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Mastering Photography

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Acquiring Photographic Vision

Recognizing a great photograph is easy. Maybe it's a striking image in TIME Magazine or just a picture of a patiently-awaited sunset from your favorite vacation, but when all the elements in a photo come together, the result can be beautiful. But in the same way that a complex painting conceals a rough sketch, all the patience and work that a photographer puts into getting that perfect shot isn't supposed to show. The final product is intended to stir an emotion, tell a story, or convey an idea, and, to the casual observer, doesn't directly reveal the photographer's possibly hard effort that went into capturing the scene. Consequently, the amount of time and skill involved in learning how to create something that looks deceptively effortless often is forgotten.

Fig. 1. Sam Abell; "Sam Abell Talks About Taking 1.5 Years To Create a Single Photograph"; 24 Aug. 2011; Photo Weekly Online; Web; 5 May 2014.

Becoming an expert photographer, as with any skill, is a gradual occurrence. National Geographic photographer Sam Abell (fig. 1), who published a book of his work in 2002, started out using the basement of his house as a darkroom. Abell relates how his father helped him learn the techniques involved in photography, but more importantly, Abell credits his father with teaching him how "to see, and to think, photographically" (80). Sam Abell's work testifies to the common belief that expert photography doesn't involve only technical proficiency, but also requires developing thorough observation and composition skills. Learning to frame a scene with the eyes before framing it in the camera lens takes time and practice, but, as Abell's work demonstrates, the results can be extraordinary.

Defining Expertise

The many different elements involved in the acquisition of expertise make a succinct description difficult. Robin Nunn, a consultant for corporations and educational institutions throughout Canada and the United States, observes in "A Network Model of Expertise" that "[n]ot much about expertise is simple … [n]o single notion related to expertise is necessary or sufficient for or definitive of expertise " (414-415). Considering the network of attributes contained in expertise, Nunn maintains, is preferable to compressing expertise into a single definition (426). However, not everyone believes that expertise is without a pattern. In "A Five-Stage Model of The Mental Activities Involved In Directed Skill Acquisition," Stuart Dreyfus, professor emeritus at the University of California, cites a study concluding that clearly outlined steps in a process lead to "the subject's behavior dramatically" improving when the subjects encountered the same objective in reality (3-4). Dreyfus bases his five-stage model upon the idea that all learners follow the basic stages from novice, through advanced beginner, and eventually, up to expert. Each step or stage contains examples of general behaviors and objectives. Dreyfus' findings validate the theory that an incremental approach to learning yields positive results. This isn't a groundbreaking idea: most teaching methods start from the foundational concepts of a subject and only build up to the more complex notions when a student has a firm grasp of the basics. Such an approach doesn't suggest a figurative holding of students' hands throughout the learning experience; once students are acquainted with the fundamental aspects of a topic, they will have the confidence and knowledge necessary to continue further into mastery.

But there's no universal ideal outline for mastering a subject, as different learning capacities and stages in expertise necessitate a need for personalized study. Nunn states that "[e]xpertise has many dimensions … [a]s new dimensions are considered, new differences appear" (426). Under such fluid circumstances, a stagnant definition of expertise would be inaccurate. Nunn goes on to note that the "requirements for expertise change" as a person becomes more proficient (426). Consequently, the process of increasing capability in a field has to evolve in order to provide a sophisticated challenge for the learner's new knowledge. Nunn's study emphasizes the shifting description of expertise more so than the writing of Dreyfus, who provides structured stages to follow when developing expertise. Still, Dreyfus acknowledges the need for personalizing the learning process as he states that "[t]he designer of training aids and courses must at all times be aware of the developmental

stage of the student" so as to devise appropriate teaching methods that will enhance rather than hinder the learning process (16). Since every skill has different features that need to be acquired, the manner and degree of change in the learning process varies widely. The difficulty comes from trying to decide which approach or combination of methods will provide the surest path to expertise in a chosen field.

Deciding the best approach to take in becoming an expert photographer is especially difficult in light of the fact that an ideal solution hasn't been defined. Nevertheless, as many examples of successful learning methods exist, gaining an understanding of what goes into achieving expertise in photography is possible.

Learning By Example

Experts commonly agree that the first step in mastering photography involves understanding and describing the basic aspects of a photo. To achieve this, many cite the work of experts as the best learning experience. In "Photography, Perception, And Composition," Jack Kligerman relates how he instructed his composition students in writing their observations of a photograph by French photographer, Henri Cartier-Bresson (fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Children on a spiral staircase, n.d.; "Classic Photography by Henri Cartier-Bresson"; 9 Feb. 2011; Abduzeedo; Web; 5 May 2014.

