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The Photo Essay: The Search for Meaning

Assignment Background

I teach the photo essay as one of several interrelated assignments that collectively make up the capstone project for HNRS 2020: Critical Thinking about Great Ideas at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio. Critical Thinking about Great Ideas is the second of two core curriculum courses that all students enrolled in the Honors College at BGSU must successfully complete in order to graduate with “University Honors.”

This interdisciplinary seminar seeks to introduce students to select foundational thinkers, ideas, and intellectual movements that have shaped human civilizations across a variety of temporal, geopolitical, cultural, and historical conditions. Individual sections of the course expose students to a variety of political, economic, social, cultural, and intellectual ideas and perspectives. Students are encouraged to understand these ideas within the context of the social, human, intellectual, and physical worlds of which they are part, as well as identify relationships between and among competing perspectives about these ideas and ultimately to integrate aspects of these ideas and perspectives into their own worldviews. One of the central goals of this course is for students to learn and gain practice in a critical method of thought and expression that builds on and expands the skill set introduced in HNRS 2010: Introduction to Critical Thinking (which students typically take the semester prior to enrolling in HNRS 2020). To this end, special emphasis is placed on the refinement of higher-order critical thinking skills (i.e., analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) through close reading of and active engagement with both primary and secondary texts.

In simplest terms, the photo essay is a project that combines text (captions, introductory remarks, etc.) and photographs to convey an idea. Contributors to Wikipedia offer a more thoughtful overview of the genre, noting that the photo essay is “a set or series of photographs that are intended to tell a story or evoke a series of emotions in the viewer. A photo essay will often show pictures in deep emotional stages. Photo essays range from purely photographic works to photographs with captions or small notes to full text essays with a few or many accompanying photographs. Photo essays can be sequential in nature, intended to be viewed in a particular order, or they may consist of non-ordered photographs which may be viewed all at once or in an order chosen by the viewer.”

Students are asked to create a photo essay that includes no fewer than 12 different photographs, each of which must be accompanied by a substantive caption (suggested length: 1 “meaty” paragraph). The photo essay must include an introduction that provides an overview of the photo essay and the larger “point” that students want readers to take away from reading it (i.e., the equivalent of a traditional thesis). I require that all photographs included in the photo essay must be taken by the student-author.

Assignment Learning Outcomes:

The photo essay assignment strives to fulfill several key Learning Outcomes for the HNRS 2020 course, for the Honors College, and for the BGPerspectives program (i.e., the program that manages the general education curriculum at Bowling Green State University). These learning outcomes include:

- The development of an ability to relate and apply abstract concepts and ideas to novel situations in thoughtful and meaningful ways;
- The development of fluency in verbal and/or non-verbal communication through reading, writing, and listening;

- The development of a critical understanding of the role of language and media: their rhetorical, artistic, and symbolic expression and the ways in which these expressions both reflect and influence culture and society;
- The development of an ability to evaluate an argument, to be aware of the processes involved in evaluating an argument, and to come to some conclusions with respect to that argument.

Course Pedagogy: Texts and the Worldview

My sections of HNRS 2020 are anchored by Dennis Ford's *The Search For Meaning: A Short History* (2008)—a philosophical survey of the development of Western thought that presents eight primary ways of making meaning, including Myth, Philosophy, Science, Postmodernism, Archetypal Psychology, Pragmatism, Metaphysics, and Naturalism. Each of Ford's eight worldviews is, in my classes, paired with a work of fiction that illustrates central tenets or/and methodologies associated with that worldview.

This bears an explanation: I pair worldviews with works of fiction primarily for two reasons: 1) my personal areas of expertise are literature and theatre; and 2) the HNRS 2020 course fulfills an "Arts and Humanities" general education requirement for enrolled students. For instance, Naturalism—a worldview that advances the notion that life is meaningful just because it *is*—is paired with Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998) in which characters regularly ruminate on the beauty (and the sorrow) that can be found in the seconds, minutes, and hours that make up our daily lives. For the Science unit, I encourage my students to consider the benefits *and* the drawbacks of a worldview that only ever looks back to determine "origins" by analyzing a text like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). And for Myth, which is principally concerned with the metanarratives in which humans often will blindly invest their faith, has been paired with Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog* (2001), a play that engages with the myths of racial supremacy, The American Dream, and sibling rivalry/Cain and Abel, among others.

