Media Literacy & Photography
Curriculum

Photograph by Keiley Bentley

Introduction

In 2016, Appalshop's award-winning youth media program The Appalachian Media Institute partnered with PhotoWings, Appalshop's Archive and artist Wendy Ewald to host a photography workshop at the Jenkins Middle-High School in Jenkins, Kentucky. Over the course of several weeks, youth participants were engaged in critical exercises around media literacy, photographic image-making and creative writing.

In 1976, artist Wendy Ewald spent 5 years working with Eastern Kentucky youth at the Campbell's Branch School in Letcher County, Kentucky to collaboratively produce the acclaimed photography book *Portraits & Dreams.* The 2016 Jenkins Photography Workshop was a return to this early collaborative methodology of community storytelling and participatory photographic practice, alongside a new generation of Letcher County youth artists.

The curriculum presented below connects Wendy Ewald's early methodology to that of Appalshop's Appalachian Media Institute-- a 29 year old youth media program wherein youth are provided with the tools and training to articulate their stories, and the stories of their communities, through media production.
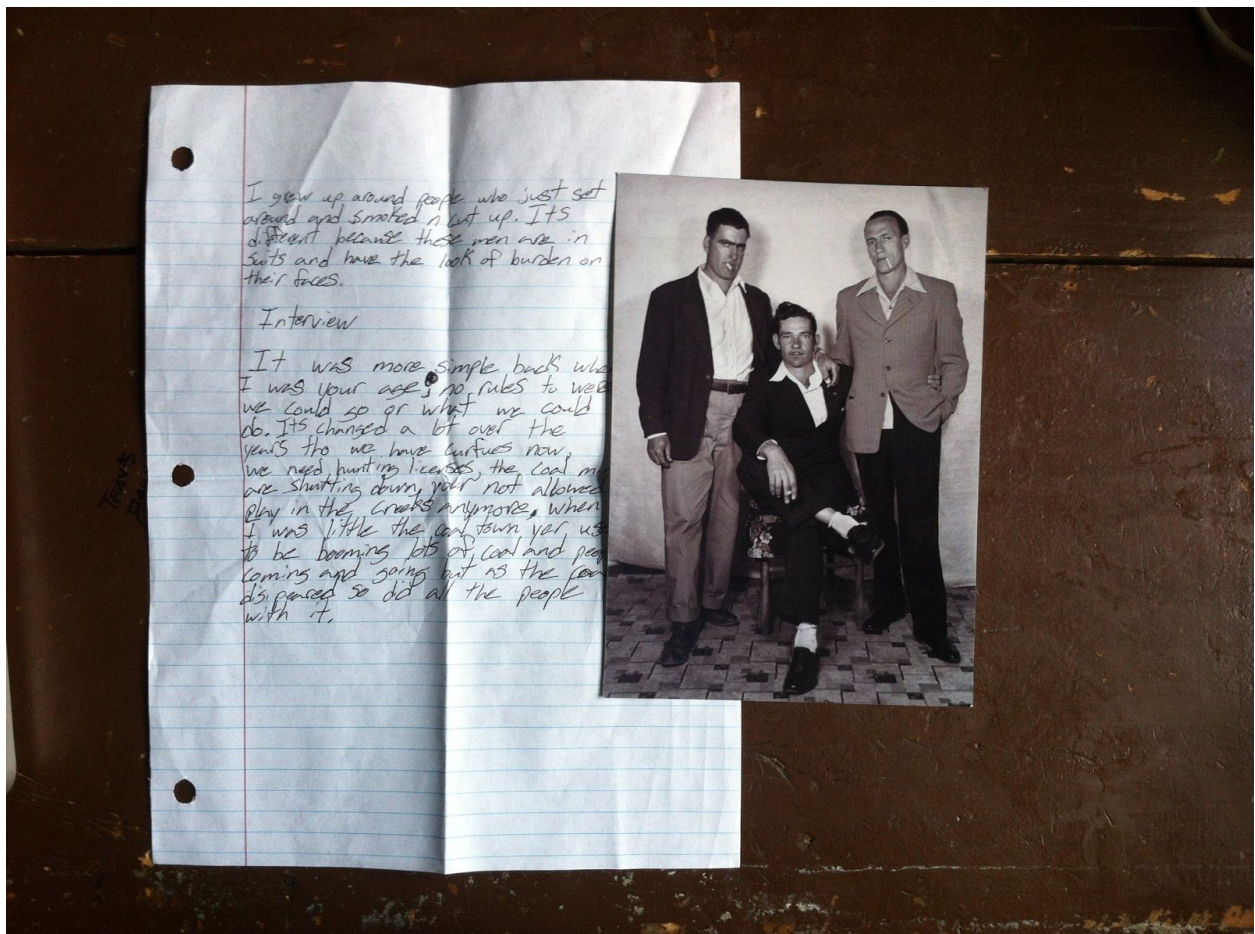

