

TALLIS ACTION RESEARCH

Action Research Report 2016

JON NICHOLLS

If I develop a mini project focused on Threshold Concepts with my Year 10 photography class, will they become more persistent and imaginative, better able to stick with difficulty, make connections and play with possibilities?

Section 1: Context

I have been teaching GCSE photography for three years since we began the course at Thomas Tallis School. Photography is oversubscribed each year. We have experimented with running two classes, one for Inclusion students, but we currently have only one mixed ability class in both Years 9 and 10. Photography forms part of the AQA Art & Design specification. I have selected my Year 10 photography class as the subject of this Action Research Project. I also taught them in Year 9. The class currently contains 25 students, 15 of them female. The class is mixed in ability. The mean KS2 average grade is 4B. Two students have an FFT grade prediction of A. Currently (January 2016) end of course predictions for five members of the class are one or more grades below their FFT grade. The class is generally well-motivated and enthusiastic about the subject. There are very few behaviour issues but I am aware that a small number of students are in danger of under-performing based on prior attainment. This is largely because they struggle to work independently when needed and find self-discipline a challenge.

Students document their work as an ePortfolio using the Weebly online website creation platform. I have created [a website](#) which serves as a combination of teaching resource used by colleagues and as a student guide to best practice. This site is the primary vehicle for sharing information with students in and outside lessons.

Section 2: The Issue

“It can sometimes seem that the distance between knowing and not knowing is negligible: we teach students something they didn’t know and then they know it. But this appearance of learning is, in many cases just the first tentative steps in embedding new concepts in long-term memory. In actual fact, the gap – or liminal space – between knowing and not knowing is mysterious and largely hidden from us. Liminality is a transitional, transformational state where we are in the initial stages of a process, or occupying a position at, or on, both sides of a boundary; what the anthropologist Victor Turner described as “betwixt and between”. This state of restless flux is something all of us struggle to pin down even in our own minds.

-- David Didau, [Learning is Liminal](#)

Last year, I developed a set of [Threshold Concepts for photography](#). They were targeted primarily at Year 12 A level photography students. Since then, as we have reflected on the use of Threshold Concepts across the school at all key stages, I began to wonder about GCSE students’ understanding of them. How might I encourage students to remain in the struggle zone for a longer period, navigating their way through the liminality of being “betwixt and between”, tackling troublesome knowledge? Perhaps I needed to extend the period of time in which students were able to stick with difficulty, rather than moving on to other topics? Could less be more? Consequently, I designed a mini project to introduce my Year 10 class to two of the Concepts in an attempt to test ways of making them relevant to the work they were doing. Part of our signature pedagogy across the arts subjects at Tallis is encouraging students to think and behave like artists. I was keen in this mini project to encourage students to investigate not only the photographs created by a particular photographer (Saul Leiter), spending longer than usual responding to a body of work from one artist, but also to consider aspects of his practice - equipment, studio, mediums, influences, attitude to life etc. I hoped that this would encourage the students to reflect on the way they felt about their own work, the choices they made, the ways in which they were oriented to the discipline of photography and, possibly, how they responded to lived experience. I was concerned about the ability of some students to stick with difficulty, make connections and play with possibilities. Some tend to see photography as a practical activity and are sometimes resistant to thinking hard about it. I wondered if there was a connection between theory and practice, whether a better understanding of photography as a practice and discipline might lead to a more sophisticated response to a particular stimulus.

Section 3: Research

Continuing the research I began two years ago (in my [previous Action Research project](#)), I have explored several texts and resources related to this particular project. These are detailed in the bibliography. Research about [Threshold Concepts in art](#) and the notion of ‘troublesome knowledge’ has helped me develop a set of big ideas for my subject. I have been much influenced by the notion of risk in education (Biesta) and various writers who have explored the ways in which students reach understanding in a visual arts context (Atkinson and Thompson).

Section 4: Action

My research question was therefore:

If I develop a mini project focused on Threshold Concepts with my Year 10 photography class, will they become more persistent and imaginative, better able to stick with difficulty, make connections and play with possibilities?

Persistent - Sticking with difficulty
Imaginative - Playing with possibilities

The mini project focused on one photographer’s practice (Saul Leiter) including a trip to see an exhibition of his images (March 2016). I identified the key Threshold Concepts relevant to the enquiry. I planned to encourage students to photograph ‘In the style of...’, developing and refining their images over a

longer period than previously. I intended to explore imaginative research strategies with students - wondering, asking interesting questions, making connections etc. I was interested in exploring with the students the difference between copying (inauthentic) and inspiration (authentic influence). For example, I was keen to share Saul Leiter's own influences and connections to work of other artists/photographers, including his own work as a painter and its influence on his photography.

