

# Critical Evaluation in a Digital Photography Course



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REASON



— Creating Coherent Pathways to Develop Critical Thinking Skills in Students



"American Gothic" – photograph by Gordon Parks (1942)

## • Introduction



Our focus: Reflect, **Evaluate**, Argue, Solve, Obtain, Network

We wanted to help students critically evaluate a **text** -- written, oral or **visual**.

For example, in the NSU Quality Enhancement Plan, it states that:

“Building on solid critical thinking skills, students will demonstrate competence in scientific and quantitative reasoning, information literacy, and written and oral communication” (Norfolk State University, p.4).

What about visual communication (graphic design, photography, film, drawing, painting, etc.)? My action plan is an attempt to fill this apparent gap.

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In REASON/QEP documents the Evaluate competency is defined as being able to “Evaluate the validity and limitations of assumptions in relation to evidence and identify limitations and contradictions in an event” (Norfolk State University, p.4).

What exactly are we evaluating? “Assumptions”? “Events”?

It might be better to say we are evaluating written, oral and visual communication or simply, texts. So, then, we are evaluating the validity and limitations of a text. For my course, then, we can talk of evaluating the “validity and limitations” of a photograph. That can work.

We can talk of analyzing and judging a photograph, for example.

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In the same QEP document, some sample classroom activities related to **evaluation** are included. For example, a professor may ask students to “Clearly differentiate between fact and opinion and examine the argument and sources of supporting evidence and to question its accuracy, precision, relevance, and completeness.”

Perhaps in the context of photography, in a similar fashion, a professor could ask students to see a photograph as an argument, an argument that the photographer is making (more on this below). As the above shows, the QEP framework can lead faculty and students to think of a photographs as a text to be critically evaluated. *However, this is something rarely done in introductory photography textbooks.*

In the critiquing process they learn what makes for a good photograph and then they can hopefully use that knowledge when composing their own photographs. Being able to evaluate or critique photographs of others is an initial skill that students should pick up in an introductory course.

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## • Description of Project: Evaluating or Critiquing Photographs

In my course criticism is defined as

informed discourse which passes judgment as to the merits of a work of art for the purpose of increasing understanding and appreciation of art.

How exactly does one critique or evaluate a photograph?



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## • Description of Project: Evaluating or Critiquing Photographs



There are a variety of ways of critiquing a photograph.

For the purposes of this presentation we'll focus on just one.

Barrett's approach can be summarized as the DIET way of critiquing a photograph.

1. **Describe** the contents and characteristics of the photograph (e.g., "this is a black and white photograph of a woman who...").
2. **Interpret** the photograph (e.g., "I think that the photographer is saying that African American women...").
3. **Evaluate** the photograph, pass judgement on the photograph. The first two steps helps the critic avoid hasty judgement.
4. **Theorize** about the photographer. Attempt to understand more the photographer than the photograph. In the theorize stage, critic is seeking to understand the photographers world-view, the photographer's theory about how the world works.

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## • Evidence of Impact: Assessment and Results



A variety of measures were used to determine if students learned how to critique photographs (two exams, a pop-quiz and an analysis of student photographs).

To provide a baseline of sorts, early in the semester, as part of class discussion, I asked students: "What is a good photograph? If you looked at a photograph, what would you look for in order to determine if it is a good photograph?"

On the mid-term exam of the students who were asked about Barrett's approach 54% scored 7 or higher out of 10 points on an essay question.

Pop quiz to see if they knew how to critique a photo without having just studied it. I wanted to see if they had internalized the method. 78% of students could list and describe the steps in how to critique photographs.

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- Evidence of Impact:  
Assessment and Results



On the final the Barrett approach was asked as an extra credit question and about half did not attempt an answer. Of those who attempted an answer, 92% scored a 10 out of 10.

About two-thirds of the students somewhat consistently submitted “good” photographs. So, it appears most students can usually produce good work, but when asked to explain what is good work, they are at a loss for words, at least during the pressures of an essay exam.

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- Conclusion



One of the goals of the R.E.A.S.O.N. Outcomes Framework is to “stimulate pedagogical innovation in the classroom” (Matveev, p. 3).

Thinking about my photography course using this framework has certainly stimulated some pedagogical innovation in my course.

In my photography course, we can now talk of photographs as texts that can be critically evaluated. This is something that is rarely done in introductory photography, but is very much needed. I appreciate what R.E.A.S.O.N. and the Col experience has added to my course.

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