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Corina M. Ender

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A Picture and a Thousand Words: Autophotography in the ESOL Classroom and Beyond

by

Corina Morano-Ender and Morton G. Ender

Introduction

Students believe teachers *"just don't understand."* Indeed, the world of teachers is much different from that of secondary students grades 9-12. Where teachers might spend their evenings cooking and reading, students watch some seven hours of television and use telephones for sociability. This disjuncture between the life of teachers and students is even more manifest with students whose native language is not English. There is even a cultural cleft between international students and their native English speaking peers. In addition to watching MTV and talking on telephones, international students are busily negotiating a new culture while holding on to remnants of their native culture.

We introduce a pedagogical tool to bridge the teacher-student-community and culture gap by integrating the personal orientations of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students through Autophotography (AP) and personal biography portfolios that can be shared with audiences. The project involves one to three months of periodic self-paced work. First, students take pictures from their personal perspective. Second, students write stories around their pictures on word processors. Third, the pictures and writings are contained in portfolios. Finally, the portfolios are copied, bound, and published by teachers and students with one copy made available as reference material for staff and students in the school multi-media center.

Autophotography (AP)

The photographic approach is a sub-field of sociology and anthropology that uses naturalistic techniques for understanding the individual and social worlds of people. For example, Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson (1942) used still photographs in a pioneering way to understand the character of Balinese people. Their book consists of 900 photographs organized around specific and in-depth descriptions of different folkways.

AP is an ecological approach to understanding one's personal orientation (Ziller, 1990). Traditional methods for accessing the self, like surveys, do not account for a person's relationship with her or his special, social environment. AP uses photographs to tap into dimensions of the self from the perspective of the individual (Hormuth, 1990).

Who Am I?

AP imitates the Twenty Statements Test (TST) used by social psychologists. The TST is a classic method for understanding the social self-concept (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954). Respondents are asked to write down in 12 minutes, 20 responses to the question *"Who am I?"* Examples of responses might include "student," "daughter," "sister," "employee," and "softball player," among others. The strength of the procedure is the use of the respondents' words. A major shortcoming of the TST is its inability to survey individuals in their natural environment. Self-photography

addresses this need and is also linked to enhanced self-esteem (Fryrear, Nuell, & White, 1977) and cross-cultural understanding (Guran & Becker, 1990). Self-photography can also assist in understanding one's own conception of self (Ender, 1995).

AP imitates the TST with pictures instead of words. Students are given a camera with film and allowed two to three weeks to respond to the question, *"Who am I?"* Students are encouraged to take photographs of people, places, and things they consider to be a part of and the major expressions of their self-concept.

Today, photography not only provides children and adolescents with a "voice" but teaches them a skill–photography and photo journalism. This has been the goal of the Washington Project for the Arts (WPA). To date, two exhibitions have been completed–*SHOOTING BACK: Photographs by and about the Homeless* (1991) and *Shooting Back from the Reservation: ANOTHER DIMENSION, Photography by Native American Children* (1994). The WPA involves teaching children how to use 35mm cameras and how to take and develop photographs from their experience.

In this spirit, we adopt Autophotography for use as a pedagogical tool to stimulate and encourage students to take photographs of *and* write about who they are.

Pedagogical Practices and Implications

Instructionally, we address the Dimensions of Learning (DoL) Model (Marzano et al., 1992) developed by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. The five dimensions are:

- Positive Attitudes and Perceptions About Learning
- Acquiring and Integrating Knowledge
- Extending and Refining Knowledge
- Meaningful Use of Knowledge
- Productive Habits of Mind

By utilizing these five types of thinking in developing a student-centered unit, teachers implement classroom-based curriculum. This model stresses the need to create a classroom environment enabling students to link their interests and goals to classroom tasks. Asking students to generate tasks that apply to their personal lives such as describing themselves after having taken pictures of and about themselves is crucial. In particular, Dimension 4 (Meaningful Use of Knowledge) is of importance here because what makes a task meaningful is that students are professionals and experts in their own class assignment. In addition, tasks are long term, allowing for exploration, elaboration, invention, and extension. Students are in a position to make choices about their approach to taking pictures and designing their portfolios as an end product. The AP project also requires and encourages cultural exploration. Students are to explore and represent their "roles/self" visually via 35mm cameras. The project requires self-reflection in two contexts: in visual and in written form.

