writing classes are always culturally diverse, and students come from sundry systems with a wide variety of educational backgrounds and styles. Since I am also a freelance photojournalist and poet, besides being a writing teacher, I incorporate photography and poetry writing into my writing courses.

Fred R. Barnard once said that “one picture is worth a thousand words,” and when students struggle with words and how to put them in the proper order so that they make sense not only to them but to others as well, then visual creativity can be a big help. Visual arts transcend adherence to one specific language and, like music, communicate via a universal language understandable to all. In a culturally diverse class, I tap into this wonderfully diverse wealth of expression and see my students awaken. Photography can become a bridge from their home language to English, their newly acquired academic language. Using visual images as a springboard and a tool of communication helps students experience immediate success and a sense of empowerment in their learning process. Using photography in the classroom isn’t about the technical and professional aspect of the craft, but about capturing images and letting images speak when perhaps words can’t.

An activity that I have done in my classroom when we cover the genre of writing description is to send the students out onto the campus or into the wider community with digital cameras in hand. The task is to find a place that appeals to them and then capture sensory impressions using visual images. For example, students may choose to go into the cafeteria or local coffee shop, sit at a table, and photograph the food or drinks to reflect their taste, the warmth of the setting, and a sense of comfort. Students may choose to go into the library to capture its sounds or silence, as well as images of solitude, hard work, and concentration. Photographs

of outdoor picnic tables, sidewalk chalk, or landscaped flowerbeds could represent a carefree spirit or free time activities. Standing on the street corner of a busy intersection gives students the opportunity to convey the workings of all their senses. Students can use both photographs and oral or written explanations to complete a community description project. Classroom presentations are always lively, colorful, and wonderfully diverse. Besides the diversity of visual images, these presentations demonstrate the diversity of people and of different ways of thinking and learning. The many different lenses through which we see our own community enrich us all.

Since combining photography and haiku is my personal favorite, I have also used the two media to encourage creative expression, asking students to create both visual and written metaphors. Haiku is a relatively simple way to learn to write a short poem, and since it doesn't specifically require complete sentences, it is an engaging way for students to play and experiment with words and verbal images. There is no such thing as a wrong haiku, so every student can experience success. Before sending students out onto the street with their cameras, we go over the technique of writing haiku and how the images they capture with their cameras can symbolize broader life concepts.

The classroom dynamics change when I combine artistic media with my pedagogy. Suddenly the otherwise quiet students speak up, enthusiastically participate, and feel comfortable in contributing to class discussions and sharing their work.

Here is a short sample of my own work that I would use in my classes to jumpstart and model an activity on photography and poetry. This collection of photography and haiku carries an autumn theme.



delicate weaving
stitched together in fine print
waiting to catch flight



group of faithful friends
wait their turn in the sparse shade
fall cross-country meet



in fall days gone by
we used to sit together
on a timeline



it's raining today
bright golden coins from the sky
we are millionaires



the portal of time
invites anticipation
reflection of past

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