As well as using questionnaires for the whole class at the beginning and end of the project, I selected a small group of students (representing a range of abilities, talents and levels of interest in photography) who I interviewed about their experience, asking them a set of standard questions:

- What have you found challenging in this project?
- What do you think you have been taught about photography?
- Where do you find good ideas for photography projects?
- How do you know when you are working successfully in photography?
- What questions do you still have about photography?

Context: The scheme of work

The mini project based on the work of Saul Leiter formed part of a longer enquiry about [abstraction](#) in photography. This afforded me the opportunity to tackle some big ideas about the (hotly contested) nature of photography and present the theory that all photographs are more or less abstract. The scheme of work was structured as follows:

1. What does 'abstract' mean in the context of photography?
2. The Formal Elements in photography
3. Close analysis of Paul Strand's *Abstraction, Twin Lakes, Connecticut*, 1916
4. A sequence of practical experiments in school and at home exploring one or more of the Formal Elements to create abstract photographs
5. What are photograms? Research with examples
6. Initial experiments in the darkroom
7. Photogram cut-ups
8. Creating a duotone in Photoshop from a scanned photogram
9. Presentation of final outcomes demonstrating sequence of experiments with evaluation
10. Research about photographers whose work might be considered abstract
11. Detailed analytical writing about one photograph, chosen by the student, using prompts related to [Bloom's taxonomy](#) (for photography)
12. Saul Leiter mini project

The Saul Leiter mini project:

This was structured as follows:

- Students were asked to make a list of at least 5 characteristics (typical things) that define Leiter's photographs
- They added a gallery of Leiter photographs to their websites.
- They chose their favourite and wrote a detailed analysis of it using the following prompts:
 - a. Why did you choose this image in particular?
 - b. What is surprising or unusual about this photograph?
 - c. Look carefully and choose ONE of the Formal Elements that you think is important photograph in the photograph (E.g. **Focus, Light, Line, Repetition, Shape, Space, Texture, Value/Tone**).
 - d. Describe why you think it is important (2 or 3 sentences)
 - e. In what ways are Saul Leiter's photographs abstract?
- The students then found a quotation by Saul Leiter, explaining why they chose it and how it helped them understand the photographer's work.
- They watched a trailer for a film about Saul Leiter made just before he died and wrote briefly about what they learned from it.
- Students were asked to do some more research about Saul Leiter in preparation for the trip to the [exhibition at The Photographers' Gallery](#).
- They attempted to photograph like Saul Leiter, thinking carefully about **composition, framing, focus, depth of field, colour, pattern, reflections** etc.
- They analysed the compositions in Saul Leiter's photographs using a DTP programme.
- They identified similarities between Saul Leiter's paintings and photographs.
- They then attempted to create a painted version of one of Saul Leiter's photographs using an A5 piece of cartridge paper and watercolours, writing a short paragraph about the experience of making the painting and what they had learned about the photograph in the process.
- Using a piece of coloured card with various shapes (apertures) cut into it, students explored the shallow depth of field and use of obstructions typical of Leiter's street photographs.

Trip to the Photographers' Gallery

The trip had two aims:

1. Students would get to see Saul Leiter's photographs, paintings and sketchbooks first hand in London's specialist public photography gallery
2. They would spend a few hours photographing on the streets, influenced by Saul Leiter

The trip was organised for 12th of February but, due to an administrative error in school, was postponed to 11th March. The cost was entirely free and I was delighted that every member of the class bar one (whose attendance was very poor) was able to attend.

Final outcomes

These are the instructions I gave to the students about their final outcomes:

By now you should have lots of 'abstract' photographs inspired by Saul Leiter and other photographers. The final challenge is to consider the best way of **editing, selecting, arranging** and **displaying** them as resolved outcomes.

Edit: You could experiment in iPhoto and/or Photoshop with converting colour images to black and white, altering contrast, saturation or colour balance. Remember, subtle changes can make a big difference to the effectiveness of your photographs. You may wish to layer your images, experimenting with the blending mode. However, this can look like you are trying to disguise a badly taken photograph with tricky effects. Be careful!

Select: It's OK to be really selective, working with just a few images from the many you have taken. Look for connections between images. Select the most effective images for some special treatment or display but think carefully about how they look together and how they convey your understanding of a particular subject or experience. Think about the sequence (order) of your images. Experiment with different selections and sequences before you make a final decision.