Image courtesy of Appalshop's Appalachian Media Institute

"When I first started making photographs, I was fascinated by documentary efforts to catalogue social and economic problems of the 1930s and the occasional successes of social reforms. With time I learned to back off from the world and let it reveal itself to me, and as I did, each project became a distinct challenge to see beneath surface relationships. As the work progressed and I became more conscious of my method, I was able to experiment with ways of sharing control over the image-making. The active dialogue between the photographer and the subject (and inevitably the viewer) became for me the essential point of a photograph. Beyond esthetic choices, I came to see photography as a language to which everyone has access." - Wendy Ewald, from the Photography and Social Practice Broadsheet, May 2014

Curriculum

Since 1988, the Appalachian Media Institute (AMI) has provided opportunities for young people from across Central Appalachia to explore their home communities, address local issues, and become thoughtful, engaged citizens through the process of place-based media making.

Our curriculum is designed to:

- Build the confidence levels and creative capacity of our local youth and position them as initiators of dialogue and social action around crucial community issues.
- Provide pioneering community-based media arts training opportunities that are college accredited, nationally recognized, and fundamentally transformative.
- Provide youth with an avenue to explore the traditions, history, and issues of their communities and develop positive attachments to their communities, cultures, and their home region.
- Develop the skills and behaviors that prepare young people to be successful in school, higher-education, and the workforce, and overcome the barriers to educational attainment that exist in many struggling communities.

Building Trust & Building Community

i. Icebreaker: Adjective + Name

- The entire group stands together in a circle (including all staff, interns and youth participants). The icebreaker facilitator leads the group by choosing an adjective that shares the same first letter and the first letter of their name, (e.g. Silly Sarah, Crazy Catherine). Moving to the left of the facilitator, each participant has to recall the adjective + name of each person before them and then state their own adjective + name. If a participant isn't able to recall all of the previous names they must take a step out of the circle. This exercise should be a fun, semi-challenging and light-hearted way to memorize each other's names and begin the workshop with a little bit of movement and eye contact.

ii. Rules, Group Agreements, Housekeeping

- During the first day of the workshop we find it important to immediately address the rules of our program, collect all paperwork (including Medical forms, Media Consent Forms, Contracts, etc) and to work together with all participants to develop a "group agreement".
- This group agreement will guide our engagement with one another and is amendable by the group at any point in the workshop. In order to develop this group agreement all participants are encouraged to contribute while a notetaker documents the group's ideas on a piece of paper. Examples of previous contributions include:
    - Do not photograph another person without consent
    - No cellphone use during the workshop
    - Assume best intentions and do not "call out", instead "call in"
- We welcome everyone into the space by providing a brief history of the program or workshop, discuss the intent and goals of the program and create space for questions and discussion.
- Lastly, we develop a cleaning schedule for each day of the program to ensure that our classroom & space are maintained by all participants.

iii. Story Circle

At the core of our community media methodology is a focus on in-person, shared storytelling. [Below is our Story Circle methodology, developed by Roadside Theater in 1999.](#)

A Story Circle is a group of people sitting in a circle, telling personal stories, led by a Story Circle facilitator. Each Story Circle is different according to its purpose.