Although my course is centrally focused on how fictional texts can be used to understand better the worldviews presented in Ford's text, non-fiction texts could just as easily be used for this purpose. Typically, I pair metaphysics—a worldview that is concerned with the individual's transcendence of the material, profane world in search of ultimate Truth, Enlightenment, and Wisdom—with Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984); however, a memoir such as Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air* (2016) or a “self-help” book like Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* (1997) or a book like Lynnette Dickinson's *A Journey to Peace Through Yoga* (2015) would arrive at a similarly strong understanding of that worldview. In point of fact, I often have led students through a guided meditation as one of the classroom activities for this unit—an activity that would pair quite nicely with Dickinson's book. For the Science worldview, I might teach a book like *Manhattan Project: The Birth of the Atomic Bomb in the Words of Its Creators, Eyewitnesses, and Historians* (2009) to underscore both the methodologies that are integral to this worldview, as well as the strengths and the limitations of seeing the world through the lens of science. *Manhattan Project* (a nonfiction text that is firmly located within the Scientific worldview) would pair well with the 1986 Marshall Brickman film about that event and challenge students to consider how seeing the same historical event through different “lenses” or “worldviews” alters—sometimes quite dramatically—what we know about the event and how we understand the cultural or/and historical “significance” of that event.

Further more, different types of “non-fiction texts” could also teach Ford's worldviews, which is one element that lends itself well to the photo essay as a whole. The photography of Ansel Adams, the paintings of Edward Hopper, or even the community mail art project of Post Secret could enhance students' understanding of Naturalism, a worldview that emphasizes the value of appreciating the “here and now” through sensual, rather than intellectual, engagement with one's environments. Students might be asked to read modern travel writing—such as Jack Hitt's *Off the Road: A Modern-Day Walk Down the Pilgrim's Road into Spain* (2005) or Dervla Murphy's *Full Tilt: Ireland to India with a Bicycle* (2010)—and then, as

a companion assignment, write an essay that describes a destination, cultural experience, language, or tradition from an “outsider’s” perspective. (This type of assignment would foreground for students the act of *seeing* the world *as a Naturalist*.)

Similarly, for the unit on Pragmatism, which is about how meaning derives from determining the best way to achieve a “satisfying” outcome given the resources available within a given context, students might be asked to read an “advice book” like Erin Bried’s *How to Build a Fire: And Other Handy Things Your Grandfather Knew* (2010) (or, alternatively, *How to Sew a Button: And Other Nifty Things Your Grandmother Knew*, 2009) and then, as a companion assignment, write a letter to their own grandchildren explaining some piece of “practical wisdom” that is unique to their generation but that will probably be lost to history and time. Perhaps more relevant to the target audience, students might be asked to read excerpts from Harlan Cohen’s *The Naked Roommate: And 107 Other Issues You Might Run Into in College* (2015) (which has been chosen by a number of institutions as a Common Read book) or Nora Bradbury-Haehl and Bill McGarvey’s *The Freshman Survival Guide: Soulful Advice for Studying, Socializing, and Everything In Between* (2016) and then asked to write an “advice blog” for future college students on how to confront a common college conundrum.

To be sure, some worldviews more easily lend themselves to certain types of companion texts than others. For example, Philosophy, which, in Ford, is focused on finding meaning through the Platonic Forms, works particularly well with a collection of poetry like Margaret Atwood’s *Power Politics* (1971) given the emphasis in those poems on evocative, metaphoric language and imagery to convey meaning. Because non-fiction writing typically is more overtly self-reflexive than fiction, it does not easily lend itself to teaching the Mythic worldview, which is centered on a blind faith in and adherence to Master Narratives. But generally speaking, both fiction and non-fiction, as well as a range of other types of cultural artifacts, could work very well to illustrate most of the worldviews included in Ford’s *The Search for Meaning*.

The Assignment: The Photo Essay

From the onset of the course, I emphasize the central role that self-reflection will play in my students' own search for meaning by assigning them a variety of projects that encourage them to consider the questions: *Where and how do I find meaning?* These projects are archived over the term and, as their "final examination," presented as a capstone website which must include (but is not limited to):

- First Day Reflection: This in-class writing assignment, completed on the first day of the semester, asks students to respond to an open-ended question (i.e., "What is the meaning of life?") with some reflective writing. Students are provided with a 4" x 6" notecard and given 10 minutes during which to compose a response. They are told that I will collect the notecards and read the responses, but I will not assign a grade to their work. These notecards are not returned to the students until the fourteenth week of the semester after the students have drafted their "Last Day" reflection.
- "Last Day" Reflection: At some point near the end of the term, students are asked to spend approximately 15-30 minutes outside of class responding to the same prompt that they were given on the first day of class. Students are encouraged to respond implicitly or explicitly to what they recall writing in the First Day Reflection in order to comment on their growth as thinkers over the term.
- Photographs 1 & 2: During the initial weeks of the semester, I ask students to select one photograph that reflects how they see the world and upload that photograph to Canvas with a brief (suggested length: 1-2 paragraph) explanation of the photograph and how it reflects how they see the world. We repeat this assignment during the final weeks of the semester. For both assignments, I provide verbal feedback on Canvas. Students are expected to integrate this feedback into any revisions that they make to the assignments prior to uploading them to their webpages.

