

Creating Experiences in an Educational Environment

by A. D. Coleman

I want to thank you for getting out of bed so early on a Saturday. I also want to thank Penny Boyer and the Photo Imaging Education Association for inviting me to address this conference a second time. They have asked me to speak to you this morning on the subject that binds us together at this event and that underpins the PIEA itself: photography education. They intimated that they'd appreciate a provocation. Specifically, Ms. Boyer solicited "your view on current photographic education trends and whether you feel this has enhanced or degraded photography." I assume she understood the risks involved in doing so. Thus, while I'm entirely and solely responsible for what I'm about to say, they're the ones who loosed this cannon in this room.

I intend to make a number of debatable and contentious assertions, leaving time for us to discuss them both during this session and after. I'm available to you for the duration of the conference, but I hope you'll continue to chew on these ideas after we go our separate ways.

Please understand that I'm most familiar with the photo-education systems in the U.S., Canada, and Europe. What I say may not pertain to your particular institution, or to the situation of photo education in Australia generally. Feel free to take this, then, as description of things elsewhere. In any case, it's a response to things as I've found them where I've visited and taught over the years. However, if the shoe fits, by all means wear it — or throw it back at me up here.

At the moment, I'm cranky because this time of year reminds me of my favorite teaching experience of the 21st century. My all-time favorite of those situations was in a program at the Centre d'Enseignement Professionnelle de Vevey, in the heart of the French-speaking Swiss wine country. I'm bilingual/Francophone myself, so I relished these three idyllic two-week teaching stints in the spring of 2002, 2003, and 2004, in a great program at a first-rate facility with fantastic students and amazing colleagues: Arno Rafael Minkinen, Sarah Moon, Franco Fontana, Duane Michals, Antonin Kratochvil, to name just a few. A visiting teacher's dream, until the program got destroyed, quite literally, by a cadre of self-serving academic-art bureaucrats. Within a year the entire program, including their inept radical makeover thereof, had evaporated. Never underestimate the long-term havoc that determined arts-education careerists can wreak in a short time, or the permanent damage (including financial damage) such rampaging functionaries can do to students, faculties, programs, and even entire schools. Thanks to a student strike and its related website,¹ this situation got widely publicized. But one rarely reads about such disasters in the art-ed and photo-ed press. Doctors bury their mistakes; architects plant ivy; and academics return to their research. Perhaps the time has come to start airing these dirty little secrets.

On some levels, photo education has had an enormous success. I celebrated some of that in my keynote talk in Canberra on Thursday.² On other levels, however, photography education in the 20th century and now into the 21st has proven itself a failure — an almost total failure, neatly cloaked in its apparent success.

Something that I observe not only in polytechnic programs, where I think it's appropriate, but also in fine-arts programs, where I think it does not belong,

¹ www.fsphoto.ch/news/

² "First Person, Singular: Inventing Myself As a Photography Critic," Photo Imaging Education Association (PIEA) Conference, National Gallery of Art, Canberra, Australia, April 27, 2006.

is an emphasis on product over process. In one's creative life I believe in the reverse — in prioritizing process over product. When I taught at New York University between 1977 and 1993, this discussion churned among our faculty members at NYU, by the way, because I saw our department structuring its program so that incoming sophomores were already planning their senior thesis projects, which the department insisted had to be finished, polished work suitable for presentation in an exhibition open to the public and the press and acceptable for publication in a slick, expensive accompanying catalogue.

I took the contrary position: that graduating seniors should be required to show only their most recent works-in-progress, unframed and otherwise unfinished; that the exhibition should be open exclusively to them, their faculty, and their parents; and that no catalogue should be published — we had better things to do with the considerable money involved. (Indeed, I took this position so far that I once published a widely distributed polemic urging photo departments everywhere to get rid of their dry-mount presses.³ But that's another story.)

A month ago I attended the Society for Photographic Education National Conference in Chicago. This conference, the SPE's 43rd, will probably get hailed by the SPE's public-relations wing as a great success. It was jam-packed, after all, so well-attended that people often could not get into the presentations due to overcrowding. Surely a triumph, right?