- What is and is not a story?
    - A story is a narrative of events drawn from the teller's personal experience.
    - A story can be fashioned from a memory, a dream, a reflection, a moment in time, and more.
    - A story typically has a beginning, middle, and end, as well as characters and atmosphere.
    - A story is not a lecture, an argument, a debate, or an intellectualization, although these elements may be part of a story.
- Story Circles should:
    - Be preceded by an informal time to socialize. (For example, a pot luck dinner.)
    - Take place in a quiet space with good acoustics where interruptions are unlikely to occur.
    - Consist of from 5 to 15 people sitting in a circle without notepads, pocketbooks, etc., and in such a manner that each participant has a good view of every other participant.
    - Have one trained facilitator who begins, oversees, and ends the Circle.
    - Have a stated time period in which the Story Circle will take place.
    - Have a purpose articulated by the leader and agreed to by the participants.
    - Allow for silences between stories.
    - Be as much about listening as about telling.
- Story Circles should not:
    - Primarily serve the agenda of any one participant.
    - Give importance to one story, or one type of story, over another.

- The facilitator's role:
  - Be clear about the purpose of the particular circle. (Examples: reinforcement of cultural identity; examination of issues of race and class; identification of community concerns; introduction of a community storytelling project; and so on.)
  - Know, or determine with the group, the theme for the particular circle. The theme must complement the story circle's purpose. For example, if the purpose is to explore cultural identity, a circle theme could be family holiday traditions. If the purpose is to better understand race and class, the theme of the circle might be a story about a moment when one realized that one was different.
  - Introduce him or herself, describe the circle's purpose and theme, and state the time the Story Circle will end.
  - Tell the rules of the Story Circle and answer participants' questions about them.
  - Emphasize the idea that listening to the stories of others is as important as telling your own, noting that deep listening can engender a meditative quality in the circle.
  - Discourage participants from thinking too much about what they will say when it is their turn, asking them to trust that their story will come from their listening to the stories of the others.
  - Tell the group how long the circle will last, and ask participants to pace the length of their stories to the time available, taking into consideration the number of participants. For example, if there are 12 people in the Circle and 60 minutes for storytelling, each story should be approximately 5 minutes in length.
  - Announce the manner in which the facilitator will politely indicate to a teller that he or she has passed the time limit and needs to wrap-up the story.
  - Ask the participants to quickly name the typical elements of a story – narrative, plot, characters, atmosphere, etc.
  - Begin the circle with a story that sets the tone for the purpose and theme of the circle, or state the theme and ask who in the circle would like to tell the first story.

- After the first story, go around the circle clockwise or counterclockwise, with each person telling or passing when it is their turn. The rotation continues until everyone has told a story.
- Reserve time after the telling for participants to reflect on what has just transpired by asking everyone for their observations and comments.
- When possible, end with a group song or poem (perhaps taught and led by a participant) that brings closure to the spirit of the particular Story Circle.
- End the Story Circle on time.
- Participants often want to talk personally to each other after the Circle breaks up, so the facilitator should ensure space is available for this purpose.
- Story Circle rules:
  - There is only one Story Circle facilitator.
  - There are no observers – only participants.
  - The Story Circle facilitator is also a participant, and must tell his or her story as well.
  - Participants speak only when it is their turn.
  - The order of telling is either clockwise or counterclockwise from the first teller.
  - When it comes to one's turn, the person decides the timing of when to speak, and may decide to pass, knowing their turn will come around again.
  - After everyone in the Circle has had the opportunity to speak or pass, the rotation begins again for those who have passed.
  - Listening deeply is the most important part of the Story Circle experience.
  - Participants should not distract themselves by thinking ahead about what story they will tell.
  - Rather, participants should listen to the stories told, and, when it is their turn, tell a story brought to mind by the previous stories, or pass.
  - Participants and the facilitator never argue with or debate another participant's story.
  - Participants and the facilitator never comment upon another participant's story other than to say, when it is their turn, "That story reminds me of . . ."
  - There is no cross-talk in a Story Circle and all responses to a particular story wait their turn and are in story form.

- Story Circles are never tape recorded or videotaped without the participants' expressed permission.
- If the stories in a Circle might be used to inform the development of a new play, all participants must understand this and give their permission.

- When a Story Circle should be stopped by the facilitator:

- It is not unusual for painful stories to emerge in a Story Circle. The facilitator must exercise judgment about when to continue a Story Circle and when to stop it. Story Circle facilitators should not try to serve as therapists, social workers, or doctors (even if these are their professional occupations), because participants did not come to the circle to receive these services.

- The facilitator can:

- Call for a break and talk individually with the distressed person.
- Refer the distressed person to the proper professional.
- Resume or reschedule the Story Circle.

