

## **Learning to See: Renovating the Asheville High School Photo Club to Improve Learning and Sustainability**

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### **Abstract**

While documents and art are limited in their ability to encompass the other's properties, often leaving documents devoid of interest and art devoid of fact, photographs can encompass both sides becoming an incredibly powerful tool for social change. Photographs can be both visually arousing and factually evident (in so far as they portray the photographer's interpretation of the action.) For this reason, I believe it is important to expose students (I chose high schoolers) to the nuanced techniques and capabilities of photography. For the past three years I have worked with the Asheville High School student-begun photo club creating some basic digital assignments. This year, my community partner, the faculty advisor for the photo club, Kristina Shriver, and I introduced alternative analog processes such as pinhole cameras and cyanotypes so that our students could better learn principles such as line, composition, and exposure time as well as explore the relationship between an interconnected person, place, and thing (the title of our end of the year photo show.) I also arranged a gallery show so that the students could gain exposure for their work. Finally, I created various promotional tools (posters, a website) and an instructional binder of such tools, assignment worksheets, and gallery contact information to hopefully promote sustainability of the club. This paper explores my process of reevaluating (along with my co-leader and students) the goals of the club, what I did to ensure progress, and the difficulties in doing both tasks.

**Keywords: high school, art education, photography, alternate processes, curriculum**

## Origins of the Project

Photography is its own medium; part document, part art, part experience. Photojournalist Joel Meyerowitz sums up the all-encompassing power of photography best when he discusses his experience photographing the destruction, clean-up, and rebuilding of the Twin Towers:

By 2001, I'd been making photographs for forty years. Inevitably, I'd grown familiar with the way I saw my work and the issues I thought seriously about, and many of my responses had become routine. But 9/11 had reawakened in me a profound need to give something back to my native city, and what I had to give a record of what all the other people around me were doing in response to the tragedy. Bearing witness week after week reminded me why I'd become a photographer to begin with - those first years when I'd burned with the desire to be out every day with my camera to see what the world had to offer. It was the same feeling of desire that drove me now, and it made me feel young again (Meyerowitz).

Meyerowitz's tragically beautiful images show not only the incredibly destructive power of hate, but illustrate how, in times of need, people of many walks of life can come together to recover and help each other, as New York City dwellers and emergency workers (from all over the country) did. This project, called "Aftermath," epitomizes photography's power for social change (bringing a city and country back together) with Meyerowitz's creation of beautifully haunting images recording the photographers' personal experience capturing and navigating the destruction and rebuilding site.

When I began volunteering with the Asheville High School photo club three years ago (in order to get more volunteer hours as well as learn what actually goes on in an art classroom), I immediately wanted to instill this sort of spark in the minds of my students. A photography student myself, I owe a good deal of my photo curiosity and knowledge to my high school photography teacher, and I wanted to pass those same things to a new generation of students. Yes, this may have been a rather ideological goal, but it is one that I have not lost during those three years, I have simply learned better techniques to achieve the goal.

Four years ago, a handful of students at Asheville High School banded together to start the Asheville High photo club so that they could practice photography with their peers. They had high hopes for the club (such as collaborative shoots and group exhibits) and did have success with an annual Halloween costume shoot and an end-of-the-year exhibit of each student's favorite work (not necessarily done in the club), but lacked the necessary time to organize it in a manner that would be sustainable. Thus, once those first students graduated or otherwise moved on in their own photographic worlds, participation dwindled and what few students were left had a lot of interest but no idea in what direction to take the photo club. So, this year, in deciding how best I could aid the community, I thought my skills – ten years of studying and practicing photography as well as eight years teaching or coaching elementary and middle schoolers – could be best used in helping the students of the photo club organize so that they could enjoy the assignments without having to worry quite as much about the behind-the-scenes operations. The purpose of my Community Engaged Scholar project was threefold: to create a new curriculum to maintain student interest and participation; to make a photo club guide full of lesson plans, assignment sheets, necessary equipment for projects, and student roles to make the club

sustainable; and to ultimately achieve the first two goals in order to inspire budding students in their photographic pursuits to potentially use their skills for social good.

