CREATIVE TEACHING: A CASE STUDY

ABSTRACT

The paper reports on a student project that combined my creative interests in social work teaching and photography. The common ground between social work and photography was demonstrated through an audio-visual presentation entitled *An alternative view of Durban* which was presented at the Annual Congress of the Photographic Society of Southern Africa (PSSA) held in Durban in 1996. The audio-visual show of the case study of the women of Block A K was first presented at the IASSW Congress in Washington in 1992 and the accompanying paper was published in the *International Journal of Social Work* in 1994.

When I was first invited to talk about the work that I do at a photographic congress, I was quite mystified as to how I would present social work to an audience of photographers drawn from all over South Africa and all walks of life. This challenge led me to think about the relationship between my work and my photography, both of which I love with a passion. What follows is the text of my talk, which was illustrated with accompanying slides taken during my work with students on field trips.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL WORK AND PHOTOGRAPHY

You might well ask *What do social work and photography have in common?* I am going to demonstrate their common ground using a visual metaphor which will bring me to the eventual topic for my presentation: *An alternative view of Durban*.

Vision is about seeing, but seeing encompasses more than merely observing the world around us. It encompasses understanding and knowing, seeing accurately and doing justice to the phenomena we observe. My understanding of the world around me is expressed in the way in which I describe or record what I see. Whether in my writing or in my photography, a filtering process takes place, which determines the way in which I communicate what I see to others. The filter is my ideology, my ideas, values and beliefs about the world around me and the more aware I am of my ideology, the more I understand why I interpret or explain things the way I do. This might sound far too philosophical for some but it is important to the way in which I see the relationship between my work and my photography, and the way in which I am going to present you my alternative view of Durban.

AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF DURBAN

*Why an alternative view of Durban?* you might well ask, and the answer quite simply is that I want to show you Durban as few tourists might see it (and remember when I say *see* I don’t mean just seeing visually, but seeing and understanding). The slides I am going to show you were taken when I accompanied a group of social work and community development students on a field trip around Durban. I always tell my students about my experience when I was first introduced to photography and how I felt that I had been born with a new pair of eyes. Suddenly I became acutely aware of the world around me. I noticed things I had never seen before. As I composed a picture, I noticed all the elements in my picture and how the light played upon my subject matter.
Recording with light is what photography is all about and light has also long been associated with seeing anew. I suddenly saw the light: I reached a new understanding, and so it was when I started taking pictures. This was an exciting and invigorating time for me. The possibilities were endless. Over the years of my photography, I have learnt to see ever differently, first seeing everything in great detail according to the labels I attached to those subjects and then learning to remove those labels and to see an infinite variety of patterns, shapes, colours and textures in my subject matter. I learnt to make the petals of a flower look like a mighty abyss.

I equipped all the students with cameras, asked a local photographic supplier to donate film, which they willingly did, and off we went on our expedition. I knew when we sat in the quiet of the classroom to observe our slides, suddenly we would see far more than we had seen on our field trip. And so it was. The students realised how little they were seeing even though they were looking all the time. I could add to the visual image information about my understanding of the communities we had visited and the people we had seen. This is where my filtering devices came through. My ideology determined my interpretation of what we had seen, and the students' experience and understanding, which was often vastly different from my own, enriched our discussions. Let me try and show you what I mean.

In Durban near the Greyville racecourse, lived a community of women whom most people saw as a blot on the landscape of Durban believing that the sooner they were moved the better. Some years back I had taught a course on poverty to a group of second-year social work students and had, with the help of a third-year social anthropology student, made an in-depth study of this community of women living on the pavements of Durban. Most of them had come from the rural areas to find work. Their families had been driven off the farms where they had lived for ages. Most of their husbands were alcoholics and/or unemployed. They had families to support, and parents and children who were still living in the rural areas. Since no work was available in Durban, these women had in true entrepreneurial spirit begun selling containers to make an income. They took up residence on the streets in makeshift shelters, there being nowhere else to go. The townships were wracked with violence and the lifestyle there was quite foreign to these rural women. Things which we took for granted became a major stumbling block for them. Crossing the busy streets was a nightmare and several women had been killed doing just that. A thriving community developed - a community in the true sense of the word with the women helping one another to learn to live in their new urban environment. Soon a leader emerged, mostly because of her ability to speak English, and over time the women were able to negotiate a deal with the local authorities to enable them to live and trade in the community which became known as Block A K.

Initially a garage owner nearby sold them water for 25 cents a litre and later the corporation installed taps and a few mobile toilets. Water was crucial to their business since they procured disused containers from chemical and oil companies, which they sold to people from the rural areas who needed them for carrying and storing water. It was estimated that rural women spent up to three hours a day every day fetching and carrying water. The containers were also used for collecting rain water that ran off houses; smaller barrels were used for brewing beer since the close-fitting lids were ideal for fermentation, and they were also used as buckets for the storage of dry goods for everyday use. The women also made and sold pillows and sleeping mats for the station vendors and for people returning to the rural areas. Others bought large containers of paraffin and detergents and decanted them into smaller bottles for sale at the station. Some of the women were earning in excess of R2000 a month for their labours. This was an honest wage. They worked hard. They walked great distances to procure their containers. Even washing them
was a major accomplishment, given the scarce water supply to the community. Surely this was better than begging or stealing? With this new understanding about the women of Block A K, the students began to see them quite differently. They were an example of survival against all odds and were to be admired rather than scorned.