During the first day of the Jenkins Photography Workshop we facilitated a Story Circle on the theme of "belonging". The prompt for the Story Circle was: *Share a story of a moment where you felt connected to-- or disconnected from-- your community.* This prompt helped to ground participants in their shared experiences and initiated a lively conversation about the challenges and opportunities of life in eastern Kentucky. It also provided a safe, non-confrontational moment for participants to share important elements of their identity that might otherwise be inaccurately assumed.

iv. Community Asset Mapping

As a group we identify and list the assets and deficits of our community based on several categories, including: *arts & culture, architecture, food, community space, nature, recreation, infrastructure, and history.*

There are several different approaches to community asset mapping. We focus on an abridged process where we work together to document our group ideas on two large pieces of roll paper (approximately 24 x 30"). Together, we identify:

> 1. Assets - a useful or valuable thing, person, or quality.
>
> 2. Deficits - a lack or shortage

As a group we define "assets" and then work to list everything we see as valuable, meaningful and unique to our community. This list has included:

- Public art, natural features, unique architecture, community resources, community centers & creative spaces, local restaurants, the farmer's market, proximity to medical care centers

As a group we define "deficits" and then work to list everything we see as an obstacle to community growth, a challenge in our daily lives, or as harmful to our community. This list has included:

- Mountaintop removal, polluted waterways & public water, lack of access to healthy food options, lack of public transportation, etc

The process of Community Asset Mapping can be a great tool for building alternative geographies of place and often leads to powerful conversations about the objects, people and locations that make each community unique and special. Allow plenty of time for conversation, cross-talk and civil discourse.

There are no aesthetic guidelines for producing a Community Asset Map. Let the group or facilitator decide what it looks like. It could be written lists, tangentially mapped, illustrated with drawings or printed photographs, etc.

v. Photographic Scavenger Hunt

The Photographic Scavenger Hunt is a great exercise to follow the Community Asset Mapping process. Utilizing the newly created maps, break your students into groups of 2-3. Each group should have:

- 2-3 disposable 35mm film cameras or Fuji Instax film cameras
- 2-3 notebooks for reflections & notetaking
- A list of assets & deficits they want to specifically capture, including:
    - 1 piece of public art
    - 1 person to be interviewed & photographed (with consent)
    - 1 piece of unique architecture
    - 1 deficit they wish they could change or alter
    - 1 local business
    - 1 piece of public infrastructure (their choice-- this could be a hospital, highway, public school, etc)

Once the groups are selected and have all of their equipment you can send them into the community to document their findings, conduct short interviews and take a moment to collectively write a written reflection on their findings.

Assignment Notes:

- If you are using disposable cameras: complete this assignment at the end of the day and have the film processed overnight and printed for review the following class day. We like to review physical prints whenever possible.
- We live in a small community that is close-knit and walkable, therefore we do not send a staff person out with the groups. You'll need to gauge this decision based on the factors present in your home community and your organizational policies.

vi. Place-Based Media Inspiration

Our community has both a rich and fraught history of media representation-- from the powerful collection of documentary and narrative films produced by community members to the countless essays, articles, books, television shows and documentary pieces made by outside media outlets and journalists.

We begin our media workshops and institutes by sharing the various forms of narratives that have made an impact in our community and greater region (positively or negatively). Below is an abridged list of media that we analyze but this portion of the curriculum should be adjusted to represent your home community.

Films & Discussion Topics

Appalachian Film Representation:

Stranger with a Camera by Elizabeth Barrett

Strangers n' Kin by Herby Smith

In Ya Blood by Herby Smith

Letcher County Butcher by Bill Richardson & Frank Majority

Christmas in Appalachia by CBS News

The Appalachians by PBS

I am Dolly, by Denise Dixon (from Portraits & Dreams)

3 Days in Appalachia by Bruce Gilden (Vice Magazine)

As it was Give(n) to Me by Stacy Kranitz

Portraits & Dreams by Wendy Ewald & Letcher County Youth

Salt and Truth by Shelby Lee Adams

Looking at Appalachia Directed by Roger May

Hollow Directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon

Coal Hollow by Melanie Light

Trampoline by Robert Gipe

Carry Me Ohio by Matt Eich

"Photography is a language. To communicate, you need to learn the language. The history of photography is like the vocabulary and influence is like a dialect. One shouldn't be embarrassed about having an accent." – Alec Soth