## **Methods and Work Undertaken**

Meyerowitz's quotation regarding his invigorating experience capturing the aftermath and rebuilding of the site of the Twin Towers in 2001 and 2002 provided the foundation for the renovation of the high school photo club: in order to get people interested in photography I needed to let them get that "photographer's high" through hands on work exploring their own worlds. Thus the mission of the photography club became "to bolster students' photography education by exploring both technique and subject matter within the medium." In consulting the International Center of Photography for ideas on developing a curriculum, it advocated for "A good curriculum [which] brings out the innate creativity of the students, builds their interpretative and technical skills, and enhances their understanding of the power of photography to communicate their perspectives of the world" (Way). Their plan called for a four-pronged approach exploring history, techniques, aesthetics, and practice while incorporating the "educator's understanding of the audience, the setting, and her teaching methods" (Way). In developing each assignment, I tried to add an element of historical background in the description. The assignments themselves focus on technique predominately while still allowing students to find their own personal aesthetic. And finally these components combine to allow students to practice what they learned.

With this end goal of sending off skilled photographers into the world, my community advisor, Kristina Shriver, who teaches multiple art classes at Asheville High School, and I had a few smaller steps in mind: growing attendance of the club, creating a more seamless and interesting curriculum, garnering community attention of the students' work, and ultimately having each student show progress in both technical and ideological photographic skills.

### **1. Growing club attendance:**

Each year, our photo club begins with around twenty students who excitedly participate in our photographic scavenger hunt where they group up to make photos using various proscribed rules. Some of the tasks include making a photo using the rule of thirds, one capturing motion, and one reflection without using a mirror. Unfortunately, after this first activity, the attendance goes progressively downhill so that by the end of each year we have only four or five students, as with this year. Unlike Jonathan Kozol's description of many inner-city schools in New York City in his book *Shame of a Nation*, where students had the drive to learn but no resources or consistency of teachers, we were teachers with no consistency of students (Kozol). However, unlike the schools in which Kozol visited, we had the luxury of turning that around quickly by simply finding a better way to interest students. In addressing this issue, we realized that we must create a more seamless curriculum in which each assignment built upon a foundation for the next. Based upon our philosophy of "learning by doing," I created assignments grounded in hands-on photographic practices which would interest the students so that they would return each week (Harmer).

### **2. Creating the new Curriculum:**

This new curriculum, which we introduced parts of this year as a test but that I created primarily for next year, is essentially a survey of the most simple to much more complicated photo processes beginning in alternative work, transitioning to analog photography, and ending up in

digital, all the while thesis-driven to make a cohesive body of work. The purpose of this plan is to impart historic and contemporary photography knowledge to the students in a manner which is fun and enjoyable.

“Photography” is an umbrella term which “refers to a multitude of chemical processes, types of prints, and reproductive technologies, including cameraless works.” The historical definition of “light writing” on a sensitized surface that the name once suggested no longer seems an adequate description of how photographic images can be obtained. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had a “version of this elasticity (or crisis, as some saw it) in identity, as suddenly different types of images—daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, tintypes, cyanotypes, albumen prints, bas-relief prints, gelatin silver prints, and many other kinds of image-objects—began competing for attention at the many camera club exhibitions appearing throughout the country, each type of image created in a manner distinct from the others and yet each claiming to be a ‘photograph’” (Francisco). From an art historical perspective it is good to learn the beginning principles of photography in order to build upon them, particularly since photography as we know it now has greatly evolved since its grassroots beginnings. I see it beneficial to start work learning how light develops chemicals to create an image, then how cameras use the same process on film, then so on into the “digital darkroom.” In the same manner as any other education, it is good to learn the basics not to simply be stuck in the past ways which we see as “best” but to use as building blocks toward the future. Learning these processes also opens up an entire mirrored world of photography so that students can also combine digital and analog if they desire. We will spend the entire first semester learning alternative processes to gain a better grasp of photography as we move into the digital realm in the second semester.

This semester, after having trouble retaining students because they already knew how to take digital pictures, we went back to photography’s roots creating lumen prints (photograms or silhouettes made by the sun on photo paper), pinhole cameras (each student made his or her own camera from a cardboard container) and cyanotypes (blue images made using the sun.) Although we still only had five students, I finally saw that spark in each students’ eyes when their alternative process photos developed.