Who crammed into those conference rooms at the pricey Sheraton Towers just off Lakeshore Drive? Photography teachers, a few of them tenured, most of them at the adjunct/assistant professor level, and almost all them teaching photography in fine arts-oriented photo programs in colleges, universities, and art institutes in the U.S. And photo students from those same programs — so many of them that the conference attendance will, I predict, turn out to have divided itself roughly equally between photo teachers and

³ A. D. Coleman, "Manifesto," *Lens' On Campus* 8:3 (April 1986), pp. 8-9.

photo students, with students perhaps predominating.

The student membership of the SPE, uncapped and energetically solicited by the Board's collective decision, represents the fastest-growing component of SPE membership. One young attending teacher boasted, at the annual membership meeting in Chicago, that she herself had brought 50 students with her, and actually pleaded with the Board to lower conference fees for students so she could bring more.

No doubt this in part explains why photo educators had a hard time finding each other in the crush, and why so many of them complained that they couldn't get in to see the presentations. Anyone can join the SPE, and the SPE Board especially encourages students — including first-year photo students — to do so.

Do you all know the Audubon Society, or is that a culture-specific reference? John James Audubon was our premier pioneering naturalist in the U.S.; his prints and paintings of animals in the wild are world-famous. Anyhow, there's an Audubon Society; you can find it online. Twenty dollars and an interest in birds and you're a member — and they'll waive the interest in birds.

The SPE has become the Audubon Society of photography. This has happened not by accident but by fiat. What was once a professional organization, membership in which required nomination by two other members and substantial credentials in the field of photo education, has turned itself into a come-one-come-all fiesta that anyone can join. It considers this a big-hearted, welcoming embrace, a commitment to "inclusivity" and a rejection of "elitism."

Let me tell you who isn't actively included in that "inclusivity," who doesn't feel welcome in that bear-hug, who doesn't join the SPE or come to those conferences — and who has stopped coming, if they previously attended. Curators, critics, historians, and theorists of photography and photo-based art are in short supply. So are major photographers. Book publishers and editors of

periodicals in the field. Directors of photo festivals and photo galleries. Representatives of educational programs in image librarianship, image conservation, and image-archive management. Teachers who work in applied photo programs in polytechnic and/or professional schools of photography, or in programs devoted to journalism and photojournalism. People who teach photography to the young in K-12 photo programs, either independently or in institutional settings. Colleagues from such clearly related disciplines as media studies, communication theory, gender studies, visual culture, sociology, history, arts management, museum studies, cultural journalism, art history, visual anthropology, and material culture. You'll find precious few of any of those at any SPE conference, national or regional.

Partly that's because the SPE makes no effort to solicit membership or conference attendance from those sectors. Partly it's because the organization devotes little or no conference programming to any of those crossover subjects. The SPE Board, and its conference organizers, consider it far more important to commit a considerable portion of its limited organizational resources to managing a portfolio-review component of the national conference at which teachers and their students stand for hours on the same lines for 20-minute critiques by the same group of reviewers — most of them merely faculty members from institutions other than their own. (I find this situation so mortifying, even though I'm not involved in it, that I hesitate even to speak of it.)

Given all that, why would our colleagues in any of the areas I just named want to join the SPE, or even attend its conferences? I can't see the value to them of such an affiliation. Why should they respect this organization, or want any connection with it? So perhaps it's for the best that they don't know of the organization's existence, or choose to stay away.

Attendees at the 1962 "Invitational Teaching Conference" that gave

birth to the SPE included Nathan Lyons, Beaumont Newhall, Walter Rosenblum, Arthur Sinsabaugh, Aaron Siskind, Henry Holmes Smith, John Szarkowski, Jerry Uelsmann and Clarence White. I trust that you know most of these names, not simply as educators in the teaching sense but as contributors to the pedagogy of this medium and also as historians, critics, theorists, curators, and notable photographers themselves. You would have known their names in 1963, had you been around then. Many of them went on to serve as members of the SPE's original Board of Directors.

