Explore photography (without a camera): Developing visual literacy with photo packs

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Introduction

Even if you don't have access to cameras to try out photography, exploring the elements and meaning of photographs is an accessible and enjoyable exercise that can help young people learn to interpret, appreciate and understand information presented through photographs and other visual media.

Engaging young people to understand some of the mechanics, language and conventions of photography can also help them enhance their knowledge and critical faculties, learn language and skills to safeguard themselves and others, and build a sense of self-respect allied with the importance of others' dignity – all of which – all of which align well with the established Five National Outcomes for youth work in Ireland.

Because photographs are everywhere these days – in publications, advertising, billboards, social media and so forth – most young people already have a clear idea of what they like in terms of images, as well as ways they have learned to get the results they want. Selfies are a great example of this.

More than ever before, perhaps, young people are able to understand and articulate how they see others and how they want to be seen. What can be empowering and interesting is to delve further into how images are made up, examine composition and analyse the significance of the different elements of an image.

Everyone looks at and takes photos and we know what we like. We can use this knowledge and ability to build up the vocabulary around images, so that we can move from discussing formal elements like colour tone or shape and pattern, to the emotions an image stirs up in us or how it relates to the state of the world. This development of visual literacy helps to participants to move beyond the literal by discussing multiple meanings, metaphors and symbols and as such helps to develop creative and analytical skills.

Photo Dialogue Packs

It's really useful to create a pack of images that can be used to explore photography in the compositional and symbolic senses (how photographs are framed and why; and the associations and systems of meaning that certain images spark in the viewer's mind), as well as to generate dialogue around imagery, attitudes, emotions and viewpoints.

The photographs you select should be of a good enough quality, in terms of subject and technique, to make them interesting and engaging for young people – and so images from the field of photojournalism (which have been framed, shot and put forward by experienced photographers and then selected by a picture editor for their quality and impact) make for strong material.

Newspaper websites often feature a Photo of the Day that can be a good place to go to build up images. Sunday supplements that feature photojournalism or documentary photography stories, like those in the *Sunday Times Magazine* and *The Observer,* are good sources. Places like the World Press Photo website[1] have collections of images by theme that can be a good source of images to discuss on a particular topic. You can also collect Photo Dialogue images from magazines, newspapers, postcards and second-hand books, or from free use, non-copyright or global commons photographic image sites online.

Top Tip
It is a good idea to talk, at least in passing (maybe more with slightly older participants) about the photographs you are using came from, the photographer who took them and where the images were published. Talk about why the photographer should get credit. Participants might have had images of their own re-used without their permission on social media, etc.

This will introduce the idea of copyright and 'fair use' of copyright material for non-commercial learning purposes such as this workshop, in an era where so much photographic content is misused, or effectively 'stolen' from the photographer.

[1] https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection

Participants

Having 8-10 young people works well for a workshop like this. An even number is good (but not essential) so that people can work in pairs if you choose that way to go. You could also split the participants into groups of 4 people each.

Equipment

- Simple line drawings of simple objects (car, house, etc.) for warm-up
- Sheets of plain paper for warm-up
- Photo Pack as outlined above
- Flip chart
- Post-It notes in different colours
- Markers

It's *not a good idea* to choose photographs that feature the young people that you are working with or people known to them personally. It is important that they are decontextualized and so involve participants' direct engagement with the image itself, rather than their personal associations.

Getting together 30 to 40 images should be enough for most groups of 10 people or fewer. The photographs can be printed onto thick paper, and laminated if you like, so that they last longer and can be quickly wiped clean after use. It's a good idea to familiarise yourself with any captions the images may come with, but keep them separate from the photographs when you distribute them to the young people so that they stay decontextualized before the participants get to work on them. A small number on the back of each print with a list can be a handy way to keep track of them.

Warm Up: 15-20 minutes

It is usually best to avoid warms-ups that are too high energy; you want to create an atmosphere where participants are more relaxed than hyped, and in which they will feel free to discuss their views. In addition to general warms-ups that might familiarise you with participant names or that you find useful to help with concentration, the following ones can help you to start a session with discussion, teamwork, critical thinking and practising respect for others:

- <u>Line- Ups</u>: Get everyone to stand in a line and then rearrange themselves, according to instructions, so that they are in a particular order. This could be done by height, age, the alphabetical order of names, etc. Ordering will be used again later with the photo dialogues so this a useful exercise

to practise listening skills and following instruction, and can be related to the discussions you would like the young people to have later.

- <u>Walking Debate</u>: Use questions around photography and its use as the subject matter for a walking debate. (Generally with this method if something that a participant says strikes a chord with others, they can signal their change of opinion by physically moving towards the student who is speaking. But you can be creative with the 'rules' of a walking debate: there is no fixed way of organising this). Start with general statements and build as the debate progresses. Motions for debate could include:

  - Photography can be a source of social change
  - Photography has had an impact on your life
  - Do you like having your picture taken?
  - Do you look at photojournalism?
  - Has having a phone camera changed your relationship with photography?