Discussion Topics:

1. What is the difference in how a resident sees their community and how someone from elsewhere sees and depicts it?
2. What are the advantages to viewing a place from the outside?
3. What are the advantages to viewing a place from the inside?
4. What is consent? Discuss.
5. What are your ethics when documenting a community or person?
6. How do you practice ethical consent in photography?
7. What is collaboration?
8. What are the challenges Elizabeth Barrett faces in telling the story of her community?
9. How do you feel about the actions of Hobart Ison in Stranger with a Camera? Discuss
10. How do you feel about the actions of Hobart Ison's community in Stranger with a Camera? Discuss.
11. How does Herby Smith address the Appalachian Hillbilly stereotype in Strangers n' Kin?
12. What is the goal of Christmas in Appalachia? Is the narrator trying to elicit a certain emotion from the audience? If so, what emotion?
13. What audience is Stranger with a Camera and Strangers n' Kin made for?
14. What audience is Christmas in Appalachia and The Appalachians made for?
15. Do the people in Shelby Lee Adams or Stacy Kranitz's photographs resemble you or your family? If so, how? If not, how not?
16. What films, television shows or other pieces of media have you seen that speak about your community? Discuss.

"What are the responsibilities of any of us who take the images of other people and put them to our own uses?" – Elizabeth Barrett

vii. Group Discussion Activities

Group discussions are a powerful way to foreground the nuance and complexity of a range of topics. Here are some icebreakers and activities that help to provoke, inspire and catalyze civil debate, discussion and exchange.

Fishbowl

- Place enough chairs for each participant in a circle, with two chairs facing each other in the center. Each participant should take a seat in the circle, leaving the two center chairs empty. Pass around pieces of paper and pens or pencils. Each participant should write a prompt on this piece of paper. The prompt can be a question, thought or provocation related to the subject you'd like them to address (In this case: Representation). You can share an example of a prompt with the group:
    - For example: it ever okay to take someone's photograph without permission? Why or why not?
- Once everyone has finished writing their prompt, pass an empty fishbowl (or container) around the circle and have everyone place their folded piece (or strip) of paper in it. Ask for two volunteers. Once two people have agreed have them move to the two seats in the center of the circle. Have one of the volunteers select a prompt from the fishbowl and read it aloud to the other. Once the prompt has been read aloud the two volunteers in the center have to discuss, debate and share stories related to it.
- The pair must continue talking until someone in the outer circle "taps them out" and steps into the circle and take their place in the conversation. Once the prompt has been thoroughly discussed or the center pair has been replaced twice, pull another prompt.
- If the conversation does not begin fluidly or a pair is having trouble initiating a conversation, the facilitator should "tap" into the conversation and get the conversation started. You can also ask former participants or youth "peer trainers" to tap in when conversations are not forming.

Recall a Photograph

- Have all participants sit around a table with paper and drawing supplies.
- I like to introduce this exercise by sharing this [TED](#) [Talk](#) [on](#) ["the](#) [single](#) [story"](#) [by](#) [Chimamanda](#) [Ngozi](#) [Adichie](#). Following the piece I guide a short (20-25 minute) discussion on how we experience "single stories" in our own community or how we have created single story narratives about others.
- Following the discussion, ask each participant to recall a photograph from memory. Ask them to investigate at all elements of the photograph in their mind: *colors, composition, framing, angle, proximity, subject, relationship between the photographer and subject, etc.*
- Give participants 2 minutes to fully recall and imagine the photograph. Do not allow anyone to bring up a photograph on their cellphone or computer-- it should be recalled
- Once everyone has settled on an image and has recalled it mentally, ask them to:
    - Write a detailed description of the photograph that outlines all of the aforementioned elements, OR
    - Write a short story that touches upon all of the elements depicted in the photograph
- Once everyone has completed their writing or drawing, have them pass their paper to the left, and then to the person across the table (make sure they are scrambled and disassociated from their authors).
- Moving around the table each person should read the description to themselves and then describe the photograph to the group. Allow time for a group discussion about each image. How does the image change as we recall it (twice?). Allow the author of the text to remark on the recollection.
- This exercise provides a great opportunity to reflect on *subjectivity, authorship* and *memory.*
- For comparison, show the image they've recalled on the projector (if they are public photographs that are widely known).