Now I list for you the 2005 SPE Board of Directors: Terri Warpinski, David Taylor, Therese Mulligan, Cass Fey, Steven J. Bliss, Shauna Church, Rebecca Cummins, Carlos Diaz, Diana Gaston, Richard Gray, Elizabeth Greenberg, Angela Kelly, Mark Klett, Lawrence McFarland, Valerie Mendoza, Sandy Sorlien. Perfectly nice people, for the most part. But they're without exception academic artists who went from being photo students to being photo teachers and, in some cases, academic-art bureaucrats, with no interval between — which means they've been in school all their lives, just switching from one side of the desk to another. It would be fair to say that most of them make photographs in their spare time. It would surprise me if you've heard of more than one of them, and I wouldn't expect their names to ring bells forty years hence. This surely tells us something. I leave it to you to ponder its messages.

One of the promises of photography education was its potential value as a nexus for interdisciplinary studies. Yet, more than forty years after the founding of the SPE, it has achieved nothing more from an educational standpoint than entrenching itself as a minor college-level academic discipline, merely another of the marginalized fine arts, nowhere part of the core curriculum.

The fault for this can't be laid entirely at the doorstep of photo educators. For all the lip service paid to interdisciplinarity in the groves of

academe, few truly interdisciplinary programs make it past the insularity and territoriality that accompany traditionally rigid departmental boundaries, and even fewer survive for very long. Still, precious little effort at interdisciplinary outreach gets made in this field. The SPE today represents the logical outcome of this relentless inbreeding, and I suspect the PIEA does as well.

I do not consider the current merger of what we might call traditional or classic photo-ed programs with video, film, animation, and multimedia, and the creation of what some schools label "media arts" programs, to constitute the interdisciplinarity I'm considering here. This technological hybridization, though fertile in many ways, does not engage with the field of ideas of other areas of study.

I believe that I err on the side of generosity in calling photo education a discipline. There's little discipline involved in it, by any definition of the term. No one flunks photography, certainly not in fine-art photo programs. How could they? In the current environment for photography-as-art, there's no right way to make photographic work, because there's no wrong way to do so; there's only pleasing your faculty's taste patterns or failing to do so. As my former colleague Richard Kirstel used to say, "The difference between commercial photography and creative photography today is that the commercial photography has to be well done." I can remember curator, critic, and editor Carol Squiers asserting, at a regional SPE conference in the 1980s, that the pomo photographers — Cindy Sherman et al — were gradually "bringing their work up to professional standards." I can remember, in the same era, the director of the photo program at the Maryland Institute, College of Art boasting that 80 percent of their most recent crop of students had graduated cum laude. Neither he nor Ms. Squiers showed the slightest trace of ironic intent in their statements.

So college-level photo education is the Lake Wobegon of the academic

world. Probably another culture-specific reference. Back home (or "up over," as we say) we have a writer and radio commentator, Garrison Keillor, whose program, "Prairie Home Companion," centers around a mythical midwestern U.S. small town, the archetypal Lake Wobegon, where, among other features, "all the children are above average." Certainly all the children in U.S. college-level photo programs are above average, and it wouldn't surprise me if that's true here in Australia as well.

The only discipline that I see imposed on college-level photo students today is the requirement — increasingly widespread and almost pandemic — that they conform their work, their thinking, and their very speech patterns to something their faculty identify as "theory" that is in fact merely dogma, thinly disguised. This results in cookie-cutter projects and grotesque, mandatory, unreadable "artist's statements," hideously and tortuously theoretized and semantically tormented, the predictable results of forcing impressionable young people with hormones rampaging through their bodies to rationalize their work according to a very particular and narrowly defined set of politically correct and ideologically approved references. Footnotes to the usual suspects — Walter Benjamin, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, et al — are mandatory, while references to unaccredited or discredited sources are ignored or even disallowed.

Notably, I've met no single teacher of postmodern theory who devotes even a single class session to the Alan Sokal/*Social Text* scandal that has riven the field of postmodern theory for the past decade. Heaven help the student who finds inspiration in the work of anyone not on the approved reading list, or the student who dares to say, as I say to you now, that Walter Benjamin was sometimes wrong — even about something so central to his theory as the concept of the aura.