Assignments:

1. For this reason, when developing the new curriculum, I decided to begin with lumen prints in order to introduce the most basic principles of light recording. They are very easy, and something we could do on the first day to immediately get students excited about ensuing projects.
2. We will then transition to pinhole cameras to learn about basic lenses and the principles behind camera photography. By building our own cameras, this assignment also allows us to keep costs for students low, while still creating a tool which students can use at home.
3. We will then take a short detour into the digital world learning how to scan analog images to digital while simultaneously creating collages and photographs strictly using a scanner as the camera.
4. Because cyanotypes work best with large transparencies, we will use these scanner images to create the film needed for our cyanotype project examining how chemicals develop photographs. These first four assignments will make up the first half of the year

as I could like to spend a couple weeks on each ensuring each student gets a firm grasp on how to carry out each process.

5. In the second half, we will begin with the annual scavenger hunt as our reentry into the photographic realm, this time using the knowledge of cameras we have already learned and integrating it with learning of digital camera functions. This fun task also makes students think about components of composition to get them thinking about these techniques as we continue into more subject-driven work.
6. Our next assignment will be “photographer emulation,” in which each student will use the work of the artist they have been researching and mimic it in both technique and approach to subject matter while also incorporating their own aesthetic. Learning photography history is important in creating a foundation for future work, however teaching art history can often be dry for students, so the ICP suggests that “To make it more personal, define history as legacy—a legacy of which they, as young artists, are part. Rather than lecturing on art history, present and discuss historical and contemporary photographs in a way that connects the photographic legacy to the students’ lives (Way). This assignment should not only get students used to exploring others’ work for inspiration and broader knowledge of the industry, but introduce to them current important work all of which they can learn from to incorporate pieces into their own aesthetic.
7. Moving fully into the digital world, we will then do an assignment on digital photo manipulation in which students will learn how to incorporate text, create composite or panoramic images, crop for effect, add motion, and whatever other technique they are interested in. The point is to introduce to them technology which they will almost certainly have to use in the work force in any future photography-related career.
8. Our penultimate assignment will explore subject matter more than technique as the students will create a self-portrait, a traditional portrait of someone else, and a portrait without using the face. The purpose is to examine what makes a “good” portrait, how and what it communicates, and ensure that they learn how to work with people to tell others’ stories - or simply their own. As Jim Harmer of Improve Photography says, “Love them or hate them, because selfies are so popular they can be a wonderful teaching opportunity. Because at the heart of each poorly lit, poorly composed and haphazardly focus selfie, lies the heart of a wonderful portrait” (Harmer).
9. Finally, the last assignment will be a slight regression from the digital realm using disposable cameras to create a photographic essay. The idea is that not only will the students hopefully have fun using this somewhat vintage method of photographing, but they should explore how to create a visual narrative. The end result of these nine assignments will hopefully be a large body of work examining the students’ chosen issue or idea which we will put together into a large group show examining all that the students learned and celebrating their hard work.

One integral part of this new curriculum is technique-driven assignments focused on building knowledge of image creation. This matches our goal of imparting photographic skills. The other goal of the new photography program is for students to use these techniques to tell others’ of their own stories (for social activism or simply to give others’ a voice.) In achieving this, each student will develop a working thesis at the beginning of the year based off of a question or issue

that they see in their particular community. For each assignment, they will address a facet of their theses, examining various approaches to telling their stories. This plays into the ICP's instruction of incorporating aesthetic into photographic instruction because "when we consider aesthetics, we look at the way artists describe what they see and sense in the world and what they think is beautiful. In turn, this expands our own idea of what is beautiful" (Way).

Also, in incorporating aesthetic and practice, each student will keep a small reflection journal to take notes in after each assignment. In order to keep this part of photo club from turning too much into a full-fledged class (which might turn students away), each assignment will only require that the students write a couple sentences based off of prescribed prompts (on the assignment worksheets.) This should allow students to practice artistic criticism without the nervousness of speaking in front of a group, and build their own aesthetic through such guided questions as "Do you think the portraits were more impactful than non-portrait images you created previously?" and "How did you incorporate your thesis into this assignment? Did your theme work well with the emulated photographer's work?" By the end of the year, the goal is for each student to have a small resource of notes on their own aesthetic, other photographers' work (to build their personal aesthetic) and a large body of work examining an issue important to them.

