

Photographs as Documentation: Some Guidelines



Photography is a way to record and communicate visually to others (and yourself) what you see. Cameras can create straightforward documents of experiences and artifacts from the classroom that can be revisited and shared with others. Photographs can also be a powerful way to make learning visible.

How might you use photography to document in your classroom?

Simpler/recording uses

- Photograph artifacts from classroom activities (children's creations in play areas, student work, notes on a blackboard that track class discussions, etc.) to include with your notes about a project
- Take photographs of children to post in the classroom along with "speech bubbles" containing quotes of provocative questions or insights that you want to highlight
- Take photographs of small groups or the whole class and display them in the classroom to reinforce children's sense of belonging to this group.
- Take photographs of individual and groups of children when they have done something successful. Use this as a prompt to revisit and reflect upon the process they went through to accomplish what they did.
- Photograph the learning process (students engaged in activities, making things, or conversations in which they try to create meaning)

More complex/communicative uses

- Select still images you have taken throughout a project to display in a visual essay about a particular learning experience

Questions to consider when incorporating photography into your documentation

What might I capture during this activity to reveal what and how students are learning?

Can I involve my students in documenting this activity photographically? What would they need to know ahead of time? Should they respond to a particular prompt or photograph what strikes them and discuss their choices later?

Some basics about how photography communicates

A photograph reveals as much by the way a subject is photographed as by its content. Photographs communicate first visually, then emotionally and cognitively. Photographers use elements such as light, time, and composition to communicate an intended meaning.

Light: The word “photography” is Greek for “light writing.” Photography depends on light, so it helps to stop for a moment to look at the light and see how it will affect your photograph. Look at where the light is coming from. Will it help illuminate or obscure your subject? If the light is coming from behind, your subject will be in shadow. You might want to reposition yourself or your subject or use a fill flash to illuminate the shadow areas.

Light is a big factor in the overall mood of a picture. What people think or feel is due in part to the quality of light recorded. Light can appear harsh or gentle, flat or textured, cold or warm. It plays a key role in capturing the aesthetic or emotional qualities of learning.

Time: A great attraction of photography is its ability to suspend a moment in time. You can use photographs to slow down important moments in fast-paced classrooms and give students a chance to revisit and reflect on those moments from an “outside” perspective. Photographs can also bring others who were not there into the classroom. “The Decisive Moment” is a term attributed to the photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson that refers to a picture in which all of the elements of an image come together to form a perfect composition. In the classroom, it could refer to a single image or series of images that tell the story of a learning experience.

Composition: Composing the photographic image is the visual process of organizing the elements and details of a scene into a balanced, pleasing, and meaningful arrangement. Composition requires making decisions about what to keep in the frame and what to leave out. Composition is effective if it conveys the photographer’s intended meaning. The most common mistake people make when taking pictures is not filling the frame with the subject. Take a moment to look in the viewfinder to see what is at the edges, especially in the corners. Watch out for clutter in the background that will detract from the subject of your picture. Try to avoid having very light things at the edges as it will make the frame for your photograph undefined. Make sure that everything in the viewfinder is something you want to include.

The position from which you photograph a subject or scene is another important part of composition. If the background detracts from your subject, choose a different viewpoint. The subject itself can look quite different from different angles. Your physical placement in relation to the subject in your photograph communicates your attitude or personal relationship to it. For example, taking photographs from a higher vantage point can make your subject look small, obscure the faces, or force the subject to look up at the camera. Positioning the camera at eye level can put a subject at ease, capture expressions more easily, and communicate a sense of respect. The viewpoint you choose also affects how light falls on your subject, particularly when you are outdoors. Carefully focusing on a figure in the foreground or background is one way to isolate and draw attention to the subject, emphasizing his or her expression or other qualities.

Questions you might ask yourself when taking pictures

What strikes me as important about this scene? Am I composing the image so as to draw the viewer's attention to what I think is most important? Am I doing all I can to communicate my perspective to the viewer? Am I including all of the information the viewer will need to observe first-hand the phenomenon or activity I want to share?

What's in the frame? Do I need this much background or is it distracting? Should I get closer to my subject or zoom in? Would the picture capture more of the main subject as an upright (vertical) or landscape (horizontal) shot?

Am I taking a variety of shots? Do I have enough images to tell the story of this activity? If you are considering putting together a "visual story of learning," it will be more informative and visually compelling if you use a variety of distances and angles to capture environmental details, the physical relationships of the children to one another, close-up shots of children's faces and working hands, and full shots as well as details of the work they are engaged in.

What do I want to communicate visually to my students or someone who was not in the room? The emotion of the subject? If so, I need to wait for the right moment when the subject's expression conveys this mood (possibly taking several shots) and include key elements in the frame contributing to the subject's experience. WHAT ELSE HERE?

Activities to explore communicating through photographs

One way to ease into taking more visually communicative pictures in your classroom is to start taking pictures at home or with friends. Try documenting a domestic scene or social outing. Resist taking posed pictures.

Practice looking at scenes with a photographic eye before using your camera. When you find a situation you would like to photograph, think about how you would compose the first image... then the next... and the next.

Look at a photograph that you think works well visually. What makes it a compelling image? Try using some of your observations next time you photograph.

Involving your students: After you have taken pictures in your classroom, show them to your students. Ask them what they remember about the event in the pictures. Do your pictures capture the event? What do they remember about the event that isn't in your pictures? What seems most important in the pictures? Is it what you intended? What pictures do your students like or dislike and why? Ask students to imagine they were the photographer for a picture they like. What would they have to do or think about to take such a picture (how would they position themselves, where is the light is coming from, what would indicate an important moment to capture, etc.)? If you ask students to take pictures, facilitate a group discussion about their photographs. What did the photographers hope to communicate? Were the pictures successful? If not, what would they change?