Supplies
1. 35mm Cameras and Film (Option: Throw-away cameras)
2. Computer Lab with Word Processing Packages
3. Art Supplies for Compiling a Portfolio

1. Cameras[1]: 35mm - $49 (each) x 5 $245
2. Film: Color-24 exposures - $2 (each) x 20 rolls   40
3. Film Developing: 20 rolls - $5 (each) x 20   100
4. Supplies: Binding - $3 (each) x 20   60

                                   Total $445

Procedures

Students are issued a camera and a roll of 24 exposure film. They are instructed to take 24 photographs with the thematic question: *"Who am I?"* No other instructions are given. The instructor should show restraint in not providing any other information to the students. The goal is to encourage students to produce a product from their own perspective.

Students are provided with ample time (two to three weeks) to produce their pictures. Students turn in the film to the teacher for development. The film is developed (two sets of prints should be obtained: one for the student and one for the teacher for back-up purposes)[2], and students decide which of the photographs are worthy in answering the question *"Who am I?"*

Students proceed by categorizing the photos based on some form of cultural perspectives (i.e., family, food, job, school, etc.). After categorizing their photos, students decide and selectively sequence their photos and outline, develop, and create a comprehensive portfolio. Within the portfolio, students must write brief descriptions of each photograph. Teachers should encourage students to create a story line with each photograph, using sentences, paragraphs, or chapters. The teacher may assist with the length of each description depending on the English proficiency level of each student or class as a whole.

Students can use a word processing package in the school computer lab, in their English classroom, or work at home, provided they have the resources available. Grading is based on the degree to which the project is taken seriously, for creativity, and completing all requirements in a fresh, mature, and timely manner.

Even though this project stresses individual creativity in learning to write, read, and use a camera and computer as media to convey concepts and cultural values, variations of this project can be undertaken. For instance, students can be exposed to a teaching unit on cross-cultural perspectives prior to initiating the AP project, hereby enabling students to interact in heterogeneous small groups.

Outcomes and Implications

The ultimate outcome for students includes developing writing and computer skills, as well as artistic interpretation skills, while reflecting on personal and social issues. This enables them to take learning to *their personal limit* without sacrificing the integrity of a curriculum specifically designed for ESOL.

Portfolios should have an added bonus. Bound portfolios as a multimedia reference resource enlighten others (e.g., non-ESOL students, faculty, and staff) to the similarities as well as the dissimilarities of students of diverse cultures at your particular school[3].

Portfolios also serve as an assessment tool, allowing teachers to evaluate student progress. A student-centered approach to instruction is implemented that empowers second or multi-language (L2, 3, 4 ...) learners and connects them with teachers and the world around them in and out of the classroom (Raimes, 1983).

Finally, we think this project encourages all students to learn at their own pace while acquiring the work habits, skills, and knowledge which will enable them to become valuable and productive members of society ... regardless of their previous academic performance, socio-economic status, race, or gender. Moreover, we think that both the teaching and learning of AP will be exciting, invigorating, and interdisciplinary.

End Notes

[1] Many students may have personal cameras. We encourage the use of 35mm cameras instead of throw-away cameras due to the low environmental impact as well as the ability to rotate cameras among students for more than this particular project, provided the cameras are not damaged or lost. We stress the importance of designing a sign-out sheet which should include a statement regarding loss or damage which each student needs to understand and sign. Indeed, the more industrious instructor may want to train the students in 35mm camera use and film development. This may prove an especially valuable skill for the student. Some schools may have photography facilities and a dark room. Instructors might want to consult with their art teacher. S/he may also have some commercial photography connections outside of the school. Another cost cutting approach would be to approach a local photographer for the donation of resources and/or time.

[2] A new media form is the exploration of personal photographs developed directly on diskette that are compatible and interactive with most word processing computer software packages.

[3] We exhibited select portfolios and brief descriptions of the project in one of the high school display cases nearest one of the ESOL classrooms.

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