### 3. Measuring Progress:

One of the best ways to measure progress is with an end-of-project exhibit examining how work changed throughout the duration of the project. Also, I believe it is important for the students to have an exhibition since we are promoting the importance of photography as a visual tool for social change — their work must be seen in order to have its desired effect.

The show this year, a dry-run of sorts of how future exhibits might go with larger groups and bodies of work, is called "Person, Place, Thing: Using Alternate Process Images to Create a Narrative." Each of four students picked a theme to center their work around (one chose her roller derby team) and used the three alternative processes of cyanotypes (coordinating with "person"), pinhole images ("Place") and lumen prints ("Thing") to explore how photographs convey identity through a visual narrative. Looking at the students' work from the beginning of the semester when we first began experimenting with pinhole camera exposures, to now when they have a much greater understanding of alternative processes, this exhibit (and any end of the year show) provides a visual record of what the students learned. One of my favorite moments from photo club this year was when one of my students stayed late to print just one more pinhole image. After five unsuccessful images which were either far over- or underexposed, she finally found the right exposure. She left that day beaming, carrying a token of her growing knowledge. At the next meeting she printed three more successful images, all of which she entered into our exhibit to show her progress.

This show was also a test in using one thesis for the subject matter for the entire year, and the students to be able to focus better in doing so because they did not have to come up with a brand new idea of what to photograph for each assignment.

4. Gaining Community Support. However, the exhibit will also serve to engage with the community, in academics, art, and otherwise. Because we have severely-limited funds to buy expensive chemicals and paper, Mrs. Shriver's and my hope is that the show this semester will bring in a few donations to grow the club, which will perpetuate future projects and exhibits.

## Ties to Academia

In exploring what to center my undergraduate research on, I thought it would be beneficial to explore photography's communication methods so that I may better understand my chosen medium. This research also shed light on the importance of photography, why students should have an art and photography education. I focused my research on the "art versus document" debate examining essentially the argument between photojournalists and fine art photographers about which method of photographing conveys a narrative more effectively.

In examining photographs as documents, I defined a document as a "reliable source of information capable of being used for reference or as an authority." As photography critic Susan Sontag says, "Photos are valued because they give information, they make an inventory" (Sontag 22). For this reason, people imbue photographs with a documentary sagacity believing the "reality" which a photo proposes. Yet, "In the way most people use photos, they carry about as much information as fiction" since they can easily be manipulated at each step of the process; from choosing the "best" moment to snap the shutter to creating the "perfect" image in post-processing, to sharing photos out of context (Sontag 22). If the definition of a document is a "reliable source of information capable of being used for reference or as an authority" and photographs are manipulations of reality and not strict recordings of a historical narrative, even the most "objectively" snapped image cannot be a literal document.

In exploring whether photography can be classified as art, I defined "art" as "organic (created by the artist), and flowing from the imagination." The underlying and overarching purpose of art is, of course, to evoke an emotion, to illustrate a trope in an aesthetically arousing way, but it is the mechanics leading up to this goal which truly define the broad term. The problem in classifying photography as "art" or "fine art" is that there is still an element of "document" in the work, that by inorganically capturing an observable moment in time, the photographer still "documents" the scene. Even the most imaginative of photographers cannot remove the key principle of capturing observable external reality (as subjectively captured as it may be) from the practice of creating a photograph thereby prohibiting it from being "art" in the literal sense.

So, how is it that a photo can serve as a document capturing a real narrative yet not be a document, illustrate the truth of idea or emotion like art yet not be art? Because photos are not mutually exclusively either documentary or artistic. When writing for his photography journal, *U.S. Camera*, Steichen ran into the same problem in discussing photos as his analysis of "photojournalistic" photos invariably strayed to discussion of aesthetic qualities more commonly associated with "art" photography. What Steichen's dilemma reveals is "a false dichotomy at the heart of distinctions between the discourses of documentary and those of fine art" (Finnegan 60). Essentially, photographs are neither "documents" nor "art." Because of the crossover between the two styles — photojournalism's manipulability and art's use of external reality — the supposedly distinct types of photography are actually not as different as they purport to be. Rather, all photographs lie on a continuum between visually literal and visually abstract, depending on how accurately and reliably they convey their narrative. Depending on how strictly a photographer adheres to the perceived reality which she photographs, essentially how objectively she tries to capture an image, informs at which point along the continuum a photograph resides. In turn, a photo's location on the spectrum informs how the viewer interprets the narrative a photograph illustrates, as an image "truthfully" recording a moment in time for history's sake or as an image conveying a "truthful" message for a social agenda.