Arrange: Do your photographs need to be arranged individually or as a set? Do they need to be the same size as each other? Do they need to be mounted in any way? Perhaps 2 (diptych) or 3 (triptych) images look great together. Will you print the pictures or make them available online? Will they be static or animated? Would they make an interesting book or zine?

Display: How imaginative do you want to be with display? You may want to look at [this Pinterest board](#) for some ideas.

Due to the delayed trip to the gallery, and the unusually short half term, I decided to extend the project beyond the Easter holiday. I was keen to ensure that students made the most of their experience, using the holidays to make more images independently, and resolving the project to the best of their ability. I had not spent this long on a single project before so felt a little uncomfortable. However, I felt that we all needed to be persistent and work towards successful, fully resolved and carefully presented outcomes. My hope was that this could be a real turning point for the students where they began to take more control of their work, preparing them for the final, self-directed coursework project and the Unit 2 externally set task.

Section 5: Findings

In order to triangulate the evidence I needed to gather about the effectiveness of these strategies, I selected the following evaluation strategies:

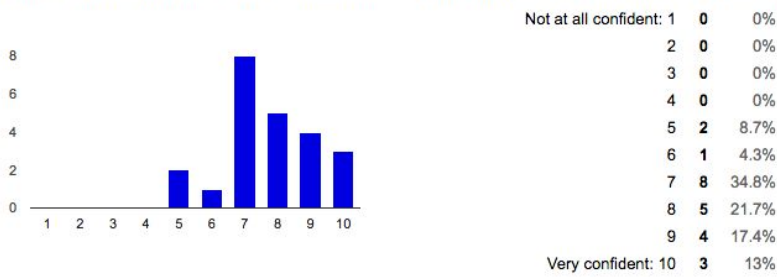
1. Student questionnaires (beginning and end)
2. Students' ePortfolio documentation and quality of their photographs
3. Interviews with sample of students

Student Survey Responses:

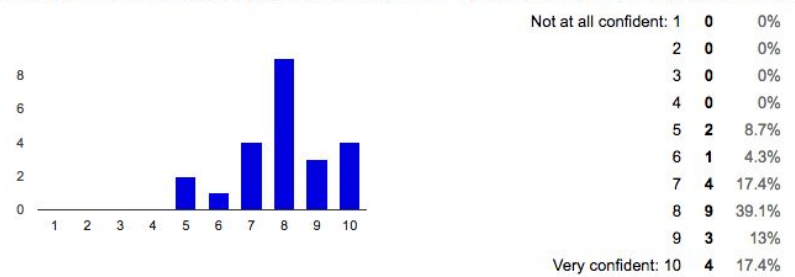
BEGINNING:

END:

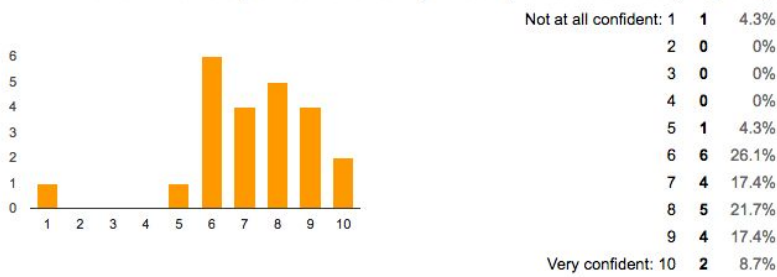
DISCIPLINED: How confident do you feel now about your ability to craft and improve your work in photography?



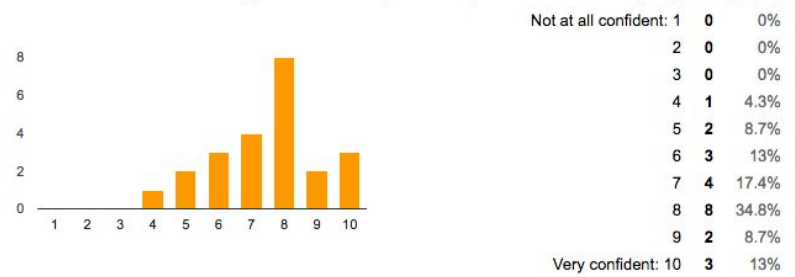
DISCIPLINED: How confident do you feel about your ability to craft and improve your work in photography?