Kligerman notes that his students' comments primarily were interpretations influenced by their own ideas, and consequently, he expresses the need to instruct "students to record what they see in the most unmetaphorical, uninterpretive way" (175-176). Requiring students to break photos down into basic written observations will help clarify students' understanding of the composition, uncolored by their own preconceived ideas. Kligerman, however, also advises teachers to begin students' studies from "the simple in structure and intention to the more complex" (176); such an approach might entail beginning with the study of a basic landscape photo before moving on to work by the likes of Bresson. This process of starting with the fundamental aspects of a subject to set the stage for more advanced study is an ageless approach to teaching. Though Kligerman wrote his study in 1977, instructors still implement his method. Cass Fey and Liz Bashore, in "Instructional Resources: Examining The Art Of Photography," use the example of expert photographer Tseng Kwong Chi (fig.3) to promote learning observational skills by studying not only his work, but also his background and his ideas regarding art and photography (26-27). The step-by-step guidelines they present are formed around the numerous questions students may have when studying Chi's work. Like Kligerman, Fey and Bashore suggest having students write their observations so that instructors can see how students are developing their "interpretive skills as well as an understanding of the artistic nature of photography" (30). When students organize their thoughts into concrete, objective statements, they can clarify what they perceive and help both teachers and themselves understand where they are in mastering a skill. Employing the work of professionals can ensure that students will learn whatever skill the instructor is trying to teach them.

But though the majority of instructors turn to experts as examples, some cite the study of peer work as ideal for learning. In "Photography Education In A Web 2.0 Classroom," Erik Myers states that "[B]y critically analyzing amateur work and offering constructive criticism, [my students learned] more about photography and composition then (sic) they could ever learn…by studying the work of professional artists" (37). Although this might be a far-reaching claim, it's one worth exploring.

Fig. 3. Pisa, Italy, 1989; "Ambiguous Ambassador"; 9 Sept. 2007; Good Eye, Meriwether; Web; 5 May 2014.

Students may not feel compelled to critically examine a work that's widely considered an example of near-perfect photography, and thus may overlook the finer details of composition; however, when studying a fellow amateur's work, a student may be much more inclined to exercise their critical-thinking skills. A theory similar to Myers' is noted by Iain Macdonald in "Why Throw The Negs Out With The Bathwater?", as he observes that some students reference work by "more able" peers to enhance their own projects (203). The most constructive outcome, then, may be produced by a combined study of both amateur and professional efforts; as Nunn observes, "Much of expertise is understanding the received view, the past, what has been done, and what we know so far" (424). Comparing the results of an expert's efforts with those of an amateur can further assist a student's understanding of what works and what doesn't in photography.

Learning By Discussion

Studying the work of others is only a part of how students develop their photographic vision; a student needs to discover how to translate their own impressions into an actual image. In "About Photography," Joe Marvullo explains the way a camera lens captures and expands on what is being seen by the human eye (68). Marvullo states that "[t]he optical system of the camera is the eyes of the photographer," and that what is seen through the lens "should be concentrated on as the 'new reality'" (68). Through the eye of the camera, details and focal points in a subject are discovered that otherwise might have been

overlooked or diminished when observing the scene in its entirety (68-69). Marvullo cites the use of "[l]ow angles, exaggerated perspectives, and dynamic lines" as ways for a photographer to guide the viewer's interpretation of a capture (69). These elements are part of the remarkable elasticity of the photographic process. In In Focus, Jodi Cobb likens this representational process to "the photographer becom[ing] detective as well as explorer, searching for clues that…complete the picture" (248). Though a subject might appear one way in person, a photographer can theoretically manipulate the scene to present the scene in a completely new way to the viewer.

This process of formulating and conveying an idea through a photo rather than merely presenting a straightforward image requires practice. Art teacher Olivia Gude (fig. 4) takes a thoroughly immersive approach to this topic in "Principles of Possibility" by stating that a primary objective of art education should be to teach students how "to vitally experienc[e] everyday life" and "learn to notice and to shape the world around them" (10). Gude notes that introducing students to the habit of being constantly aware of their environment will improve their understanding of art and creativity in the classroom and beyond (10). Though students would be guided in this practice, they nevertheless would be instilled with a sense of independent learning. Similarly, citing a need to give students "as much unlearning as learning", Kligerman warns against predefined ideas that will prevent students from obtaining an untainted perception of their environment, and he promotes the use of photography to assist students in observing their surroundings with fresh eyes (177-178). By learning to see objectively, students gradually will hone their observational skills and become attentive to moments of creative inspiration.

Learning Through Experimentation

Fig. 4. Olivia Gude; "Creating Places 2007"; 17-18 May 2007; Chicago Public Art Group; Web; 5 May 2014.

