

A Picture Tells a Thousand Stories: Using Staged Photography to Promote Dialogue on Social Issues in an Art Education Classroom

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Abstract

Drawing on poststructuralism and social semiotics, this study investigates the process and nature of art interpretation as a social activity by examining how undergraduate art education students interpret the issues-driven staged photography they have constructed. Through creating and interpreting this photography collaboratively, the students are engaging in critical dialogue about social issues relevant to their everyday lives. In this study, I analyze the intertextual resources (codes) used by the students to generate meaning in creating and interpreting images, and find that the students activate different intertextual resources to decode images in correspondence with the specific issues presented in them. Photographic images, regardless of how intuitively or deliberately they are created, are likely to generate different, if not conflicting, readings dependent on the respective intertextual resources deployed by the individual readers who interpret them. Additionally, I am thereby exploring the possibility of promoting critical dialogue using issues-driven staged photography in an art education classroom to help students develop greater social awareness.

**Key Words: Art Interpretation, Critical Literacy, Intertextuality,
Social Issues, Social Semiotics**

Rapid advances in technology in recent years have greatly facilitated the production and consumption of visual imagery. Textual materials are no longer considered the dominant form of communication in a visually saturated society. This “cultural centrality of vision” (Schroeder, 2006, p. 303) calls for a critical understanding of visual practices (both presentation and interpretation) as a social activity. Poststructuralism and critical social semiotics have informed educators about meaning and how it is a socially constructed, fluid variable that changes and is changed in use (Rose, 2001). In art education, this notion has blurred the boundary between authorship/artists and readership/viewers with regard to art interpretation and triggered questions about the very nature of interpretation. In line with Barthes (1977b), who famously declared the “death of the author” and the “birth of the reader,” Barrett (1994) argued that the artist’s interpretation of his or her art is simply one interpretation among many and not necessarily more accurate or more acceptable simply because it comes from the artist. If the main purpose of art interpretation is not limited to discovering the artist’s intent, the meaning of art becomes more fluid and much broader (Barrett, 1994), illuminating the very nature of art interpretation.

Framing the Study: Interpretation, Poststructuralism, and Social Semiotics

Interpretation plays a key role in meaning making and knowledge construction, entailing the making of personal connections between what we see and what we know about life (Hubard, 2007). It is through interpretation that we gain information, insight, and knowledge about art and life (Goodman, 1978). In the modern era, art has belonged mostly to a number of small, select groups in art institutions who have been given the authority to present and control it and offer speculations about it. Poststructuralists, on the other hand, have questioned any single authoritative reading of art since this limits the public’s interaction with and participation in it. If art is about communication, it requires “focused engagement with and the representation of multiple worldviews” (Sanders-Bustle, 2008, p. 14) from “both the artmaker and the art viewer” (Barnes, 2009, p. 41). A work of art is not produced by the artist alone but rather is coconstructed with the

interpretations of the viewer as well. Art is no longer just about the material or physical aspects of presentation, but rather is a site of social interaction between artist and viewers from which meaning is shaped.

Theories such as poststructuralism and critical social semiotics have opened up new terrain for examining the practices of art interpretation. Poststructuralists have questioned the notion of self as a coherent, structural entity by arguing that it comprises the tensions and conflicts of varied ideologies, and that each individual creates his or her own understanding and existence within a given context. Therefore, the meaning making of a given text can never be finished or come to a complete closure; it is always open to *re*-interpretation and *re*-construction in relation to certain variables and subject to biases and misunderstandings.

At the same time, social semiotics draws my attention to the ways in which language and imagery are used in the social construction of race, gender, and class, which in turn shapes our interpretation and understanding of the outside world. Social semioticians see all texts as social action, as embedded in larger economic and cultural practices and power relations. In art education, social semiotics provides insights into the practices of art interpretation (e.g., art dialogue and writing) because it emphasizes “the social effects of meaning” (Rose, 2001, p. 70). Artworks are semiotic processes, incurring meaning through an intertextual relationship with sign systems.

