Teaching Digital Photography: Starting a Program at Your School

by KEITH KYKER

TECHNOLOGY-BASED ELECTIVES are among the most popular classes in schools. Elementary students learn the basics of computer operation and keyboarding. Middle school students learn popular office applications and website design. And it’s not uncommon for high school students to graduate with a portfolio of industry certifications from Microsoft and Adobe. As information technology leaders in their schools, school librarians often seek to become involved in this important educational trend. However, without software-specific training and computer science certification, many find themselves on the outside looking in.

Fortunately, there’s a technology-infused elective that allows school librarians to integrate media literacy, communication, and computer skills into the school’s course offerings. That class is digital photography.

This article will examine the content options for a digital photography class. Also featured will be the hardware, software, and print resources necessary for success.

YOU DON’T HAVE TO KNOW EVERYTHING...

Before we continue, let me emphasize that you don’t need to be a professional photographer or a Photoshop master to teach a digital photography class. You simply need to have an interest in learning these skills and teaching them to your students. Most teachers understand this concept: you don’t have to know everything before teaching anything. This is especially true with digital photography class. The first year I taught the class, I was just a few days ahead of the students in the photography book and software manual (more on that later.) My ability to teach and my love of the learning process served as cornerstones for the success of the class. I think that most school librarians share those qualities and can, therefore, be successful in teaching a digital photography class.

DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY CLASS TOPICS

There are four main topics—photography, digital image improvement, adding text, and digital layout—to include in a digital photography class. You can design your course based on your students’ needs, your personal interest, and the amount of time that you have with your students. In my full-year, daily digital photography class for 7th and 8th grade students, I can provide lessons, activities, and extended projects in all four of these areas.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Teaching students to create good pictures using a digital camera is the primary building block of a digital photography class. Students should learn the basic operation of their cameras, including using the auto-focus feature, selecting the proper flash mode, and accessing the various pre-set controls for creating pictures in diverse physical settings. More advanced students (with more advanced cameras) can learn about adjusting shutter speed and aperture size to gain further control of the camera.

Students can also learn photographic composition concepts that will improve the aesthetic appeal of their pictures. These concepts include:

▶ Using Depth: A good photographic image has fore-
ground, middle ground, and background. A picture with many different levels draws the viewer into the picture. Teach students to avoid creating flat shots.

Finding the Right Height: A beginning photographer will create all pictures from eye level. You can teach students to create images from low and high perspectives.

Creating a Focal Point: Teach your students to make sure that all of their pictures have an obvious subject. This is especially true when creating pictures of natural landscapes. Photographs emulate the real world. A “pretty view” is fine for paintings, but most viewers hold photography to a different standard.

Utilizing the Rule of Thirds: Basically stated, your subject should not be the center of your picture. Divide your screen into thirds, in effect drawing a tic-tac-toe grid on the screen. (Many cameras display this grid on the viewfinder screen.) The subjects of your picture should be along those lines.

Using Lines: Lines are all around us—the edges of buildings, the horizon, the petals of a flower. Some lines are straight and others are curved. Pictures with horizontal and vertical lines create a feeling of stability. Diagonal lines create a dynamic, action-oriented mood. Curved lines are natural and organic. You can teach your students to take advantage of naturally-occurring lines in their photography.

DIGITAL IMAGE IMPROVEMENT

Students can use popular software to improve the images that they create with their digital cameras. Some of the basic techniques include:

Rotating the image to compensate for mistakenly tilted images.

Cropping the image to eliminate unwanted sections and to shift the emphasis to the desired subject.

Adjusting the shadows, highlights, brightness, and contrast.

Adjusting the colors.

Most popular digital imaging software programs also offer advanced techniques including blurring all or part of the image, selecting only part of the image to adjust, and “healing” (eliminating) unwanted elements, such as power lines and telephone poles, from the picture. Students can also under-

DIGITAL LAYOUT PROJECTS

The most complex skill set involves digital layout techniques. Students create sophisticated projects by combining pictures, text, and shapes. An example would be a magazine cover featuring a cover-sized picture, two or three small inserted images, geometric shapes, a stylized text title, and text take advanced adjustments, including adding artistic effects to images and creating composites of two or more images.

