

**Still life with school supplies: Teaching agricultural photography through Kolb's  
Experiential Learning Model**

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## **Introduction and Need for Idea**

Modern Americans have limited experience with agriculture. Only 1.4% of the population works directly in the field, creating a stark divide in knowledge regarding the origins of food and fiber (USDA ERS, 2021). One method to educate this population about agriculture is the use of agricultural photography. Agricultural photography is a specialized branch of photography aiming to “illustrate the practice of cultivating, breeding, or harvesting plants and animals to provide food, wool, and other products” (Kohn, 2020, para. 4). Photographs featuring agricultural subjects are frequently used in newspapers, magazines, and websites for both agricultural and non-agricultural audiences (Chapman, 2016; Kohn, 2020).

Quality photographs taken by individuals knowledgeable about both art and agriculture provide powerful visuals and meaningful context to interest and inform those divorced from the industry (Chapman, 2020). However, many agriculturists are unaware of the artistic principles necessary to produce striking, representative images. This study seeks to teach agricultural communications students the basics of agricultural photography through Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model (Kolb, 2014).

## **How it Works**

Students in West Virginia University’s agricultural communications class first receive instruction in photography techniques such as lighting, arrangement, emphasis, balance, depth of field, the rule of thirds, framing, and positioning. Next, students work in groups over three class periods to construct and photograph still lives demonstrating photography techniques. All still lives consist of school and office supplies, and students use their smartphone cameras to capture images. This makes it easy and affordable to source materials, provides students with a variety of objects to photograph, and allows them to learn more about the technological tools they use every day. The still life activity serves as the concrete experience portion of Kolb’s theory (Kolb, 2014) and introduces the basics of photography.

Once photography is complete, student photographs are evaluated for completion and understanding. Students also take time to reflect on their new photographic knowledge and discuss how good photography can create positive and effective representations of agriculture. Reflection occurs both through class discussion and through individual writing activities. Reflection questions begin with Jacobson and Ruddy’s (2004) five-question model for guiding critical reflection during experiential learning processes. Later questions follow up organically with student comments. This portion of the activity relates to the second and third parts of Kolb’s theory, which concern themselves with reflection on the outcomes of the concrete experience and the development of plans for performance in future situations (Kolb, 2014).

Finally, students complete an independent photo series activity requiring the use of course photographic techniques in a less structured situation. For this assignment, students select an agriculture-related subject of their choice and represent it visually to a general audience through a series of five photographs. Students must also provide a brief written explanation

highlighting the techniques used in each photograph and their impact on the photograph's overall appearance. The photo series assignment correlates with the active experimentation portion of Kolb's theory, in which learners test their knowledge by applying it to the world around them in novel situations (Kolb, 2014). These assignments are graded by the instructor for completeness, photograph quality, and proper use of techniques.

### **Results and Implications**

Results to date indicate this activity is an engaging way to introduce and practice basic photographic techniques in an agricultural communications class. Collected reflections indicate students are recognizing the power of photography as a storytelling tool, they benefit from the ability to practice photography and observe results, and enjoy learning to use smartphones cameras more adeptly. Students also mention how this activity encourages creative thinking and planning when taking photographs instead of simply snapping pictures.

### **Future Plans and Advice**

Future plans for this study include gathering in-depth information on students' views, efficacy levels, and skills regarding photography basics. These data will be gathered through pre-lesson and post-lesson tests, as well as through discussion and written reflection. The researchers will compare pre- and post- efficacy and skill scores using a t-test, and will continue to analyze discussion and reflection for emerging and continuing themes.

Other plans for this study involve adding an expanded human and animal photography component to the lesson. Despite using similar base techniques as still life photography, human and animal photography requires its own skill set and knowledge. Knowing how to take quality photographs of people and animals will benefit agricultural communications students and empower them to portray the industry more effectively.

### **Cost and Resources Needed**

This study uses common items that are available to students and instructors, making it low cost or even free. Students construct still lives from school supplies such as books, pencils, pens, rulers, markers, protractors, paperclips, and storage containers. The instructor provides some of these items for use, and students are invited to include their own items as well. The instructor also provides a list of photographs that students must take. Lists can either be printed on paper or displayed on a projector screen for students to reference. Students use their own smartphones to photograph their still lives, which saves money and teaches them to work with the technology they are most likely already using for photography.

### **References**

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