This study emphasizes semiotic resources instead of semiotic codes. Codes are predetermined interpretive frameworks used by producers and readers of texts. In creating and interpreting texts, we select signs with reference to what seem to be appropriate codes “in order to limit... the range of possible meanings they are likely to generate...” (Turner, 1992, p. 17). Codes help to simplify experiences for easy communication between text producers and readers. Social semioticians are concerned with who made the rules and how the rules change and might be changed. Social semioticians use *resource* in lieu of *code* to acknowledge changes and power dynamics in the visual signification between representation and interpretation (Aiello, 2006). Unlike semiotic codes, semiotic resources are

produced in the course of cultural histories coming from specific interests and purposes (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

In addition, intertextuality is a key factor in interpreting texts. According to Rorty (1992), “Reading texts is a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or whatever, and then seeing what happens” (p. 105). In this sense, understanding art means interpreting the discourse within which the work is situated, with the understanding of intertextuality as “the way that the meanings of any one discursive image or text depend not only on that one text or image, but also on the meanings carried by other images and texts” (Rose, 2001, p. 136). The meanings of an image can never be simply self-referential or completely objective; rather, individual viewers bring their own lived-through experiences and respective funds of knowledge to the formation of these interpretations. When interpreting art collaboratively, they bring their culturally shared values and assumptions to the construction of their interpretation.

Understanding the process of art interpretation is essential in art education. Interpretation entails a process of discovery and invention, a new production in itself. Art interpretations are persuasive arguments about art and can be personal or communal (Barrett, 2006). Taking a poststructuralist stance, Barrett (1994) pointed out that art attracts multiple interpretations that may be different, contradictory, and competing. It is not the goal of interpretation to arrive at a single, unified interpretation or to match the artist’s “original” intent. The interpretation of art as it occurs in educational settings should offer students different perspectives that will deepen their understanding of the art piece being examined.

Barrett (2006) has further argued that photography, like any art form, is a mode of communication beyond that of affective expression. It demands interpretation to uncover its constructed meanings, either intended or unintended. Because photography has often been used to depict reality, it is often viewed as reality itself or a transcription of reality rather than as an opinionated construct carrying situated knowledge and meanings. Photographs are in fact ideological constructs representing a particular

viewpoint of the photographer. A photograph should be regarded as a discourse anchored in social relations.

Additionally, Forrester (2000) noted that despite the dominance of constructivist representational processes, only a few studies (e.g., Intraub, Bender, & Mangels, 1992; Intraub & Berkowits, 1996; McKlevie, Standing, St. Jean, & Law, 1993) have looked specifically at photographs. As he points out, essentially there are two views informing current debates in photography, one emphasizing the “realism” of the photographic image, the other focusing on the “discourses, interpretations and codes which inform recognizing and ‘reading’ a photographic image” (p. 159). This latter view was of particular interest to my research in this study. I was interested in analyzing the interpretations of photographic images and artist intentions by college students in an effort to provide suggestions for using staged photography to promote social dialogue. The study was also intended to serve as a possible instructional model for art educators interested in fostering critical visual literacy through art education. To that end, I discuss the relevant implications of a project like this for art education, suggesting the possibility of using issues-based images to promote social dialogue and foster critical visual literacy.

Study Setting and Design

This inquiry focused on a collaborative approach to art production and written interpretation by college students. A collaborative interpretation of art navigates between personal speculation and communal knowledge. Specifically I looked at how college students would work together to draw upon intertextual resources in order to create and interpret art.

The participants were 20 college students (preservice elementary teachers) at a university in Texas. After learning about photography as a medium for artistic creation and storytelling, the students were evenly divided into five groups. Each group was asked to produce three staged photographs depicting scenes that would be thought provoking, mysterious, or that raised issues of greater social importance, and then write about the intent behind their photograph. The students used the school environment as their setting and were encouraged to photograph several scenes, change the

background and idea, and consider photographing each scene from different perspectives. All group members were expected to be in the scenes and to work together in playing out the ideas in the scenes. In taking each photograph, the student participants were to pay attention to the form (use of design principles) and the content (meaning) of their creations. They were also to consider setting, lighting, and the way they framed their scenes. Each group was to then choose one final photograph to share with the class for its interpretation. Within the semiotic framework and for the purpose of this study, I refer to the group who produced a particular staged photograph as the “authors” and the viewing groups as the “readers.”

