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I'm a Photographer, Let Me In! : Opening The Door To Photo Education



Since I began working within a university teaching photography approximately three years ago I have had a steady stream of enquires from friends working as commissioned photographers asking how they could secure a position teaching the subject they have devoted a large percentage of their lives to. As time has passed my answers to their questions have evolved and developed into a set of questions that I hope both explain what is required and reveal why their applications are so often unsuccessful.

It is only natural in a reduced commissioned market that photographers with years of experience see the education environment as the perfect area for them to share their hard earned knowledge. Many have studied photography at degree or HND level, built themselves careers as photographers across a broad range of specialist areas and see their contacts and real life adventures as invaluable input into a student's progression. And they are right, but they are also wrong!

Cards on the table. I don't have an MA and I never formally studied photography, my degree is in Graphic Design from what was once just called St.Martins School of Art but is now known as CSM, part of UAL. At the time (in the mid to late 1980's) it was not easy to study a degree in photography in the UK (to my knowledge there were only three institutions that offered one), the qualification on general offer was a Higher National Diploma. A vigorous skill based qualification that focused on creating potential photographers for the industry. Meanwhile at St.Martins, we were left to our own devices to find our own way. Theory was

minimal, creativity was everything, our lecturers were working designers, illustrators and photographers who pointed us in the right direction and let us go. Their priority was dealing with us and their own work, nothing else.

That approach and those years saw award winning art directors Lee Swillingham and Robin Derrick and internationally recognised photographers Miles Aldridge, Platon, Jake Chessum and Mark Mattock, novelist and screenwriter Phillip Ridley, Advertising Director Danny Barber, Telegraph Cartoonist Matt and Times Sex Columnist Suzi Godson amongst many others all come from the Graphic's course based in a former banana warehouse in Long Acre, Covent Garden. It was education through industry engagement with a freedom to explore all areas of creative practice. No modules, no marks, no structure.

That was then, but this is now and things have changed, but back to those questions I ask photographers who want to enter today's academia. Here they are:

1. Do you have an MA?
2. Have you ever taught before?
3. Do you know what research means?

The first two questions are simple yes/no answers but it is the third that is most usually met with a brief silence followed by a "not really". It is at this point that I find myself inhaling deeply in the style of a mechanic about to deliver bad news, before explaining the reality and importance of 'research' not only to their application but also to their proposed future in academy. It's possible to explain if you are within higher education, but to the working photographer my explanation may as well be delivered in esperanto. And yet it is 'research' that will most likely define the success of your application, not your multiple tear sheets, photographic experience or knowledge of the industry.

Academy loves an acronym when full word usage would be easier to understand and it is the REF (Research Excellence Framework) that holds most sway when academic positions are being considered. The REF is at the forefront of most universities thinking at the moment and this will become even more so as 2020 approaches and the REF submission deadline looms.

Why? Because successful entry into the REF brings universities prestige, ranking and funds. You can find out more about the REF here www.ref.ac.uk but to save you many hours working your way through their terms and conditions I'll give you a simple guide as I understand it.

As a lecturer at a university you are expected to be 'research active', this means engaged in self initiated work based on a specific area of enquiry, preferably in collaboration with someone from another academic institution and if they are not teaching the same subject as you even better! Once you have completed your research you need to have an outcome that the REF recognises as being an outcome. This means that you need to have your findings published, not in a widely read magazine or newspaper but in an academic journal or delivered in the shape of a 'paper' (this actually means a talking about something you have written on your area of research; this is 'delivering a paper') at a seminar of some kind (size of audience not important!). If you can get the paper published in an academic journal as well then that's a double success and a more impressive outcome. There are other aspects that are taken into account such as 'impact' but getting the basics right requires more than enough mental agility and paperwork before additional requirements of outcomes are considered. All

you need to be aware of is that you need four 'outcomes' or 'outputs' to be entered for the REF and the quality of your 'outputs' will be judged before they are entered. This judging seems to be as arcane as any other aspect of the REF when related to photography but basically Four Star Gold is what everyone is aiming for.

If you've noticed a rapid rise in the amounts of talks, seminars and collaborative events over the last few months connected to universities or university lecturers as I have, then the REF is why. The pressure is on and academia is responding. But if you are a photographer hoping to teach you are most likely unaware of any of this. Your work will not necessarily meet any of the REF criteria however recognised and successful you have been and no one is going to explain this to you when you are completing your application form. The lack of call to interview then becomes not only disappointing but also frustratingly illogical.

Interestingly this emphasis on the REF could be misplaced as government strategy may well make the REF much less important than the TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework). Although this is being recognised by institutions the emphasis is still on the REF.

My reason for outlining the success of students and the role of lecturers when I was at St.Martins was to highlight the seismic change not only in the learning environment but also in the institutions expectations of those lecturers they choose to employ. It is the new environment and those expectations that need to be understood by those hoping to become part of the higher education lecturing community.

As I have said I don't have an MA or a PHD (and I have no desire to have either), I do however have thirty years of experience working with professional photographers, photography and as a photographer. I got lucky and was interviewed by people who saw worth in what I had done and what I had to offer. Now I work within an academic institution I'm able to bring my experience to my teaching, I'm also now involved in research and I'm working on initiatives with REF outcomes. Now I've been let in I know the rules of the game and I can play the game.

Now you know the rules I hope you get a chance to play too.