In exploring the medium of photography's manner in conveying a narrative, I also examined the necessity in understanding photography's communicative power. We as both photographers and viewers of photographs must be careful in how we take and interpret photos. "William K. Ivins has called the camera the most important invention since the printing press" says Sontag. "For the evolution of sensibility, the invention of the camera is perhaps even more important. It is, of course, the uses to which photography is put in our culture, in the consumer society, that make photography so interesting and so potent" (Movius). Sontag's extensive discourse on photography points out that to photograph something is to appropriate it. "It means putting oneself in a certain relation to that world that feels like knowledge — and, therefore, like power." By photographing a person, a place, or a thing, the photographer imposes her own subjectivity on the scene, making it about her own experience of the area and not of those who reside within it. In photographing other people, and especially other cultures, a photographer violates them "by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they never can have (because they can't see themselves); it turns people into objects that can symbolically be possessed (Sontag). Because photos can visually tell an evocative story with varying degrees of manipulation, it is easy for photographers to impose their own interpretations of a scene into a pleasing image which viewers then interpret in their own way.

On the other hand, photography's visual dynamism, its power to break down language barriers (because photography does not need words to illustrate an idea) to reach a huge audience, can serve an important and helpful purpose when socially aware. "Photographers use their cameras as tools of exploration, passports to inner sanctums, instruments for change," writes National Geographic writer Robert Draper (Draper). "Their images are proof that photography matters (Draper).

Because photography is often as much about the experience as the end product, and because that experience often involves getting to know new people and places, photography has the capacity to be an irreplaceable tool for diplomacy and cultural awareness. The 2013 Photo Issue of National Geographic contains photo projects from India, Iraq, the US, China, Norway, North Korea, Ireland and The Congo, among many other countries. One such project is David Guttenfelder's coverage of North Korea, examining the tightly controlled society known for censorship. Tim Sullivan, the writer accompanying Guttenfelder, says that although it is "easy to believe in the caricatures of North Koreans as Stalinist robots, the challenge is to find the far more elusive — and more prosaic — reality (Sullivan). As photography is a way of aestheticizing the whole world, Guttenburg uses these intimate hidden moments of uncensored reality, often the "unimportant" moments, to erase the caricature of North Korea and instead return to them a sense of humanity (if still based on his perception.) And, returning to Humans of New York, last month, one of Stanton's photos of a young student thanking his principle for her dedication garnered such attention that he spent a week photographing and interviewing the principle as well as other students at the school. The principal's goal was to send the sixth grade class on a trip to Harvard in order to reinforce the idea to stay in school and continue on to higher education in order to improve the students' success in the future. By sharing the visual stories of the students and principal — pictured as energetic, hard-working, and earnest — and asking his fan base to support their efforts, Stanton raised over one million dollars, enough to fund the field trip for ten years and create multiple scholarships for students to attend college. In this way, by sharing a student's story through photography, Stanton raised the awareness of the difficulty for students in Brownsville, Brooklyn in breaking out of the social "norm" of dropping out of school, potentially falling into poverty, and then perpetuating the cycle of crime, incarceration,

and poverty (Let's Send Kids to Harvard). When a photographer takes the time to know his subjects and treats them as humans telling their stories for their own sake rather than the photographer's personal gain (thus attempting to convey visual truth either in a literal documentary style or an abstract artistic manner), photography can show not only that we are all the same (in our inherent humanness) but especially celebrate diversity and examine social issues in various cultures.

Because photography has the power to tell others' stories from diverse cultures and social backgrounds examining issues within these environments, it is important to equip future generations with the skills and knowledge to use photography for such good. Rather than treating art education as "a matter of political dispute, often reduced to simple slogans supported by passionate commitment to images that are conjured up by catchy phrases and advertising copy," advocating for art programs simply because they offer a romanticized approach to self-expression, I believe art and specifically photography are actually integral to any education rooted in problem solving and critical thinking (Greer).

