

## Research, pedagogy and power

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Sometimes the medium of photographic research is photography itself. Sometimes it is thought and observation. Sometimes it is writing. Finding words – sometimes necessarily difficult, obscure, complicated words – to articulate the known but unsaid or unacknowledged within any practice is part of a process of positive self-actualization. This is true for photographers, as it is for anyone else.

The first seminar that I teach to arriving undergraduate photojournalism and documentary photography students each year is about language. It involves reading a chapter from Roland Barthes's *Image, Music, Text*. We talk about its meaning, but first we talk about the experience of encountering it as a piece of writing. The last time we did this, one student responded with anger, saying it 'made me feel stupid,' which is as good an illustration as any of the power of language. Depending on how it is handled, theoretical language can either be part of what bell hooks calls the 'practice of freedom,' or a totally alienating obstacle.

The Academic Literacies model provides a framework for acknowledging the pressure faced by students as they negotiate unfamiliar literacy practices. These are understood as social practices that often uphold relationships of power and authority. One of the things that distinguishes this model is its attention to the problem of tacit-ness or implicitness, which always expresses a power relationship: the student experience of having to adapt to the language of higher education is often stressful, and teachers often fail explicitly to acknowledge this, instead maintaining a further tacit expectation that students must either navigate these barriers independently or fail to progress. Students thus either occupy a privileged position as insiders of academic discourse, or are excluded and disempowered, particularly in relation to the teacher. Within and around the written word, power relations are played out and identities are forged. In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks writes that, 'when our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes evident is the bond between the two – that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other.'

Calls for more accessible language in academic research are common, but on the other hand there is the view that, 'the love of clear writing turns out to be a hatred of language, a hatred that

motivates a refusal to teach.’ In an article subtitled ‘The Pedagogical Politics of Clarity,’ Douglas Sadao Aoki further notes the ‘commonsensical conviction that good teaching, like good writing, makes its meaning clear and accessible – a thing that speaks for itself.’ But language is not just a vehicle for meaning; language *is* meaning. Writing is thinking. I can give a summarised account of a difficult piece of writing, but unless it is a *bad* piece of difficult writing, something will be lost.

Photography, too, is supposed to ‘speak for itself’. As well as a resistance to difficult language, I also witness a kind of affront from some students and photographers at research that ‘over-analyses’ images which should be left alone to speak their requisite ‘thousand words’ with self-evident clarity. Sometimes it’s appropriate to respond to images with silence. But just as the default rejection of theoretical language ends up being an implicit acceptance of exclusion from the discourse of power (or a refusal to teach), those of us who occupy positions inside the academic discourse of photography can choose whether research contributes to education as the practice of freedom, or of oppression.