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Why study photography?

A good question? A pointless question? An obvious question? A rhetorical question? Whatever your take on the title of this article there can be little doubt that it is a question regularly asked with no one agreed answer. In many ways the answer you receive or decide upon giving and the satisfaction you have with that answer is based upon your expectation of what photography will give you and your personal experience of the process of learning and teaching.

Expectation is defined by several factors but a few to consider are; Do you want to be a professional photographer who earns their living purely from photography? Do you want to further explore photography as part of a personal interest or hobby? Do you want to gain a qualification that will aid you in teaching photography? Do you want to progress your work and develop your practice under the tutelage of those you respect?

These are realistic and common reasons to invest both time and money in joining some form of educational establishment offering photography as an academic option. However, I wonder how many of those looking to study photography see it as an opportunity to learn how to work a camera, set up lights and how to use Photoshop and how many see it as a new language and an opportunity to expand their visual vocabulary? And how many of those with specific requirements from a course based on a pre-conceived expectation have those expectations fulfilled or surpassed?

More questions than answers, I know but please stay with me on this. Let's be honest unless you are going to enter the world of teaching photography any photographic qualification you receive will be of little or no relevance to your career as a photographer. The reason for your learning sits firmly with the opportunity to spend an extended period of time exploring, experimenting, and learning about photography with and from others who are on a similar journey as yourself and those experienced and engaged with the world you wish to enter. When you enter the world of professional photography as a photographer it is your work and how you present that work that has to speak for you not a certificate or grade.

But what if you don't want to be a photographer but still want to study photography? Within the world of academia, the phrase 'transferable skills' is commonly wheeled out as a reason for studying a subject that may have little obvious relevance to a potential career. However, is actually hugely relevant to the study of photography. Decision making, digital understanding, communication, self-confidence, presentation, collaboration, self-analysis, research and marketing skills are all essential elements of a professional photographers working practice and should therefore in my opinion be the foundation of any good photographic teaching.

My experience is that very few undergraduate (or post graduate for that matter) potential students of photography have this depth of understanding of what being a photographer involves. Once you do, the answer to why you should study photography should be both simple and exciting.

Photography today provides the alphabet for an international language that informs all forms of global interaction. By understanding that alphabet you can create your own journey within the new media environment. That may be as a photographer but it may not. I believe that studying photography is no longer about training to be a photographer it is about learning to speak a new language with confidence and understanding.

It is with this understanding that perhaps the elephant in the room can be addressed. That elephant comes in the shape of a widely-held belief that we do not need any more photographers as there is no work for them. It is a tough belief to argue against if we see the study of photography as only having one outcome. But if we see the study of photography as a gateway to visual literacy then the potential outcomes are multiple.

The course I lecture on has a long-established reputation for producing students who graduate and begin to work as photographers, photographer's assistants, agents, location hunters, picture editors, shoot producers and within post-production. But it is now the case that they are also moving into the spheres of filmmaking, social media and digital publishing. This is as a direct response to the implementation of moving image and social media understanding as part of a photographic education and the re-interpretation of the oft repeated phrase "We are all photographers now" to "We are all

publishers now". With this understanding the creation of lens based media can be seen as an intrinsic element of global communication and that is a powerful and seductive reason to study the language that is at the heart of the most important form of storytelling we have today.