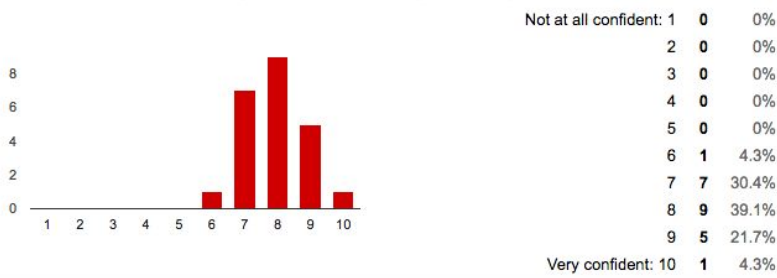
DISCIPLINED: How confident do you feel now about your ability to reflect critically in photography?



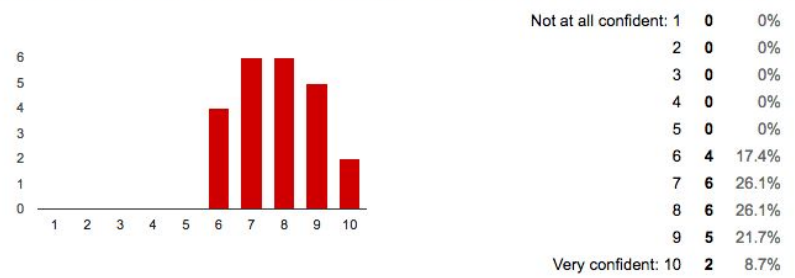
DISCIPLINED: How confident do you feel about your ability to reflect critically in photography?



DISCIPLINED: How confident do you feel now about your ability to develop techniques in photography?

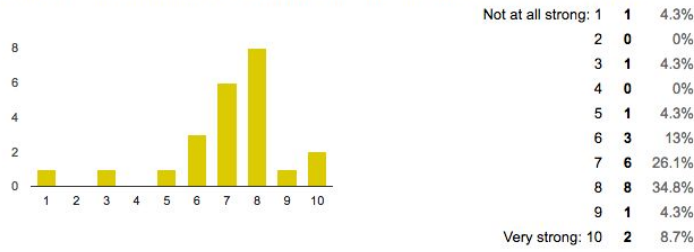


DISCIPLINED: How confident do you feel about your ability to develop techniques in photography?

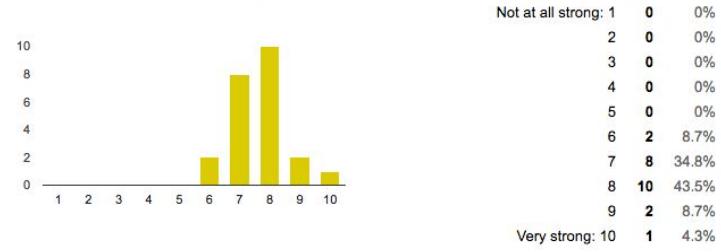


Responses to the first section of the questionnaire reveal that, prior to the mini project, students overall felt slightly less confident at reflecting critically about their own and others' photography project than they did about crafting and improving or developing new techniques. This confirmed my hunch that they find some of the more cognitive aspects of the subject more challenging. It might also reflect the fact that their understanding of photography as a discipline is still developing. Following the project, confidence levels in all three sub habits of being disciplined appear to have increased slightly.

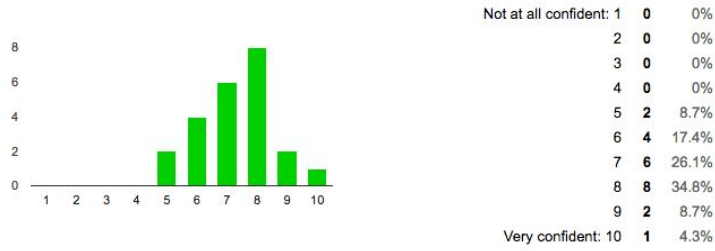
How would you rate your ability to think hard about your own work in photography?



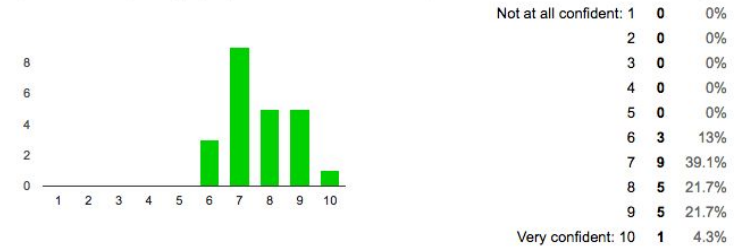
How would you rate your ability to think hard about your own work in photography?