Within the past year I've had the peculiar experience of telling two

current graduate students, from two different institutions, that they were producing useless pomo junk with clearly insincere and sometimes incomprehensible spoken and written justifications thereof — and having them thank me for giving them permission to do otherwise. I advised them to do that on their own time, since they both made it clear that their departments required such work of them and would not let them either enter the two programs or leave them until they could prove, to the faculties' satisfaction, that they had absorbed the presently approved influences and reflected those in their work.

The academic world's lack of criticality in its relation to the theories it embraces, and its rejection of diversity as manifest in its shunting aside of thinkers not on the currently approved list, is simply a disgrace. This is not "teaching theory," a process which, by any meaningful definition, would require the testing of theory in practice and the correction of erroneous theory. This is the transmission of dogma. One might as well be in Bible class learning "intelligent design," or in some madrassah somewhere studying the Koran, or waving little red books at each other. The fundamentalists of academe aspire to the status of scientists; for evidence, we need look no further than Barthes' preposterous claim that semiology constituted a "science of signs." Yet they reject the very fundamentals that make any discipline a science: repeatable experiments, theories that enunciate their limitations and state the experiments that would prove or disprove them, then the systematic testing of those theories without attempts to do what scientists call "saving the appearances." You don't make something into a science simply by sticking the label "scientific" onto it, whether it's semiotics or socialism or "creationism."

Another promise of photo education was its utility not only across the curriculum but from childhood education onward. Though it has been conducted in an uncoordinated and largely ad hoc way, there's now a 50-year pedagogical

experiment in teaching photography to the young behind us, with hundreds of past and present K-12 photo programs dotted all over the world. Some of those programs have been institutionally based, while others have been supported by non-profit organizations or simply initiated and somehow held together by dedicated individuals in storefronts and community centers.

I know of no one in the field of college-level photo education — or in the parallel field of art education — who considers this a phenomenon worth studying, despite Moholy-Nagy's 1932 prophecy that "the illiterate of the future will be ignorant of the use of camera and pen alike." I know of no dean at any art school or photo school, no director of any tertiary photo program at a college or university, who has considered the possibility that the K-12 photo student of today might become the college-level photo student of tomorrow, and has partnered or otherwise affiliated with K-12 programs as potential feeders into their courses. I know of no photo-industry manufacturer savvy enough to perceive the same logical connection and devote serious attention, and resources, and money, to nourishing K-12 photo ed on the perfectly reasonable assumption that once people start photographing seriously, at any age, they rarely stop.

I've gotten so fed up with talking about this to people I know in the field that I've decided to put my money where my mouth is, as it were, by inaugurating a long-promised website, The New Eyes Project, as the first stage of a support effort for K-12 photo ed and a research base into its history and pedagogy. This went online in March of this year; you'll find it at <http://k12photoed.org>. Eventually it may come under the umbrella of the Foundation for the Exhibition of Photography, a Minnesota-based nonprofit with which I'm also developing a program for teaching young people how to read and understand photographic images.

There used to be an organization in the States created to support K-12 photo teachers; it collapsed back in the 1970s due to under-financing. There's

one in Canada for high-school teachers, the Photo Educators' Forum. I don't know of any others. The SPE has made clear its lack of interest in this sector of the photo-ed community, even though many of its older members once worked in grassroots community photo projects. I don't know enough about the PIEA yet to speak of it in this regard; perhaps you'll enlighten me on that score during the question period or afterwards.

In short, I see the college-level photo programs, whether applied or fine-art in emphasis, as having created virtually no trickle-down effect of photo education worth speaking of in half a century. A graduate of such a program like Zana Briski, who founded a photo-ed program for street kids in Calcutta (subject of the Academy Award-winning documentary *Born into Brothels*), or Wendy Ewald, who has seeded such programs internationally for twenty years, is the exception, not the rule. I know of no single college-level photo program that teaches its students how to teach those younger than they are, or encourages them to do so, or provides support for those students' students if they take that path.