### **Challenges Faced and Responses to those Challenges**

Initially I began volunteering with the club intending to teach, primarily to garner more volunteer hours. I did not truly consider the importance of my role in the club other than as someone who knows a good deal about photography and can share it with students. However, this method did not work well in getting students interested in photography because I tended to almost do the work for these budding photographers. In order to identify more with the students, to fuel that "burning desire" to create images, I learned that I needed to collaborate with them letting them do the work while I simply supply the basic tools and structure. Now, I see my role more to provide the students with tools to expand their creativity, by finding out their particular interests in technique and subject matter. This semester, I worked with the current few students in the photo club to decide which processes they liked best, and what they wanted to learn in the future, which is how I created the structure for next year's lessons surveying both analog and digital processes learning new techniques across the board. I also found that students were much more invested in their projects when they were photographing a subject of interest to them. Thus, the backbone for every assignment next year will be based off of a thesis or question each student comes up with at the very beginning of the year, so that they can build their knowledge of photographic processes by exploring subject matter of interest to them.

Student involvement is another of my biggest obstacles. Currently, the only way to grow the club is by word of mouth, so I have created a few ideas for a marketing campaign for the current students to carry out at the end of this year and beginning of next year with my help. Through posters and announcements we hope to catch the attention of a few new students, while the current students are also tasked with inviting at least two of their peers each. My aim is to get new people to come to the first meeting where we will immediately begin by making simple lumen prints, thus giving a glimpse into the interesting projects we will do throughout the year. Also, potentially, the promise of an exhibition at the end of the whole year could entice others to stick with the club.

Time itself is a huge factor. We currently only have forty-five minutes every other week to meet and that is simply enough time to accomplish much. This past month we began meeting every week instead, and I arrived ten minutes early to set up the chemicals. In this time, each student produced at least three prints, quite a difference from the first half of the semester when each

student only had time to print one image per meeting. It is difficult to ask students to meet every week because many have other obligations such as work, athletics, and schoolwork. Yet, it is incredibly difficult to create photos in such a small window of time. Currently, our solution is to offer meetings every week, but structure the curriculum to build in time for students to come only biweekly. In this way, motivated students can immerse themselves into their assignments and those with outside obligations will have enough time to create work.

Money is, of course, a large concern. Chemicals, paper, and other tools are quite costly and easier to buy in bulk. One solution is to charge students dues to join the club, but some of the students are not from affluent backgrounds so this might meet with resistance. Community donations would provide the easiest source of money, and we plan to have a donation box at the opening reception of our exhibition. Another avenue is hosting a fundraiser; our current idea is to find school events for a few of the students to photograph for a small fee, which would also give them exposure and experience in photography business.

The final large issue is diversity. I do not know the population distribution of the students at AHS, but it could be a potential problem that only one of the five regularly-attending students in the club is of color if it comes off as the club discriminating against certain racial or social groups. I do not know if there is some "correct percentage" of students - such as a number relative to the overall percentage of the student body. As a club we welcome everyone, but I think it will be important to ensure that our promotions for next year do not simply target specific identity groups. I structured the club so that students would not need a nice camera (they can simply use their camera phones for digital assignments if they would prefer), so my aim is to advertise based on this principle so that students, no matter than social background, do not feel marginalized because they could not afford to join the club.

## **Results**

This project is still in its beginning stages since we have not been able to carry out the full curriculum. However, there are some visible signs to indicate that the project will have positive results. Primarily, the students numerous times have stayed past normal club dismissal time to print additional images. Though most of them have other appointments, they stay as long as they can because they are absorbed in their work. Though there may only be five students that are this interested, this is a great improvement and excitement to see the spark of interest as they work.

The pieces they created for our exhibit also show visual results of what they learned this year as the images they are each presenting show much improved quality over the first images they made. Particularly with the pinhole cameras, many of the students began with completely black (overexposed) or completely white (underexposed) images when we first introduced pinhole cameras, but now each student through trial, error, and increased understanding of how pinholes cameras work has created at least one well-exposed photo.