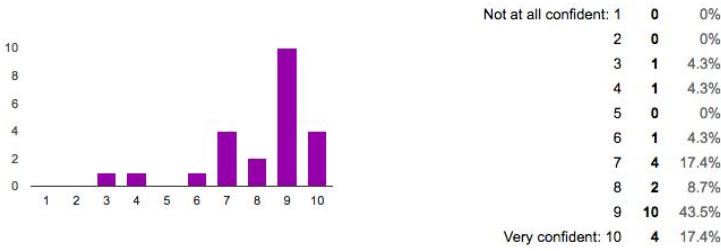
When you look at a photograph you haven't seen before, how confident do you feel about your ability to think about it?



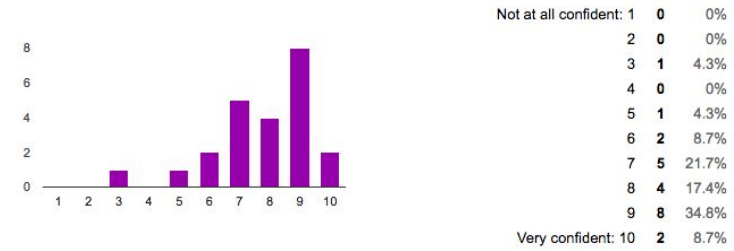
When you look at a photograph you haven't seen before, how confident do you feel about your ability to think about it?



How confident do you feel about making photographs inspired by other photographers' work?

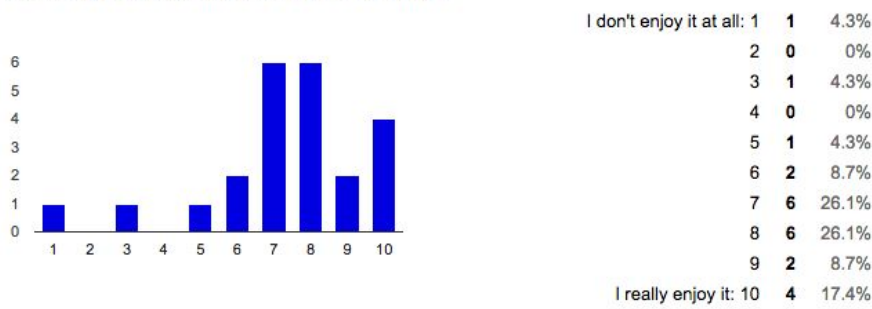


How confident do you feel about making photographs inspired by other photographers' work?

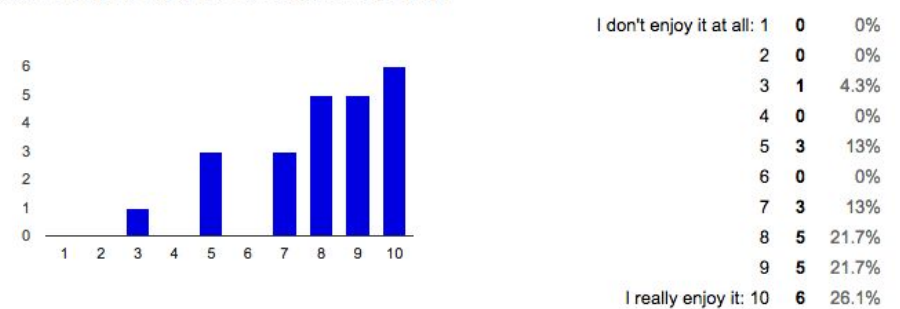


The first survey responses indicated that levels of confidence were very mixed with regard to the more reflective and critical aspects of the course. Thinking hard and discussing photography generated some more negative responses. I am sure that most students enjoy the doing and feel much less confident about the thinking and talking. This is reflected in the responses comparing writing about and making photographs. 40.9% of those questioned were ambivalent at best about their enjoyment of writing compared with 77.3% who scored 9 or 10 for making photographs. One of the major challenges for me as their teacher is finding ways to forge a link between making (mostly practical) and talking, thinking, writing (mostly cognitive). If I can demonstrate that developing their cognitive tools can have a positive impact on their ability to create better photographs I might be able to encourage the less confident members of the class to take a more active role in (and even enjoy) thinking about photography. In the second survey there are some positive signs that this has begun to happen. Confidence levels in thinking about and making photographs appear to have increased. Perhaps not surprisingly, students appear to enjoy talking about photography more than they enjoy writing about it. In fact enjoyment levels with regard to writing seem to have fallen between the first and second survey. Of course a lack of enjoyment does not necessarily mean a lack of progress (more deliberate practice can indeed prove irksome) and I would like to think that students have become better at writing about their own and others' images. However I must try to find ways to make the writing feel more necessary, natural and creative. There may even be a case for reducing the amount of writing and putting greater emphasis on demonstrating understanding visually.