The type of photographs produced by the students fit the categories of interpretive and ethically evaluative photographs (see Barrett, 1986). According to Barrett (1986), interpretive photographs are explanatory, offering information about the world or living phenomena from a particular point of view. Such photographs are fictive, poetic, and metaphoric, usually using actors, models, or situations directed by the photographer (Barrett, 1986). Although interpretive photographs make explanatory claims about the world, these claims would be hard to prove with empirical evidence, and acceptance of their truth is based on a viewer’s willingness to believe them. On the other hand, ethically evaluative photographs communicate what people should become and how things should be. These photographs, such as those seen in advertising, make moral judgments by presenting that which is considered acceptable or desirable; thus, they may take political stances on promoting social justice or acceptability.

Once the students in the groups finished taking their photographs, they chose one piece over which to collaborate on writing about their intent. As I observed, the members of each group looked for commonalities to synthesize their ideas about the art piece they had produced. They conversed about and elaborated on the relationships between the visual elements of the artwork on a deeper, interpretive level, as echoed by Barnes (2009) describing a similar group task: “Conversations lead [sic] to richer reflection as participants moved from the ‘personal space’ of their own perception into the ‘community space’ of wider insights” (p. 43). Collaborative writing about art creates a balance between personal and

communal interpretation, “allowing students to follow their insights from an initial spark of understanding, to a fully executed idea” (Barnes, 2009, p. 44). Yenawine (1997) also noted that writing “involves a set of skills ranging from simple identification—naming what one sees—to complex interpretation on contextual, metaphoric and philosophical levels” (p. 1).

Each group of students also interpreted the several other photographs created by their peer groups. They were asked to work collaboratively in interpreting these photographs and writing down their ideas. In creating art and interpreting it collaboratively, the students were thus given a unique opportunity to experience art production and interpretation as a social activity.

For this study, I selected three photographs from three of the groups to analyze. Each data set consisted of three sources: the photograph itself, the statement of intent by the authoring group, and the interpretations by the peer viewing groups. In my analysis, I drew upon the work of Barthes (1977a) who, approaching visual communication from a linguistic lens, claimed that visual signification can be articulated in terms of denotation and connotation. The level of denotation addresses the literal meaning of an image, whereas the level of connotation corresponds to its ideological meaning as inscribed by cultural codes. Intertextuality operates at the connotation level, which is key for readers to make sense of what they see in a given text. The notion of intertextuality refers to the relationship between texts—in this case, a piece of art and its personal, cultural, and sociopolitical connections made by the author and readers—that goes beyond the literal depiction of the photograph. Therefore, in interpreting the data, I looked at each photograph in terms of its denotations and connotations as I analyzed the intertextual resources upon which the authors and readers drew in making sense of the photographs that they and the other groups had staged.

Social Issues as Illustrated Through Staged Photography

Issue 1: Heteronormativity and the Display of Public Affection by a Same-Sex Couple

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Figure 1. Photograph A.

Statement of intent by the artists/authors (see Figure 1):

After class a homosexual couple decided to walk to their car together, holding hands. . . . They were not being overly affectionate, nor were they flaunting in the ladies' faces. They were behaving like any normal couple. Two conservative, narrow-minded, hypocritical ladies smirked at the couple because they do not believe in same-sex relationships. They also slurred gay remarks to the couple as they passed by, harassing them to no end. Had this been a man and women holding hands, there would have been no judgmental looks from the two ladies. This is an issue we see each day and is one that impacts the lives of many people. After this picture was taken, the couple confronted the judgmental ladies and [later] created a gay activist group on campus with the hopes of changing the way people view others.

The photograph (see Figure 1) shows two young women walking together and holding hands as two other women stare at them. Along with the artists (henceforth the authors or the authoring group), all four viewer groups (henceforth the readers or the reader groups) pointed out the same detonation of the public display of affection between a same-sex couple. Denotational statements offered by the readers included "two homosexual girls stepped out into a public place area, and displayed their outward

affection by holding hands,” and “as two young ladies are walking through campus holding hands, they appeared to be lesbians.” The image itself would have made little sense to the readers without the contextual and intertextual sources of information that each reader brought to the scene on his or her own. But although both authors and readers offered similar denotative observations, at the connotative level their interpretations varied, with the reader groups linking the depicted scene to personal assumptions or beliefs, heterocentric social norms, the current sociopolitical climate, or historical context. For instance, one group stated, “Even though the women staring were being rude and obnoxious, the women holding hands seemed oblivious to their actions,” while another group observed, “The two women holding hands seem to be involved in an intimate relationship.” Other statements further illustrated the use of personal assumptions: “The couple holds hands after getting out of class. As they walk to their car, they reminisce about what happened in class,” and “The girl in the brown is submissive and decides to ignore the situation.” Personal beliefs also came into play in interpreting this image, as shown in two statements: “People fight for their freedom to live their life however they choose without judgment,” and “Being in love with a person transcends gender, ethnicity, or disability.”