The exhibit also showed the importance of photography in the students' own lives. Each student chose a theme to follow: marching band, roller derby, photo club, and school. The students said this was much more fun than simply taking photos of the school every time as they were able to capture subject matter more pertinent to their own lives. One student chose to focus her work on her experience with marching band. She created a fun group portrait of her section mates, a series of pinhole images of the football field where they practice and perform, and a lumen print made from paper cutout music notes. In creating these images she was able to merge two of her passions: music and photography. She was also able to convey the great sense of family she

enjoys within marching band community, combating the



stereotype that marching band is lame and full of geeks. While this project may not necessarily seem groundbreaking in terms of social activism and aid to oppressed groups, it was certainly a start in using photography for such a purpose.

Figure 1. Sutton, Naima. “Marching Band.” Photograph. Asheville, NC, 2015. *Person, Place, Thing*. Cyanotype, pinhole camera, lumen print triptych.

Finally, each of the five students say they are definitely returning to photo club next year, and even better that they each have a handful of friends in mind that they plan on inviting. We will not see this direct result until next year, but the fact that the students think that their time is well-spent enough in club to return and invite others, shows that they have enjoyed their experience and hope to improve upon their skills, my ultimate goal of the project.

### **Sustainability**

As sustainability was already one of the photo club’s biggest problems, this was my focus in developing the deliverable for this project. My intent was to create a full year instructional plan including syllabus and expectations, individual assignment instruction sheets, directions for the entire exhibition process, and suggestions for continued promotional material all put together into a classroom binder. As I may or may not be able to return to the photo club next year to help, I wanted to leave instructions for every step of the process so that either Mrs. Shriver could go back to leading without the added pressure of having to develop an extra lesson plan outside of her classroom duties, or so that the students themselves could once again take over leadership. The latter is my preferred option, since a student-run club often garners more outside interest and overall participation. Ideally, the few students remaining in photo club for this entire year will be able to help new students next year with the recycled assignments which we began this year and will start with next year. Through peer instruction, students on both sides (the teaching and the learning sides) can build their knowledge together.

### *1. Syllabus and Expectations*

In writing the instructional plan for the photo club, I had to walk a thin line between class and recess; giving specific instructions and expectations while not holding the students to the restraints of a full-fledged classroom. Thus, the syllabus only lists two rules: “come to club as often as possible and be fully engaged in what we are doing when you are present.” These are fairly easy to enforce, even if it is the students themselves simply holding their peers accountable.

When the club began, the students had a closed Facebook group which the leaders of the club administrated. They used this to remind other students when we had club meetings and what to bring to the meetings. This worked reasonably well, however some students did not always check their Facebook pages to see the reminder, so it was not fully efficient in communication. This year, Mrs. Shriver and I began using Remind 101 – a phone application in which students join a specific group and teachers can send a text to that group without either side seeing the others’ telephone numbers – and it has worked wonders with the attendance of our interested students. Every Sunday I simply send out a Remind 101 to the students regarding when we will meet that week, and then another with the same information the evening before the meeting. This is something that any future faculty advisor or student leader could continue with little effort and no invasion of privacy.

When we have actual assignments at hand, there is never a problem with students engaging, but there have been times when we have tried to carry out student critiques and the only people critiquing work are Mrs. Shriver and I. Therefore, in developing the new syllabus and curriculum I left out the student critiques favoring personal reflections at the end of each assignment so that the students may still engaged in artistic criticism while not being overwhelmed with having to articulate it in front of their peers. Each of the new assignment and club activities is fully hands-on so that there is no awkward down time during activities. In this way, I hope to maintain the interest of those in the club, and hope that through their interest they in turn invite other students to join (as we are all-inclusive regardless of experience and equipment) so that the club membership can become self-sustaining.

### *2. Assignment Sheets*

Because I may not be there next year to teach each assignment, I wrote detailed instructional sheets dictating the supplies needed, background of each process, steps to each process, application of the process to the students’ chosen thesis, reasons for doing each assignment, and reflection questions. The idea for these instructional sheets came from an Adobe Digital Creativity class (about teaching digital creativity to students using Adobe projects.) Because it was an online course, the instructors posted instructional pages with the same backbone of information for each project which I included in my directions, so that we could get the same information without having to listen to a long lecture. These assignment sheets should allow students to essentially teach themselves the processes, particularly if those who have already done them further explain what is on the sheets.