Penny Boyer gave this session the title of "Creating Experiences in an Educational Environment" simply to provide an umbrella under which I could talk about pretty much anything. But if we take that title seriously, as a loose description of what we do for our students, and for ourselves, when we teach or (in some cases) administer educational programs, then what would I extract from these dyspeptic comments that we all might find either worthy of further investigation or even rough agendas for the next twenty years?

1. Rather than immersing students in dogma — and one particular genus of dogma — masquerading as theory, why not adopt the scientific relationship to theory, in which theory informs practice and practice tests theory? Sending students out into the world babbling half-digested pomo notions and "contextualizing" their work with incomprehensible pomo jargon is not an

educational achievement; we might actually consider it a handicap.

Certainly no one should be allowed to teach theory who cannot clearly state what the limits are of any particular theory in the syllabus, and where it goes wrong. No one should be allowed to teach postmodern theory as received wisdom who cannot explain convincingly why it was not terminally embarrassing for the editors of *Social Text* to publish an article by physicist Alan Sokal that deliberately mixed pomo terminology and locutions with scientific language in a stew of gibberish intended specifically to test their editorial intelligence and their reader's blind credulity.

Most importantly, students, like scientists, should receive encouragement and support for testing and disproving theories, not just for finding or creating supporting "evidence" for their faculty's pet beliefs. It's not hard to distinguish theory from dogma: If it can't be either proven or disproved, and does not come in the form of an open question, it's not theory, it's dogma.

2. True interdisciplinarity in photography education — or even, more broadly, in the study of lens-based imagery — does not consist entirely in connecting with departments of printmaking and artists' books and multimedia. It involves connecting with other disciplines within the humanities, such as visual culture, perceptual psychology, and anthropology, and even within the hard sciences: optics and visual perception, for example. Unfortunately, the current fiscal and territorial necessity of defining a given photo department's relationship to film, video, animation, and multimedia has preempted the time and effort needed to consider that same department's logical connections to media studies and sociology and 20th-century history. We need to see the technological shift we're undergoing as an interruption of the search for an interdisciplinary situation for photo education, however unavoidable in the immediate moment. There's no reason for the academic environment of the 21st century to remain as insular and territorial as that of the 20th. Is it not time to start forging sturdy links between photography — or, more broadly, the

lens-based media — and other pertinent disciplines?

3. Surely it's time to pursue both a trickle-down approach to photo education and a wick-up correlate. If we agree that every world citizen needs to know both how to make and how to interpret lens-based imagery in all its forms, then obviously the necessary education goes hand in glove with that required for producing literacy. The tertiary photo-ed system has entrenched itself securely enough in the academic environment that it constitutes a platform from which pressure for such education at the earlier levels can get exerted, and to which teachers and administrators at all levels should feel encouraged to look for support of all kinds. Creating photo-ed programs for the K-12 context, partnering with existing programs of that sort, and encouraging tertiary photo students to consider K-12 photo ed as a professional path would seem a few of the most obvious approaches.

4. Process orientation. Despite the pressures from deans, provosts, parents, and so many others, can we find ways to keep our programs and our students process-oriented rather than product-oriented, so that for as long as possible during their educational experience they feel free to play, experiment, and fail? Treating the educational environment as a pre-professional context has its downside, one aspect of which is that it reduces the willingness to take risks. I think that foolishness and failure – including a high ratio of both to gravity and success – are inherent to creativity. They require support if they're to become part of the creative toolkit.

So, in concluding, I'd propose to you that these four agendas, separately or together, represent ways of "Creating Experiences in an Educational Environment" — and ways of rethinking and reformulating the experiences presently available to your students. They include a proposal for revising what happens in the classroom in the teaching of what we might broadly call theory; a way of redefining your program's relationship with other programs at your

institution; a way of expanding your program's impact on the outside world by collaborating with K-12 photo programs; and a way of thinking about the balance you strike in your programs between exploration and resolution.

Now I open the floor to your questions and comments. Thank you for your attention.

(This is the complete text of an address delivered to the Photo Imaging Education Association (PIEA) Conference, Sydney Convention Centre, Sydney, Australia, April 29, 2006.)