When asked to explain their ideas in staging this photo, the authors used oppositional words centered on heteronormativity to raise important questions about issues concerning the public display of affection between same-sex couples. These words, and their implied oppositional terms, included *normal/abnormal*, *conservative/progressive*, *heterosexual/homosexual*, *acceptable/unacceptable*, *pleased/disgusted*, *rude/nice*, *comfortable/uncomfortable*, and *status quo/political action*. Coming from the view of heteronormality, the authors, for instance, equated heterosexual with “normal” in indicating that the couple behaved like a normal couple, whereas if they were a heterosexual couple, they would not have received the unwanted attention from the bystanders.

Most of the reader interpretations linked the depicted scene to the current social climate, political conditions, or historical context. With respect to social climate, one group said that homosexuality is more socially acceptable today, but that people are still uncomfortable with or critical of such affection, as expressed by the two bystanders in the photograph.

Another group claimed that “currently, homosexuality continues to be controversial in our society; however, our society has opened up to the idea of seeing same-sex relationships.” The image also tended to evoke a political discourse about gay issues among the participants. According to one group,

Homosexuality has been publicized more in our society, but there are still many who do not believe that is the “correct” way to live. Many conservative people are fighting to limit or stop this lifestyle because they believe that relationships should be heterosexual.

As another group elaborated:

Our society is currently fighting between the freedom to choose who they are with and keeping the union between man and women sacred. More states will legalize same sex-marriage as time passes and people fight for their freedom to live their life however they choose without judgment.

Another statement linked the depicted scene with the historical context, pointing out:

In the past, this type of behavior would have been unacceptable in our society. We would have never seen a homosexual couple showing their affection publicly. They would have been ridiculed or even punished for their behavior or indecency.

The intertextual resources upon which the students drew to interpret the depicted controversial scene thus included personal beliefs and assumptions, everyday experience, heterocentric social norms, the current sociopolitical climate, and historical context. The students’ interpretations pointed primarily to heteronormativity as the basis of social norms that have been constructed as “natural.”

Issue 2: Social Responsibility



Figure 2. Photograph B.

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Statement of intent by the authors (see Figure 2):

After such a drastic scene that took place in the classroom, the girl flees out of the building, and sits right on the hard concrete steps. The girl that is seated on the steps has her hands covering her face, hiding the emotions she is feeling. The shadow that hovers over the girl represents the dark feelings that she is experiencing at this moment. After a few minutes have passed by, the distressed girl's classmate comes out of the building. She sees the distressed girl but does not care what has happened to her or even try to console her. The girl immediately walks to the left side and steps down the steps. The bright burning sunlight to the left side represents the pride and dreariness that overwhelms the girl, making her insensitive to this particular situation. Now a lady walks out of the building and notices the distressed girl. As we can see, the illuminating light that reflects on the lady's extended arm represents feelings of compassion and a sign of hope for the distressed girl. The lady calms the distressed girl and discovers that the girl's car was towed. . . . Now here are some (thought-provoking) questions to think about: If you were to see a person who is distressed or is overcome with despair, would you extend a helping hand? Or would you look and walk the other way?

This photograph shows a young woman sitting on the steps in front of a building who has her head down while another young woman appears to be trying to talk to her. Another girl is walking down the steps not paying much attention to them. In interpreting this image, the participants employed everyday experiences and their understanding of visual metaphors while linking the scene to the current social climate and historical context. Since all participants were college students, they appeared to draw on issues happening on campus. The reader groups came up with various possible reasons for the girl to be sitting on the stairs in distress: a school-parking issue (pointed out by the authors), a breakup with her boyfriend, or poor academic performance. For instance, one group said that the girl “failed her Organic Chemistry class and cannot graduate because of this,” while two other groups indicated the girl was distraught over a breakup with her boyfriend. The participants used oppositional words to dramatize the emotions they read from the picture. Example words included *shadow/light*, *distressed/hope*, *failed/successful*, and *sad/happy*. Other keywords included *breakup*, *ruined*, *devastated*, *sympathetic*, and *concerned*. Additionally, the authoring group applied visual metaphors to convey a different connotational level as they associated shadow with dark feelings and light with feelings of compassion and signs of hope. The authors described the girl looking away as uncaring about the situation such that “her expression of happiness [was] shown on her face,” while “the girl that is seated on the steps has her hands covering her face, hiding the emotions she is feeling.”