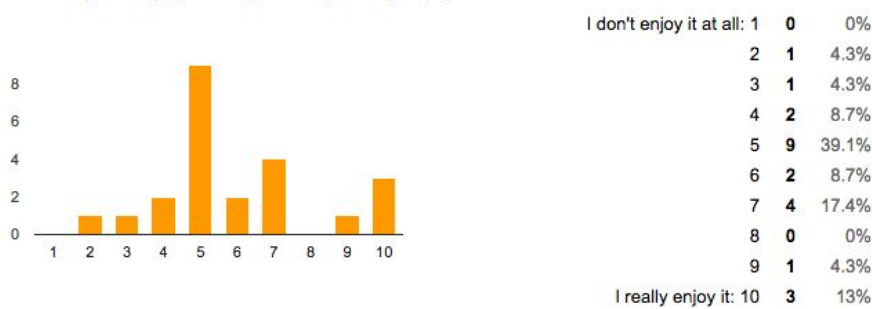
How much do you enjoy discussing photography?



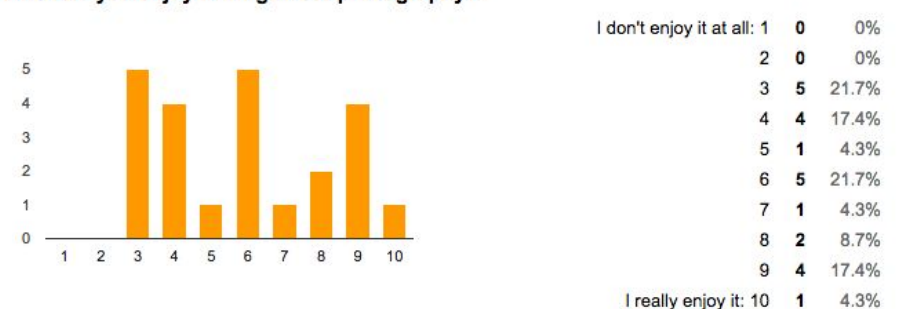
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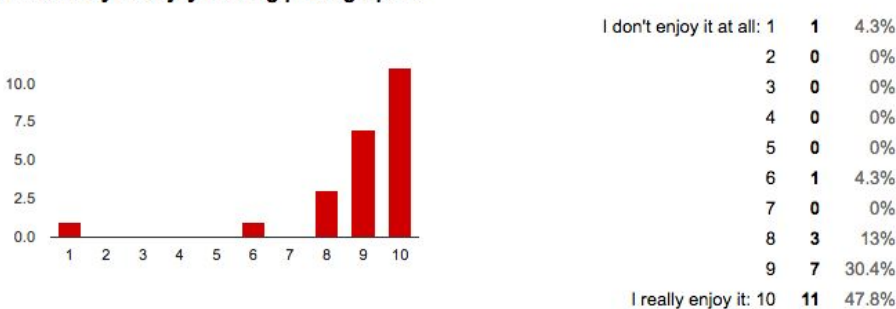
How much do you enjoy writing about photography?



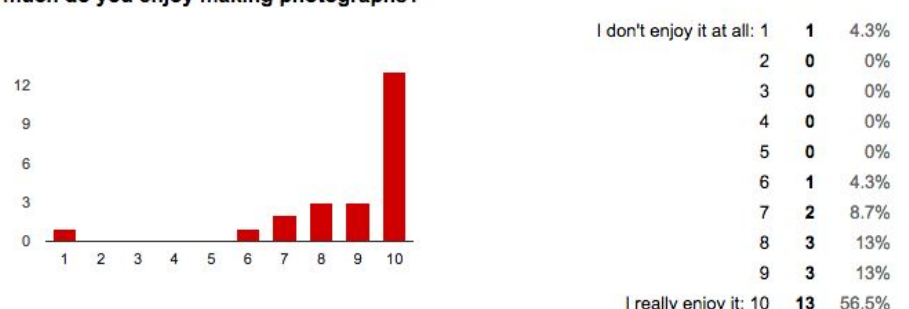
How much do you enjoy writing about photography?



How much do you enjoy making photographs?

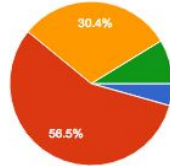


How much do you enjoy making photographs?



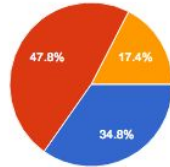
The responses about exhibition and gallery attendance reveal that, before the project, most students had rarely accessed works of art (including photography) in gallery settings. This is not particularly surprising but confirms for me the importance of building regular gallery visits into the course of study. Following the project, feedback indicates that more members of the class have been to see art in galleries and museums with friends and family. It would be interesting to find out whether students who have had little access to places of cultural interest are encouraged to visit them more regularly following a school trip.