I Identify

- The facilitator should place four signs in four different corners of the room (Agree / Disagree / Conflicted / Neutral)
- The facilitator should make a list of 10-15 "identity traits", such as:
    - *I identify as poor*
    - *I identify as rich*
    - *I identify as a person of color*
    - *I identify as white*
    - *I identify is LGBTQIA*
    - *I identify as religious*
    - *I have used food stamps and felt ashamed*
    - *I, or my family, receive government assistance and felt ashamed*
    - *I believe that immigrants should have the same rights as native citizens*
    - *I identify as a rural person*
- Have the group stand in the center of the room. When the facilitator reads their list of identity prompts, each person should move towards the sign that represents their position (agree / disagree / conflicted / neutral). If they don't fully identify with any of these positions, they can stand somewhere in between.
- Leave time for participants to discuss their choice

"Gradually I saw that it was less interesting for me, as an artist, to frame the world wholly according to my own perceptions. I wanted instead to create situations in which I allowed others' perceptions to surface with my own." – Wendy Ewald

Learning & Sharing

i. Tools of the Trade

A critical part of our practice is the focus on media & visual literacy-- we *see,* discuss, critique and recall imagery before we start to make it. During the learning and sharing stage, we begin to produce our own images and learn about the process of giving and receiving critical feedback.

Critical Thinking & Feedback

- We begin our process of critique by first viewing imagery created by media producers who are not present in the room. We look at historical and contemporary media work and discuss,
    - Subject Matter
        - How is the subject matter conveyed or represented? What is the framing-- is it positive or negative.
    - Form
        - How is the image-maker using form to tell a story about the subject matter? Is the imagery in black and white, is it overly saturated, is there handwriting or other contextual information provided?
    - Integrity
        - How was the content gathered? Do they appear to have the consent of the individuals represented?
        - Has the content been researched? What are the indicators?
    - Aesthetics
        - What is the individual voice of the image-maker? How is it indicated?

- Once we've gotten used to the process of discussing the work of others, we begin evaluating our own work. We start with a group critique of our first assignment (*the Community Asset Mapping Scavenger Hunt documentation)*
- Critiques are facilitated by the Lead Educator and are initiated with leading questions:

- ○ What's working in this image?
- ○ What's not working in this image? How is the composition, framing, exposure?
- ○ What is the author attempting to say through the aesthetics and form? Why did they make these choices?
- ○ What's missing from this image?
- If the conversation is moving fluidly between the students, the facilitator should step back and allow the discussion to happen with fewer guiding questions.
- If critiques move into unproductive places (i.e "I think this is bad"), ask for the commenter to give more helpful feedback:
  - ○ What is it you're responding to? Why does it make you feel this way?

Tools for Learning

Tools for teaching the foundations of photography:

- [The Interactive Exposure Tool](#)
- International Center for Photography, [Focus on Photography Curriculum](#)
- Improve Photography: [3 Lesson Plans](#)
- Aperture: *[The Photographer's Playbook](#)*
- Photography as Social Practice: [An](#) [archive](#) [of](#) [research](#) [and](#) [dialogue](#) [around](#) [socially engaged photography](#)

Sharing

Since 1969, Appalshop has produced representational works within, alongside and about its community in eastern Kentucky. Appalshop media makers are committed to living in the same community as the individuals and stories they represent. This principle carries into our work alongside youth, who host a public screening or exhibition of their work at the conclusion of each program followed by a community question and answer period.

Credits

This curriculum was produced by the [Appalachian](#) [Media](#) [Institute](#) at [Appalshop](#), with generous support from [PhotoWings](#), a non-profit whose mission is to highlight and help facilitate the power of photography to influence the world. They help photography to be better understood, created, utilized, seen, and saved.

Special thanks to the students of the Jenkins Middle High School and the Jenkins Photography Workshop with Elizabeth Barrett, Wendy Ewald, Oakley Fugate and Kate Fowler.

PhotoWings has also contributed support to the 2016 Summer Documentary Institute. To watch the films produced by the 2016 youth producers and to read more about the program you can visit our [website](#) or this series on the [Oxford American](#).