Descriptions from the participants (both authors and readers) led to a discussion about moral responsibility (“helping strangers in distress”) and personal safety (“trusting complete strangers”) as the authors probed. Another group had a similar interpretation: “A concerned passerby stopped to console and check on the status of [the girl’s] mental state. Another student passing by seems to have absolutely no remorse or concern with her situation.” The participants thus emphasized the contrary reactions of the two female bystanders to the girl in distress.

Several statements also related this scene to the current social climate or historical context to explain the different reactions of the two female bystanders. One group stressed that “you cannot trust people because

sometimes a good deed can turn against you,” while another stated: “In the past, there was more compassion for other’s feelings and needs. Most people would help their fellow neighbors, coworkers, or even strangers in their community because people still trusted one another.” As a different group elaborated further:

Nowadays, fear controls the way we live because of the dangers our society has instilled in us because of all the violence that occurs every day. Now, it is very common for people to ignore someone who is in need of help.

The authors and readers all pointed out this social dilemma about helping total strangers.

Issue 3: Reality Versus Appearance



Figure 3. Photograph C.

Statement of intent by the authors (see Figure 3):

Two young ladies are walking into the bathroom as one is walking out. There is a man sitting outside the woman’s restroom who is perceived to be staring inside. Before the two women walked into the restroom, a different woman in a wheelchair had gone into the bathroom while her boyfriend worried anxiously outside. The woman in the wheelchair required

assistance and the boyfriend was somewhat overprotective of her disability. He liked to be around her at all times to ensure her safety. The woman walking out of the bathroom assumed the man was staring at the women inside. Upset by this action, the woman went to report the man to the police, while the two women walking in assisted the handicap woman. Although angry about being questioned by the police, the boyfriend was grateful and was not harmed or arrested.

The first two sentences by the authors describe the photograph well at the denotative level, which did not, however, yield substantial information about what the photograph in fact depicted. In writing down their intent, the authors focused on what was not shown, addressing the misunderstanding of the situation and, more broadly, the issue of reality versus appearance.

Many different connotations were factored into interpreting this image, including personal experience. Several keywords used by the reader groups highlighted the general stereotypes behind the depicted scene; these included an *eerie* guy waiting for his next *victim*, his *pervverted intensions*, and the assumption that he was a sexual predator. The students also used value-charged adjectives such as *overprotective*, *staring*, *anxious*, *angry*, *grateful*, *peeking*, *intruding*, *pervverted*, *staring*, and *waiting*.

The authors drew upon social norms, personal experience, and psychoanalysis to construct their statement of intent by describing both the scenarios of an overly protective boyfriend and an incidence of gender stereotypes associated with a man looking into a women's restroom. Interpretations by the readers covered both these scenarios as well. Along with the authors, two reader groups deployed personal experience and psychoanalysis to interpret the scene as portraying an overly protective boyfriend. One group described the guy as "waiting for his girlfriend to come out," while the other group elaborated:

The guy in the picture is an overprotective boyfriend. He comes to school with his girlfriend everyday and follows her around to make sure she does not talk to any other men. In this picture he was watching her walk into the bathroom with her friends, who he does not like or trust. He made them

keep the bathroom door open so that he knew everything they were talking about.

The readers further drew upon social norms to judge the depicted scene. In many societies it is considered socially unacceptable for an adult male to stare into a women's restroom; there would be less controversy if the person sitting outside the restroom were a female. One reader group commented: "The man had already been sitting there waiting for his next victim. During the picture, the girls are discussing the eeriness of the guy sitting outside the ladies room." This was echoed by similar statements of two other reader groups: "The man is trying to eavesdrop but cannot hear them clearly. Instead he inches closer to the ladies room hoping to hear the conversation and sneak a peek," and "It seems as though this man has perverted intentions as he is staring into the women's restroom."