Which of these statements is truest for you? (Visiting galleries and museums)



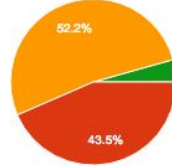
I have never been to an art gallery or museum.	1	4.3%
I have only been to an art gallery or museum with school (primary and/or secondary).	13	56.5%
I have sometimes been to art galleries and/or museums with my friends and/or family members.	7	30.4%
I regularly visit art galleries and museums with friends and/or family members.	2	8.7%

How many exhibitions of photographs have you ever visited?



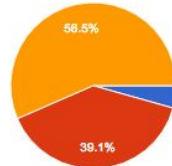
None	8	34.8%
1 or 2	11	47.8%
More than 2	4	17.4%

Which of these statements is truest for you? (Visiting galleries and museums)



I have never been to an art gallery or museum.	0	0%
I have only been to an art gallery or museum with school (primary and/or secondary).	10	43.5%
I have sometimes been to art galleries and/or museums with my friends and/or family members.	12	52.2%
I regularly visit art galleries and museums with friends and/or family members.	1	4.3%

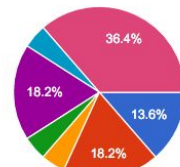
How many exhibitions of photographs have you ever visited?



None	1	4.3%
1 or 2	9	39.1%
More than 2	13	56.5%

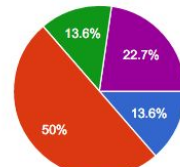
During the course of the project there has been a slight increase in the numbers of students making some or good use of the website outside school and in Students' attitudes to doing well.

Which of these statements is truest for you? (Home learning)



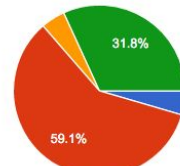
I struggle to complete my photography home learning.	3	13.6%
I mostly complete my photography home learning.	4	18.2%
I have sometimes completed my photography home learning.	1	4.5%
I never complete my photography home learning.	1	4.5%
I always complete my photography home learning.	4	18.2%
I don't think home learning is useful or important	1	4.5%
I'd like to get better at doing my home learning	8	36.4%

Which of these statements is truest for you? (Using the website)



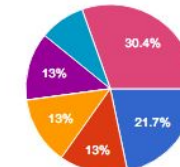
I make good use of the photography GCSE website outside school	3	13.6%
I make some use of the photography GCSE website outside school	11	50%
I never use of the photography GCSE website outside school	0	0%
I make excellent use of the photography GCSE website outside school	3	13.6%
I rarely use of the photography GCSE website outside school	5	22.7%

Which of these statements is truest for you? (Doing well)



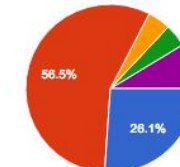
I don't care how well I do in photography.	1	4.5%
I want to do well in photography and try my hardest.	13	59.1%
I don't know how to do well in photography and feel confused a lot of the time.	1	4.5%
I want to do well but I know I'm not working hard enough.	7	31.8%

Which of these statements is truest for you? (Home learning)



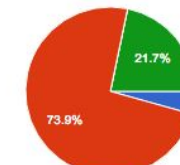
I struggle to complete my photography home learning.	5	21.7%
I mostly complete my photography home learning.	3	13%
I have sometimes completed my photography home learning.	3	13%
I never complete my photography home learning.	0	0%
I always complete my photography home learning.	3	13%
I don't think home learning is useful or important	2	8.7%
I'd like to get better at doing my home learning	7	30.4%

Which of these statements is truest for you? (Using the website)



I make good use of the photography GCSE website outside school	6	26.1%
I make some use of the photography GCSE website outside school	13	56.5%
I never use of the photography GCSE website outside school	1	4.3%
I make excellent use of the photography GCSE website outside school	1	4.3%
I rarely use of the photography GCSE website outside school	2	8.7%

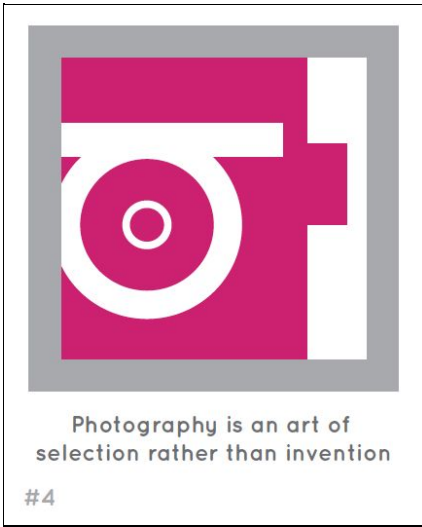
Which of these statements is truest for you? (Doing well)