Once students have an advanced understanding of how to analyze and compose a skillful image, such as carefully and objectively observing their surroundings, turning their knowledge into real-world experience is a logical step. Many instructors stress the importance of giving students the opportunity to employ their new skills as they continue to learn. Olivia Gude emphasizes a learning structure that "teach[es] skills and concepts while creating opportunities to investigate and represent [a student's] own experiences" (6). Gude advocates for allowing students to have complete experimental license with the media they're trying to learn, citing an "over-constricted… education system" with inhibiting student creativity (8). The creativity needed for this experimental process can increase students' abilities as they discover their own methods in place of established procedures. Through implementing their new knowledge independently, students can gain a stronger understanding of how to decide their own learning routine based on personal strengths and weaknesses. If they're free to do solo experimentation, students also may discover their own individual techniques rather than simply implementing what they've learned. Nunn addresses the aspect of creativity involved in self-directed study, as he notes that "[the learning process] is surrounded by a complex cluster of concepts, including adaptiveness, art, curiosity, intuition, originality, skill, talent, and values. That cluster in turn has a complex relationship with the elements of expertise" (424). Dreyfus also notes the link between expertise and creativity, as he states that replacing "the detached stance of the novice and advanced beginner [with] involvement, the learner…is set for further skill advancement" (179). Both Nunn and Dreyfus are in agreement that converting knowledge into action, specifically creativity, will provide the student with ample opportunity for making informed decisions that will lead to creation rather than mere emulation of proven practices. A reasonable conclusion is that an active learning practice would truly accelerate a student's mastery of their subject.

And while experimentation is important to practice freshly attained skills, helping students comprehend the concepts they've learned and how well they've understood them also is crucial. As Dreyfus observes, "Increased practice exposes the performer to a wide variety of typical whole situations. … [Each] has a meaning which is its relevance to the achievement of a long-term goal" (10). By applying classroom skills in real life, students will be able to enhance their knowledge with wisdom gained through trial and error. Iain Macdonald

states that students "need to be able to learn through practical application and experimentation in a learning environment that allows for mistakes" (203). Removing the students' fear of errors will increase their confidence and lead to a willingness to try new techniques and equipment, and consequently expand their capacity for knowledge and proficiency.

Learning to Adapt

As students begin their exploration of photography, a wealth of options now presents itself. No longer is the study of photography confined to the darkroom — a fact lamented by some. Iain Macdonald voices "concern …that if secondary schools and colleges with the facilities to teach film are forced to convert to a singular digital mode," the experience of analogue photography may be lost (191). Many photographers believe the time, effort, and deliberate choices that go into taking analogue photos provide a more thorough understanding of photography than that gained from studying only digital photography practices. Macdonald claims that the tangible nature of analogue film, which requires substantial manual effort and physical development, would provide the best foundation for a student to appreciate fully the creativity and artistry of photography (207-209). However, Macdonald doesn't believe that learning should stop there. He observes that while the development of analogue film would require an understanding of the technicalities of the process, digital film necessitates numerous "technical and creative" abilities. Other photography instructors observe nothing but positive results from photography's segue into the digital world. Myers states that "[my students] have developed a stronger understanding of the principles of design and elements of art" through their use of online programs, such as class wikis and blogs (38). Myers notes how his photography class has evolved to rely primarily on these web tools, as his students watch video demonstrations on photo editing and utilize his online curriculum to enhance their studies and photography projects (37-38).

Though the practice of technical abilities would broaden students' knowledge, Macdonald worries that some students may find the technological aspect difficult to grasp, and therefore prefer the material nature of analogue film (207). Nonetheless, Macdonald acknowledges that many students desire "the limitless opportunity of digital post-

production," particularly the ability to quickly see and adjust the images they have taken (204-205). With digital photography, students are able to instantly analyze and possibly redo their work, enabling them to learn and adjust their techniques in the moment. Consequently, while Macdonald states that analogue film should introduce a student to photography, he also notes the many benefits of digital practices (209). Although students may not be practicing photography per se, working with technology is an important part of understanding how the photographic process has evolved. By utilizing both the traditional and modern tools at their disposal, students can gain a knowledgeable appreciation for the myriad creative opportunities involved in the field of photography, and become proficient in the skills photographers of today are required to possess.

Conclusion

Expertise isn't an exclusive goal reserved for only certain people and areas of learning. Expertise exists in all domains of knowledge from the academic to the practical to the artistic. Mastering the skills and knowledge to be both technically and aesthetically adept is a continual process of self-directed experimentation and feedback from other practitioners, and is not simply a repeatable checklist of processes and procedures. Some might believe that photography can be distilled down to a simple procedure of aiming a camera and pushing a button, but that idea is entirely inaccurate. Photographic talents are developed, not in a few hours spent in a darkroom, but through patient study, practice, and artistic exploration. A great photograph that stands the test of time doesn't necessarily have a great story behind it – just an experienced photographer.

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