

Photographing **Text**

by Kurt Wootton



Photographing text



Habla and Photography

Our use of photography in the language classroom was first piloted at the ArtsLiteracy Project at Brown University. Numerous master teaching photographers including Mary Beth Meehan from Providence, Rhode Island, Cynthia Weiss from Chicago, Illinois, and Joao Kulcsar from Sao Paulo, Brazil have contributed to our approach combining photography and text. We now have taught teachers, artists, and students using photography to develop literacy and language in over a dozen cities in three countries.

A team of us were asked to lead professional development for teachers in the St. Paul School District in Minnesota. Since our work concerned literacy, I spoke with our team of teaching artists, “I think it’s important for us to show how we can make any text accessible through the work we do. Let’s model this with teachers by selecting a text even we have trouble reading.” We chose the first chapter of *Speak, Memory*, a difficult autobiography by Vladimir Nabokov. One of the teaching artists took the chapter home that night and struggled to get through it. “I couldn’t even read this text,” he said, “It’s too difficult, how are we going to teach this to teachers?”

We took on the challenge. With copies of the text in hand we entered the classroom, only to find the space filled, half with teachers, half with their students. Many of these students were from the theater classes in the urban

school we were working with, and many of them had very low literacy skills. “What should we do, should we change the text? We weren’t planning on students attending the workshop.” We knew the selection by Nabokov was rich with ideas, so we decided to approach the text through many different artistic mediums. We proceeded to work with students, remixing the text in a variety of ways—through performance, music, and movement—eventually culminating in the following photography experience. At the end of the workshop one of the young high school girls raised her hand and said, “I loved that text. What is that novel? I want to read all of it.”

There is no question. Students can rise to any challenge. It is only a question of how we, as teachers, frame that challenge.



Procedure

1 PREPARE MATERIALS

Often teachers shy away from photography because they lack immediate resources in the school or classroom. We have led many photography projects even with just one digital camera. While other students are participating in a classroom activity, a group of four students take one camera, wander around the halls of the school (or even community), collaboratively capture images, and bring the camera back to the classroom. At least four or five cameras are ideal so that small groups of students each can work at the same time. If no cameras are available, Chicago teaching artist Cynthia Weiss uses frames made out of poster board. Students look through these homemade viewfinders and then sketch the image on paper. It's not a question of "can we," it's a question of "how can we."

2 CHOOSE TEXTS

We enjoy using a shared text so students can view the different ways they as a community interpret the text with a wide range of creative and original images. We also prefer to use texts that are far above the reading level of the students so that through the work with images, we make the text accessible and interesting.

3 MODEL PHOTOGRAPHS

At the beginning, our goal is to have the students taking photographs as quickly as possible. We do not teach them a host of technical vocabulary from the field of photography nor spend much time on the different aspects of operating a camera. We do show them models of abstract photographs students have taken. When we don't do this, we often see an endless set of images of posed friends and pretty flowers.

Our goal is for the students to push themselves toward abstract and metaphorical interpretations of text. We show a range of photos from past students and read the matching text from the original story or poem.

4 TEXT SELECTION

Students read the given text and select what they think is the most essential, profound, or provocative phrase or sentence in the text. There are no right or wrong answers, but the students should be able to explain why they selected it.

5 COLLABORATIVE PHOTOGRAPHING

Each small group of students takes a camera and leaves the classroom for about twenty minutes (depending on the bound-



aries set by the teacher or the school.) Each student in the group is the director for his or her line of text. He or she might ask the other students in the group for their opinions or help in taking the photograph, but ultimately the director of a particular photograph makes the decisions. This process continues and each group returns to the classroom with one photograph per person interpreting one selected phrase from the text. The students can take as many photographs as they like as long as they edit their final choices to one.

6 DOWNLOADING PHOTOGRAPHS

If only one computer is available, an appointed student as “technical expert” downloads and adjusts the photographs as the students return to the classroom. If a computer lab is available students can download and edit their own photographs.

7 CULMINATING PERFORMANCE

Project the photographs onto the walls of the classroom and ask the students to stand at their seats to read each selected quote. If time allows, ask students to explain why they selected their respective quotes and how their photographs represent interpretations of the text.



*In Brazil, teachers and artists perform in front of a photography exhibit of their work based on the **Cronicas** of Clarice Lispector*

Work Samples



From Dublin, Vermont

“One shared it—just as excited bathers share shining seawater—with creatures that were not oneself but that were joined to one by time’s common flow, an environment quite different from the spatial world, which not only man but apes and butterflies could perceive.”
from *Speak, Memory* by Nabokov



From Chalco, Mexico

“He implored Gods aid and found the door.”
from “The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths”
by Jorge Luis Borges



Habla is an educational center and lab school based in Mérida, Yucatán, México, dedicated to fostering school environments that promote the success of all students from multiple cultural backgrounds. For teachers, artists, and school leaders, Habla offers: cultural and language experiences, teacher institutes, and an annual international educational forum.

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