The photographs that they select can be borrowed from the internet (with an appropriate citation) or taken by the students themselves.

- Milestone: Photo Essay.
- Milestone: “Modified” Ignite Presentation: In his article “What is an Ignite presentation, and why should you try it?” Alex Rister defines the Ignite genre as “a presentation format where a presenter speaks while slides advance automatically to support them. An Ignite presentation is exactly 5 minutes, and contains exactly 20 slides. The slides advance automatically after each slide is displayed for 15 seconds.” For this modified version of the Ignite presentation, students only have to speak for 3 minutes, and their presentations only need to include 12 slides. Their jumping off point for this presentation is the question that Ford debates throughout his book: “Why?” or more specifically (though still purposefully ambiguous) “What is the meaning of YOUR life? Where and how do you find meaning?” Students are encouraged to view the Ignite as a “punctuation mark” for the class in which they summarize or/and illustrate their unique worldview. Ignite presentations are both recorded and uploaded to students’ websites and delivered live during the final examination period.
- Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA) Milestone: The second milestone is a CYOA. For this milestone, which is due approximately 2/3 of the way into the semester, students are free to choose any format they wish. I encourage them to put some serious thought into the format, as it will also reveal a great deal about the student’s worldview and his/her answer to the central questions that guide his/her search for meaning. For this milestone, I have had all manner of creative and thought-provoking responses—from a child of deaf parents creating a “Sign My Life” video about growing up between the hearing and the deaf worlds to an amateur artist who crafted a charcoal self-portrait entirely of Scriptural passages from the Judeo-Christian Bible.

Alternate Assignment Applications: I have used (or could imagine using) the photo essay assignment in a wide variety of courses and across the disciplines. Below are three suggestions for alternate applications of the photo essay assignment:

- In an Honors Academic Writing course, I have substituted the photo essay for a more traditional argumentative essay as one means of introducing multimodality. The photo essay assignment asked students to conduct archival research on some narrowed aspect of Bowling Green State University's history (e.g., sex-based student conduct rules and regulations from the 1920s, race-related activism in the 1960s, etc.) and present an argument about the historical significance of that event/personage in 10-15 photographs and captions.
- In an Introduction to Literature course, I have assigned the photo essay as a small group assignment in the unit on Setting. Students were asked to select a short story and to craft a photo essay in which they incorporate photographs related to the setting of the chosen short story. In their captions, students were asked to analyze how the setting impacts various aspects of the story, from character to plot and theme.
- In a course on critical thinking, a photo essay could be used to have students (individually or in small groups) present a step-by-step guide to different parts of the critical thinking process. This project could be used as a supplement to primary course readings, much like a chapter re-write assignment.

Assignment Evaluation: Like all assignments for the capstone project, the photo essay must demonstrate an awareness and a deep understanding of the course readings (esp. Ford) and should be deeply self-reflective. More specifically, the photo essay is evaluated according to the following criteria: adherence to photo essay guidelines/genre expectations; thoughtful development of ideas; logical and clear organizational structure; keen awareness of audience expectations, needs; thoughtful construction of

visual aid; adherence to rules of effective written communication; clarity of expression; and thoughtful engagement with course readings.

Sample Photo Essays: The following sample photo essays were created by students enrolled in my HNRS 2020 sections during the Spring 2016 term. Students have consented to their work being linked/published in this forum:

- [Michael Anderson: Collision](http://mandersonia.weebly.com/photo-essay.html) (http://mandersonia.weebly.com/photo-essay.html)
- [Katie Dushek: You Are Loved](http://katieeileen11.wix.com/mysite#!photo-essay/c10fk) (http://katieeileen11.wix.com/mysite#!photo-essay/c10fk)
- [Noah Eblin: Photo Essay](http://neblin.wix.com/mysite#!photo-essay/js6j5) (http://neblin.wix.com/mysite#!photo-essay/js6j5)
- [Brenda Emerson: Through Brenda's Eyes](http://throughbrendaseyes.weebly.com/milestones.html) (http://throughbrendaseyes.weebly.com/milestones.html)
- [Rachel Lundeen: Rachel's Racing Thoughts](http://rachelsracingthoughts.weebly.com/milestone-1-photo-essay) (http://rachelsracingthoughts.weebly.com/milestone-1-photo-essay)
- [Joan Mosyjowski: Cracked](http://eggsistentialcrisis.weebly.com/photo-essay) (http://eggsistentialcrisis.weebly.com/photo-essay)
- [Nicole Schwaben: Into the Wild](http://nschwab3.wix.com/mysite#!photoessay/c1t44) (http://nschwab3.wix.com/mysite#!photoessay/c1t44)