ADDING TEXT

The next step in working with digital images is adding text to the cropped, adjusted images. Typically all of the fonts installed on the computer, as well as more artistic fonts included with the digital imaging software, are available when adding text to digital images. Students can change the color and size of the text as well.

Most programs allow for the addition of “styles” to text, including outlines, drop shadows, glows, and bevels. Students can also experiment with advanced effects, such as “warping” the text and liquefying the text (imagine the text DRIP on the screen, with the bottom parts of the letters forming a pattern of water drops.)

Many simple projects can be completed using the skills of photography, image adjustment, and text. Students could create simple magazine advertisements, movie posters, and book covers. Just imagine assigning each student one of the books from your state award list. They could create an illustrative digital image, crop it to book cover size, improve it, and add text. These projects would look great displayed in your library!
When the projects get this involved, you will want to provide specific project requirements and grading criteria. My latest book, *Teaching Digital Photography: The Ultimate Guide to Tween and Teen Learning* (Libraries Unlimited, 2014), contains more than twenty projects to engage your students’ creativity and digital imaging skills. You can find student-created examples of many of these projects on my website (TeachingDigitalPhotography.com).

**WHAT YOU NEED**

Maybe now you’re thinking about starting your own digital photography class. Let’s look at the hardware, software, and books that you’ll need to get started.

**HARDWARE**

You will need several digital cameras for your students to use in class. Simple point-and-shoot cameras like the Sony W800 or the Canon Powershot A2500 sell for less than $100 and work well in the school setting. I try to provide one camera for every three students enrolled in my class. Many students will bring their own cameras, and students can share the classroom cameras. Of course, you’ll need to make sure you provide memory cards and cables for transferring the pictures to the computer for editing. You will also need to plan for recharging the camera batteries between class sessions.

Ideally, each student should have access to his or her own computer during the class time. For this reason, a computer lab makes the best classroom for digital photography. Alternatively, students enrolled in a school with a one-to-one laptop program already have access to the computer that they need for the class.

**SOFTWARE**

Adobe Photoshop Elements is a popular, inexpensive program for teaching digital photography and digital layout skills (Kyker 2014). Your school may have a site-license for Adobe Photoshop, the industry standard software. If so, that’s a great choice as well, although a bit less “friendly” than the consumer-oriented Elements version.

If you choose to look beyond the Adobe product line, just make sure that the software includes the ability to adjust images and create multi-layer layout projects. Most software accomplishes the former task, while only a few facilitate the latter.

**BOOKS**

If you’re a relative newcomer to digital photography, digital imaging software, or teaching a digital photography class, you’ll definitely need some specific guidance. Fortunately, advice is available on all three topics in print format.

A few minutes spent browsing a bookstore will probably reveal several books on photography. This is especially important if you don’t have extensive training or experience in photography yourself. Remember, most of your students will probably be using “point-and-shoot” digital cameras, not professional-level DSLRs. Your book purchase should reflect that need. Look for a book that provides examples of photographic composition techniques.

A second book that you’ll need will be a manual for the software that you plan to use. There was a time when software came with a printed manual; it’s not that way anymore. Fortunately, there are several options out there. My personal favorite is “The Missing Manual” series. These manuals are widely available for purchase and eBook download.

Finally, you will need a professional resource that explains the scope and sequence of teaching digital photography and layout skills, and provides skills-based project plans and grading rubrics (Kyker 2014).

Do you need to buy these resources for your students? No—these will serve as your professional resources as you teach the class. In my time as a secondary school digital photography teacher, I haven’t seen the need to provide a printed textbook for each student.

**GRAB YOUR CAMERA**

In conclusion, I believe that teaching a digital photography class is a great instructional opportunity for school librarians. In belt-tightening budgetary times, school librarians are often required to teach one or more elective classes to fill out student schedules. You probably have access to a computer lab, and the digital cameras that you’ll need are relatively inexpensive. My guess is that your knowledge of the instructional process, combined with your visual and media literacy skills, will help you create a class that will be among the most popular in the school.

Grab your camera, buy some inexpensive software and resource books, and contemplate this new opportunity. Who knows? Maybe this spring when your principal and guidance counselors are designing next year’s schedule, you can pull them aside and describe the digital photography class that you’d like to teach. That’s how I got started, and I haven’t regretted it for a minute.

**REFERENCES:**
