Turn out the Lights: Using Night Photography to Teach Exposure to ACOM Students

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Introduction/Need for Idea

As more emphasis is placed on the value of developing students' visual communication skills, photography has become a common course offering in agricultural communications programs (Cannon, Buck, & Specht, 2016; Morgan, 2012; Terry & Bailey-Evans, 1995). Further, the use of innovative instructional methods in photography courses can improve students' creativity (Kennedy & Akers, 2018) and understanding of camera functions, including exposure (Anchell, 2015). Once undergraduate students learn the basic skills, photography teaches them to think critically, independently, and creatively (Bogre, 2014). A two-week "Maymester" photography course is offered as part of the ACOM undergraduate program at Texas Tech University. The entry-level, field-based course focuses on teaching students the basics of exposure and camera operations, while introducing them to concepts of composition and storytelling. Most students enter the course with little to no knowledge of how to operate a camera in manual mode. The course uses a variety of experiential instructional methods, including night photography, to enhance students' understanding of key photographic competencies like exposure. Night photography involves the use of specific photography equipment and an understanding of how to manipulate exposure on a digital single lens reflex (DSLR) camera. The production of quality long exposures at night requires students to learn how to incorporate different light sources into the image, which can make them a better photographer (Biderman & Cooper, 2013). This innovative idea is the use of a challenging night photography experiential learning activity to teach exposure concepts at the beginning of an entry-level agricultural communications photography course.

How It Works

During the first two days of the two-week semester, students received introductory lectures in the classroom about the basics of exposure (shutter speed, ISO, and aperture) to learn about their camera's main functions. The night photography activity occurred in two phases on the third day of class: (1) an in-class session where techniques were discussed and long exposure photograph examples were shown, and (2) a field outing to a farm where students could practice night photography. A farm located within a 30-minute drive from the Texas Tech campus was identified as the location for the night photography outing. In the days leading up to the outing, students were given an equipment list that included their camera, lenses, tripod, shutter release remote, and charged camera battery. Students were also encouraged to bring camping chairs, flashlights, proper outerwear, and snacks to aid with the waiting period between exposures. Students met on campus two hours before sunset and carpooled to the farm. Once at the farm, students were asked to set up their camera equipment and get familiar with their surroundings before sunset. Farm equipment, including a spray rig, a tractor, and an antique combine, served as subjects for the long exposures. During the long exposure activity, students were instructed to set their cameras to specific exposure settings, which required them gain familiarity with their camera's menu, ISO, aperture, and shutter speed functions. The different agricultural subjects set up on the farm were light painted by the instructor while the students captured long exposures. Students each had to make the manual adjustments to their camera settings. A variety of exposure settings were given to students throughout the evening to illustrate how different settings produce different results. Back in the classroom, students were asked to critique their work. At the end of the two-week semester, students provided written feedback about their experiences during the night photography outing.

Results to Date/Implications

While many students admitted the night photography outing was challenging, most found this initial field experience to be beneficial to their overall understanding of exposure. One student said she learned the most during the night photography outing and noted it was helpful to have had the experience early in the course. Other students said night photography pushed them to learn their cameras and its functions. None of the students in the class had any previous experience with creating long exposures. One student said, "I really didn't know anything about my camera going into it, but by the end of the night, I was start to feel confident in how to use my camera." Another student said the night photography activity helped them better understand how light can be used in a photo. One student admitted they had no idea what they were doing at the beginning of the night. "I could not get my settings right, and all of my pictures were very grainy. But I loved doing this. I definitely learned a lot about my camera and light during this experience." Another student noted, "This outing was a little challenging in the beginning due to a lack of knowledge of my camera, but it helped me learn a lot." Despite the positive feedback, some students said the wait-and-see elements of long exposures took too long. One student said, "The night outing was hard for me. I just don't have the patience for it." In addition to grasping the concepts of exposure, students also discussed how the night photography outing helped them understand the value of quality equipment. Some students said they "went too cheap" when buying a tripod, and the activity taught them the importance of sturdy equipment.

Future Plans/Advice for Others

The use of an experiential night photography outing in an entry-level digital photography course does encourage a quicker understanding of exposure settings and camera functions. Night photography will continue to be used in the course as a field experience. Providing an equipment list at the beginning of the course is important to give students plenty of time to acquire the different camera items needed for the outing. Instructors should place a specific emphasis on the importance of a sturdy tripod. Cheap, lightweight tripods will not hold a DSLR camera securely, especially in windy conditions. Another piece of equipment that has repeatedly caused confusion is the shutter release remote. This device helps photographers more easily make long exposures in the camera's "bulb" mode. However, shutter release remotes must be compatible with the student's camera. While making students purchase accessories that were compatible with their cameras was a good learning experience, many chose to buy cheap, generic remotes that rarely work with their camera model. Instructors should provide students with links to remotes that have been proven to work with common camera models, such as the Canon Rebel.

Costs/Resources Needed

In this course, students are responsible for purchasing their own cameras, lenses, and other needed accessories, including a tripod and shutter release remote. The typical entry-level DSLR camera can range in cost between $400-$700. Because photography and videography are an important part of the ACOM degree program, purchasing a DSLR camera is considered a necessary expense for the discipline. This activity can take place in any setting where there is little light pollution, however, establishing a relationship with a landowner in a location away from city lights is helpful when organizing an effective night photography outing in an agricultural setting. Adobe Lightroom Classic software was used in the classroom to manage image workflow and editing. An Adobe Creative Cloud subscription is $19.95 per month for students.

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