Working Assumptions

LESSON PLANS

Photography & Consent

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Working Assumptions is a cultural non-profit that explores the everyday give-and-take of family and care through visual storytelling, encouraging reflection and dialogue.

workingassumptions.org

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Overview: Teaching Responsible Photography

Photography is a powerful tool for sharing, preserving important moments, and connecting with people. Though photos seem "real," photographers shape each image through framing, timing, and selection—giving them significant power over how stories are told. The relationship between a photographer and their subject is essential. A responsible photographer must prioritize their subjects, especially when capturing images of people in vulnerable situations. Responsible photography always requires consent.

It can be helpful to think of consent as an ongoing conversation rather than a one–time agreement. Photographers must balance their own creative aspirations with a responsibility to the people they photograph.

To start building consent:

- Define your own boundaries.
- Be sure you are comfortable with your working relationships.

Obtaining consent can be challenging because photography can be either be planned or spontaneous. Here are some key points for getting consent:

> **Communicate Clearly:** Explain to subjects your work, your limits, and how the images will be used. A conversation will get you the clearest communication.
> **Non-Verbal Cues for Fast-Paced Situations:** In quickly-moving situations such as parades or protests, where you cannot speak to each other, you can make eye contact or gesture. Often people will express how they feel through non-verbal signals.

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Thinking Through Consent

Asking is a form of respect. When you choose to include other people in your photographs, it's important to ask permission before or after capturing an image (to take the photo and to use/share the photo). This process is called consent. While consent can be shared differently, it usually involves asking, conversing, obtaining a model release*, and mutual understanding. The goal in reaching consent is always to have a collective understanding of what will be photographed and how photographs may be used and shared.

Think about the following questions below before starting to photograph:

What interests you about this person? Do you like their look? Are they an example of something you're trying to show in the world? Are you just curious?

Thoughts

How are you planning to approach the project? Are you going to work collaboratively with this person (making choices together)? Are you going to work more like a photojournalist (where you are strictly observing them and photographing what happens)?

Thoughts

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How will you select images? Will you invite the person / people you are photographing into the selection process or will you be the only one deciding which images are used?

Thoughts

Who will see these photographs? Are you planning a public exhibition? Is this a class project? How, if at all, will you communicate with this person / people if the final product changes? Will you ask for permission for each new use of the images?

Thoughts

*A model release is a signed agreement indicating that any people who appear in your photo have given their permission for you to take and share the picture. You don't need model releases for photography if:

- The person in the photo isn't identifiable.
- The photo is being used for news, blogs, or educational purposes (though you need to be very careful not to use these types of materials for marketing purposes without a model release)
- The photo is for personal use, like family albums or private sharing.
- The photo is taken in a public place where people typically don't expect privacy.

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Scenarios Discussion

Choose one of these scenarios to discuss with your class:

- ❑ You're doing a street photography project about places where care is evident in your community. You see an adult you don't know pushing their child on the swings in the park. The light is beautiful, the moment is pure, and you don't want to ruin it by distracting everyone. How could you approach the situation to get the unguarded moment of connection you saw, while still being sure the family is okay with being photographed?
- ❑ You're working on an ongoing photo essay about your cousin caring for an family member who doesn't have their full cognitive abilities. You spend a lot of time documenting their relationship and feel they're comfortable with the process, but the person often forgets the details of your conversation about how the pictures will be used. How could you proceed?
- ❑ The family you babysit for has given you permission to make a portrait series about your work caring for their elementary school-aged children. Sometimes the kids love being photographed and play along. Other times they turn away, seem annoyed, or ask you to play with them instead. How do you move forward?
- ❑ You're documenting a complex relationship between two people who are dating. The three of you have talked a lot about the project, and the couple has agreed they want to participate. After photographing them several times, you notice that one person is treating the other disrespectfully, and you make an incredible series of pictures capturing the relationship's complex mixture of pain, anger, love and guilt. You're confident that both participants gave you permission to tell their story, but you're pretty sure that one of them isn't going to like the way they're portrayed. What do you do?

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Photography Questions

Think about your own photography project. Talk with a peer about these questions as they apply to your work:

How do we make sure that the people we photograph feel respected while still making pictures that speak directly and honestly?

Thoughts

Who holds which kinds of power in the relationship, and how does that influence the conversation?

Thoughts

What is consent in this setting, and how do we know when we have it?

Thoughts

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