- <u>Photo Connection</u>: Lay out all of the photographs onto the floor or a table and ask each participant to pick out a photograph that appeals to her or him in some way. They are given a minute or two to reflect on why it did appeal: it could be an emotional connection, or it could be that it makes them smile. The participants then describe to the group why they were drawn to that particular photograph.

Main Section: Photo Dialogues (30-40 minutes)

Photographs can be read like as a visual text of their own, particularly when they are not accompanied by a caption. By their nature, photographs are ambiguous and can have many different meanings. We all see pictures differently, not only because of the social influences we are exposed to as we grow up but also down to perceptual differences between people, for example no two people see colour in the same way. Remember the colour changing dress from a few years ago? https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_dress

Because the meanings attached to photographs are not fixed, they generate exchange and discussion. Our memories, experiences and personal beliefs affect how we interpret an image. Our response to a photograph says as much about ourselves as it does about it. Exploring 'the meaning' of a photograph can introduce the idea that people have different ideas and different opinions, and that there is no one implicitly correct meaning to assign to something.

Photo Dialogues are a tool and approach that involves the facilitation of looking, discussing, selecting and organising photographs according to a particular theme or idea:
  - It can be about *how* a photograph communicates – addressing, for example, what photographic techniques are used, and why.

  - Or it can be about *what* a photograph communicates, which could involve exploring the themes, attitudes, intent and perspective it displays.

At the start of a session, you will need to introduce the theme you would like the young people to explore, using the photographs they select to illustrate the points they want to make.

It's helpful to introduce participants to some terminology that they can use if they wish. They may have already noticed particular aspects of the images, but may not have the vocabulary to express it. For example, if you would like the young people to explore *what camera techniques are in evidence*, take some time to describe and demonstrate composition techniques like the rule of thirds, symmetry and as well as perspective, colour, lens type, shutter speed and depth of field.

If you are more interested in the young people exploring *what a photograph communicates,* then take the time to lay some groundwork for the themes you would like them to discuss. These could include, for example, representations of young people or the family, power dynamics, emotional displays, feminism, capitalism, inequality etc.

Practice:
To begin, the photographs from the photo pack are distributed randomly around a table or on the floor, and the participants select and arrange photographs in relation to a theme. Participants are generally placed into pairs or groups of 4-5 people, with the images from the pack distributed evenly among them.

A simple starter task is to ask the participants to *arrange the images* so that they are lined up from Warm Colours to Cool Colours. This is an uncontentious way to start the process and eases any fears among the people that they don't know how to analyse images. The extremes are easy to decide but generally when it comes to the middle section, it comes down to participants' subjective opinions about the images.

Then you can develop the session to things like participants *arranging the images along a continuum* that captures the emotions they evoke, from 'positive' to 'negative'. Again, it is often when the discussion turns to the middle section that things get most interesting.

The tasks set can be adapted to create dialogue about a particular theme or attitude that you would like to see explored. You could ask participants, for example, to arrange the images from 'least empowered subject' to 'most empowered subject' within the image. Or you could ask them to choose an image that best represents, for them, an emotional condition such as hope, struggle, joy or wellbeing.

Depending on the intention of the session, you could also encourage the young people to *group similar images* (by compositional style or emotion, for instance) rather than arrange them along a continuum.

Each task should generally last about 5 minutes, with about the same again given to the groups providing feedback. The groups can report back to the facilitator (as he or she works through the room) or to the whole group as to how they made their decisions and why.

It is important that all participants listen and respect differing views during feedback. It is also important that facilitators or group

leaders facilitate, rather than projecting their own views onto the discussions.

If it is appropriate, it can be interesting to share the original captions, source and/or subject depicted in the images (which you will have held back until this point) during the feedback moments after each task or in a collective discussion towards the end of the session. This can help to open up ideas around how language is generally used, and how the image creator's captioning of their own photographs or artworks can change their meaning and viewers' experience of the work.

Photo Dialogues can be used in many different ways, such as developing awareness and understanding of photographic language, genres or techniques; exploring a particular issue within the community; building narratives or stories But this flexibility means it is important to be really clear about the objective of a session (with or without youth work or project leaders) before running it.

One nice way to finish up a session such as this is to ask the smaller groupings to create a fictional narrative from the images. They can then tell/perform this for the wider group. The photographs can be stuck up on the walls and accompanied by captions (or any other accompanying graphics, artwork) to tell the intended story.

This process leaves a tangible trace of the dialogues that happened in that workshop, opens up the images to other group members or people who use the workshop space, and might encourage their curiosity and dialogue with the workshop participants.

Feedback

You can capture some feedback as each group presents by asking them what they liked or did not like, or use Post-Its to capture some key information as to how the young people felt about the process.

If this is part of a series of workshops, I prefer to leave formal feedback forms until the end of the programme, but it is important and useful (for general learning and to amend future workshops) to get at least an informal impression from everyone. I have found that the following are useful questions to ask:

- What did you enjoy most?
- Were there things that surprised you?
- Have you considered photographs in this way before?
- What surprised you about the information you were able to glean from the images?

Alternatively, your organisation (or the youth project you are facilitating for) may have a standard feedback form that you have to use, or which you can amend to explore whether the objectives of your session have been met.