### *3. Exhibition Process Instructions*

One of the most exciting parts of this club is the ability for students to host an exhibition; however few of the students in photo club now have ever done such a thing. Therefore, I left detailed instructions with a timeline of the best way to approach the planning, creating, and

executing of an exhibition. Instructions are simple, such as “find a venue to host your exhibit 5-6 months before your desired date” and “create an inventory list of each piece exhibited including artist, title, date, medium, and sale price information.” Many artists (myself included) learn the exhibition process by simply throwing themselves headfirst into it, so my intent was to leave enough instructions that the high schoolers would have a general idea how to approach the exhibition and learning the rest of the process through the actual experience. Again, by organizing the show myself this year and telling my students how I did each step, I am hoping that next year and the years following the students will have a solid understanding of the process in order to carry it out themselves. This is not only a good skill to have as an artist both going into an undergraduate program and going into the fine art work, but will be a good test of leadership for the students.

#### *4. Promotional Material*

The last thing I included in the project deliverable was a list of promotional material ideas with a couple examples to give the students some idea of how to market the club to other students in the future. My plan is to elect a couple people at the end of this year to head the marketing committee and spend the last week of photo club this year planning and creating advertisements to entice newcomers to the club. The material includes one set of large posters to place on bulletin boards throughout the school, a set of postcards to leave in each classroom, a mission statement or commercial to include in the daily announcements, and potentially an ad to run in the school newspaper. While I have created such advertisements in the past, and include some of them for visual examples, my aim is for the students themselves to create them to appeal to their peers. Because few people actually know about the club, spreading its existence through word of mouth and visual advertising will hopefully bring more students. And, each year, the students should add examples of their ads to the promotional materials section of the binder so that each subsequent generation can continue the process.

#### *5. Website*

The final piece of this project promoting sustainability is a website. The site hosts the club’s mission statement, a gallery of student work, a calendar of club meetings, exhibits, and local art information, a printable list of assignments for those who missed a meeting or wanted to practice at home, and links to tutorial videos for our projects and other interesting photography work. The link to the site will be included in the photo club’s information on the school club directory, so it will serve as an informational guide for prospective students and parents, as well as an instructional tool for current students and parents. In this digital age, most teachers use various forms of the World Wide Web to communicate with their students, so this and Remind 101 will be the two tools with which we can communicate outside of the classroom. The website operates under the photo club’s own email address and password, so anyone with this information can update the website. This will be important when someone takes over club leadership. I created the site through Wix, a free non-code site, so it should be easily maintainable.

### **Conclusion**

The Asheville High School photo club originated as a student-run organization and my intent in carrying out this project in partnership with the photo club’s faculty advisor, Mrs. Shriver, and the few students left in the club was to jump-start the program so that students had the resources to take over leadership again. Phase I of the program was spending this year working with students in photo club and researching outside educational sources to create a streamline

program which the students would learn from and enjoy. During Phase I, I also explored the feasibility of setting up a student exhibit for the end of the year. Phase II was to create the actual materials for the students to use in subsequent years so that the club can become self-sustaining.

This project has been incredibly rewarding for me. As my undergraduate research examined why photography is important, it was gratifying to actually get to teach someone else photography skills. I have always been an advocate of the arts, particularly as budget-conscious schools have had to cut arts programs. While I am not entirely sure I would want to deal with the politics of working for a school system, getting to show an impressionable student how to build her own camera and then see her face light up when she finally prints a well-exposed image is both satisfying and humbling. My community partner, Mrs. Shriver, was studying for her master's degree this year while simultaneously teaching high school, so she can also benefit from my project because she will be able to act as the club's advisor and guide in the future and not directly teach the club. I hope to continue working with the Asheville High photo club next year at least so that I can fully see my project come to fruition, however I believe that I have at least left the building blocks so that future photo enthusiasts will be able to explore photography together. I also created this program so that I could introduce it to other schools if they are interested – currently I am working with the In Real Life program at Asheville Middle School to develop a photo-focused after-school program and the Asheville Art Museum to create a summer workshop– so that the next generation of photographers is equipped with creative technical skills and the ability to tell others' stories.

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