Nearby, the basket sellers at the station were women who traded in traditional crafts, which included grass baskets and mats, beadwork, carvings, and crocheted goods. Some of them came from as far afield as Zimbabwe. They travelled to Durban where they anticipated a more profitable and better market for their goods. Many of them returned with goods not obtainable at home partly as a result of that country's foreign currency restrictions and import controls. Those who had done particularly well might afford hotel accommodation. Those who had not, slept on the pavements surrounded by their possessions and their products. They bought rubber mats and pillows from the container sellers to make their situation on the pavement more comfortable. Their primary interaction was with commuters since they were situated outside the main railway station where they had created a small commercial focus. Food vendors had attached themselves to this group and supplied them and the passing trade with hot and cold drinks and cooked meals.

Over the road from the basket sellers was the taxi rank. The taxis were the main mode of transport for people living in remote areas, which were otherwise inaccessible. Informal food vendors at the taxi rank competed with the formal business sector restaurants and cafes in the area. Fresh produce was also sold, along with decanted cleaning agents and paraffin for fuel. Taxi owners took great pride in their vehicles, which were kept immaculate by street children, who provided a car wash service and were an important part of this informal system.

Many taxi owners used the services of the mechanics situated further around the block. The mechanics had been operating in the area for over fifteen years. The cost of their repairs was competitive, their service was good and, since they worked on the pavement, they had low overheads, which helped to increase their profit margin. They had a steady stream of customers, some of whom had been using their services for years. The owner of the business lived in an urban township. While some of the mechanics in his employ lived in the area, others commuted to their homes where they could be reached by telephone outside their usual working hours.

Another stop on our whirlwind tour took us to the Dalton Road Hostel, situated in the heart of Durban in Sydney Road. Hostels were a direct result of the apartheid system, which prevented men who were needed for cheap labour in the city from living there with their families. Men were housed in hostels in the cities and on the mines. Their families stayed on the farms. They sent money home and visited when they could, which was not often given their long hours of hard labour. Conditions in these hostels were appalling and never questioned and they remain the same today as the slides showed.

Photography has helped me see and understand the poverty around me. I remember once going to Peru, where I saw poverty for the first time. It dawned on me that the same kind of poverty existed right on my doorstep at home but I never saw it. Like millions of South Africans I could go to work each day and never see the poverty because it was contained in townships and hostels on the city's periphery. This has changed now. Group areas and apartheid legislation has gone and the poverty has spilled into the cities. Which brings me to the third leg of our field trip to Kwa Mashu, through Inanda, Bhambayi and the Phoenix Settlement. Here I saw the destruction the violence had wrought and I began to understand why people, especially street children, had fled to the cities.

Finally, and even closer to home, was the sprawling informal settlement of Cato Crest. Here there were many heartening examples of the strength of the human will to survive. Who would believe that it housed a chicken farm. So great was the demand for chickens that it would take a hundred
Surely this was Block A K, the against all odds

such "farms" to meet the supply. Right next door was a crèche, one of many in this community, and children had taken over a former white school in the community nearby, so hungry were they for an education. We saw only makeshift homes when we passed by, another blot on the landscape, but like the rough-hewn oyster they harboured pearls within.

This world is the world we want our Social Work students to see and understand. We are training our future social workers to have a desire and commitment to work towards eradicating, or at least minimising, poverty in our communities. Sixty per cent of our population is poor. Many of our communities within 25 kilometres of the city centre are without water, electricity and essential services. The people here live in overcrowded conditions. They cannot find work and more and more are turning to a life of crime. We, the affluent, are the victims. The only way that this will be turned around is through development. Research has shown that improving the quality of people's lives changes their aspirations and leads to a drop in population growth. It is this and not contraception which makes the difference. The population growth rate for urban areas is 2.7 children per family as compared with 5.7 in rural areas. Development is the key but it is a mammoth task.

This then is my alternative view of Durban. Ironically, it is a view more and more tourists come to see. People now want to see the townships, to meet traditional healers and to visit a shebeen. These are our new tourist locations. Just the other day I accompanied a party of 24 Americans on a 'development tour' of Durban. Juxtaposed against the beautiful seafront, the modern shopping centres and the extravagant suburban homes is another world, an alternative view of Durban.

I hope that I have helped you to see Durban differently, to understand its beauty and its poverty. It is the sad side of Durban that social workers see, but they are heartened by the strength of the human spirit, the ability of people to survive in the most adverse circumstances and still to maintain hope. Children who choose a harsh life on the streets must surely be trying to escape a worse life in the townships. Like the pavement women of Block A K they are trying to survive in the only way they know how.

So photography, like social work, is a vehicle for seeing. Just because you do not see the poverty does not mean it is not there and even if you do see it, it does not mean that you see it as it really is. You impose your own insight, understanding and experience on what you see. Often you might look and not see at all. We focus selectively on the world around us. Photography teaches us to see the whole frame, to see every element of the composition. There is then a relationship between social work and photography. Both are media through which I have broadened my understanding of the world around me.

REFERENCES