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Findings and Implications

The cases presented here show that the students activated different intertextual resources to decode and interpret images in correspondence with the specific issues presented in them. For instance, although Photograph A depicted public affection by a female couple, the students articulated general issues of homosexuality by linking the image to the broad texts of personal beliefs and assumptions, heterocentric social norms, current social climate, political conditions, religious beliefs, and historical context. Differing slightly from the intertextual resources used in Photograph A, the interpretations of Photographs B and C demonstrated the intertextual resources of personal experiences and assumptions and social norms, coupled primarily with the texts of visual metaphors and psychoanalysis, to generate narratives. As the interpretations of these three images revealed, those interlinking the current social climate, political conditions, and historical context added more relevant and deeper layers of meaning to the interpretations since they were engaging the participants further in examining their dominant views and perceptions of the issues being presented.

In this study, issues-driven images served as a catalyst for semiotic discourse and action on issues of importance to the participants living in a democratic society. As van Leeuwen (2005) highlights, what makes social semiotics distinctive is its belief that *all social action is semiotic*, because changes in social practices are heavily affected by changes in discursive practices and their textual renditions. The interpretations of Photograph A unraveled the prevalent heterocentric social norms and agendas held by the participants as a basis for decoding and interpretation of which they may have been unaware. This interpretive process allowed the participants to recognize how heteronormality is a taken-for-granted, naturalized standard in measuring social behavior. The unraveling of hidden or implicit beliefs and values from semiotic discourse thus has great potential for unlearning normalized beliefs and ideologies and relearning those that have been marginalized.

Social semioticians claim that “the signs of articulation”(Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 41) found in texts form the basis for later articulations of the same ideological discourses into other texts. Social semiotic discourse aims to reveal systematically normalized conventions in order to promote social change. Semioticians such as Charles S. Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure see ideology as “a set of socially constructed meanings or norms that become embedded and naturalized in the cultural fabric, to the extent that they become invisible or common sense” (Aiello, 2006, p. 92). The interpretations of the participants in this study led to further discussion about social norms and conventions. Photograph B pinpointed the social dilemma between helping strangers in distress and freeing oneself from social obligations, while Photograph C challenged the objectivity of visual evidence in spite of how explicit images may be. The participants were divided in decoding the situation of a male seated outside a women’s restroom: Although the authors of the image addressed two possible scenarios—an overly protective boyfriend or a sexual predator—most readers emphasized the latter, which was opposite the authors’ intention.

The three photographs examined in this study unveiled many hidden stereotypes and biases that come with art interpretation that the participants might not have recognized. Further discourse with the participants provided

them an opportunity to reexamine their naturalized ideologies associated with reading these images. Analytically, when it comes to interpretation, social semiotic discourse guides the reader to look at text, context, and intertexts and to speculate dynamically on related social tendencies and their political implications. From this process, to enable power to break the rules of semiotic production also means having the power to intervene and possibly change the ideological currents characterizing the public domain (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). A distinctive characteristic of the social semiotic paradigm is its reversal or changing of dominant ideological assumptions through semiotic action.

Conclusion

From this study, I conclude that photographic images, regardless of how intuitively or deliberately they are created, are likely to generate different, if not conflicting, readings dependent on the respective intertextual resources deployed by the individual readers who interpret them. A semiotic discourse framework could help both educators and students alike recognize the nature and impact of visual imagery and its interpretation, and become more aware of the correlation between the meaning of visual culture and the specific intertextual resources used to generate meaning. In art education, educators could help students become more aware of the kinds of decisions and intertextual variables involved in making and interpreting visual imagery.

More importantly, creating and interpreting issues-based staged photography could be approached as a way to promote critical semiotic discourse and social awareness. As shown in this study, each photograph offered a distinct social commentary worthy of further investigation and could be used to unravel normalized yet often unjust conventions or beliefs in order to foster a critical faculty in all participants about issues of importance to them. By recognizing that students use their own life experiences and personal values to give meaning to visual imagery, an assignment that asks them to produce and interpret an issues-driven image will necessarily unveil their value positions regarding their worldview of particular social situations. In this sense, they are not merely passive observers of visual culture, but are active constructors of meaning as persons who engage in visual projects of

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possibility. Creating and interpreting staged photography allows individuals to explore imagery as an agent for critical discourse and to see the power of imagery in semiotic action. Issues-driven photography offers relevant points of discussion for all participants to reflect upon and problematize taken-for-granted values and beliefs as a premise for enabling further social action.



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