I don't care how well I do in photography.	1	4.3%
I want to do well in photography and try my hardest.	17	73.9%
I don't know how to do well in photography and feel confused a lot of the time.	0	0%
I want to do well but I know I'm not working hard enough.	5	21.7%

Initial responses to the questions about specific Threshold Concepts demonstrated a mixed picture with regard to levels of confidence in understanding. Clearly, my aim was to improve these levels over the course of the mini project, demonstrating clearer links between big ideas, artist's practice and students' responses (both critical and creative). The second survey indicates some impact on improved levels of confidence relating to both concepts. I am

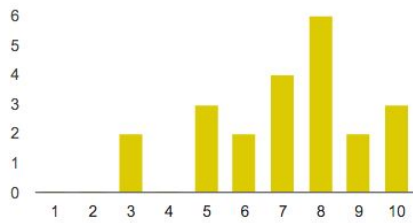
encouraged about this although I am also aware that students may spend varying amounts of time in the struggle zone, dealing with troublesome knowledge. Most reassuring were the responses students gave to the additional questions in the second survey (see below). These attempted to assess the specific affordances of the Saul Leiter mini project. I was keen to see if students felt that spending a longer period of time really getting to grips with a couple of big ideas (in the context of a single artist's practice) had been beneficial or whether they had struggled to maintain their interest and motivation.



Concept #4

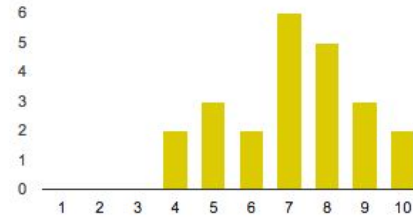
Photography is unlike other visual arts in that it begins with a world full of things rather than with a blank slate. Photography is more an art of selection and translation rather than of invention. However, photography is also an art of production, not just reflection. It does things to the subjects it represents.

How confident do you feel that you understand this idea?

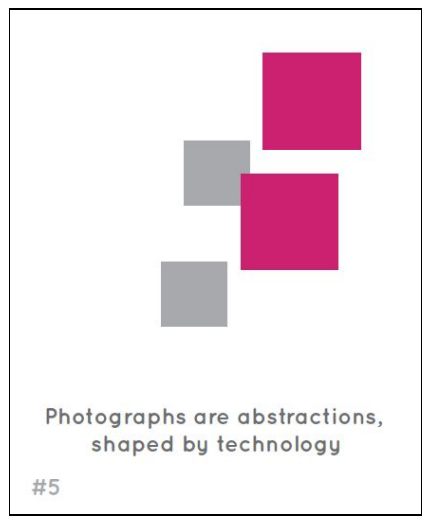


Confidence Level	Count	Percentage
1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	2	9.1%
4	0	0%
5	3	13.6%
6	2	9.1%
7	4	18.2%
8	6	27.3%
9	2	9.1%
10	3	13.6%

How confident do you feel that you understand this idea?



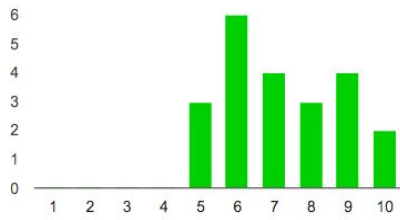
Confidence Level	Count	Percentage
1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	0	0%
4	2	8.7%
5	3	13%
6	2	8.7%
7	6	26.1%
8	5	21.7%
9	3	13%
10	2	8.7%



Concept #5

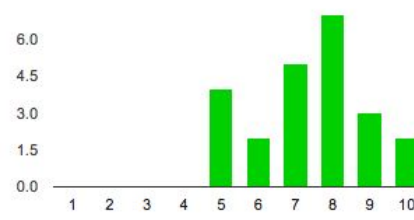
Cameras 'see' the world differently to the way we see the world with our eyes. The photograph (whether this is a printed image or pixels on a screen) can sometimes 'disappear' because photography is able to create an almost perfect illusion of reality. We tend to see only the subject of the photograph rather than the photograph itself. However, all photographs are, to some extent, abstractions. The flatness of photographs creates relationships between objects that may not have existed in reality. All photographic images are shaped by the technology the photographer chooses and by a process of selection, editing and manipulation. Each and every photographic image is therefore made or constructed, rather than being a window onto the world.

How confident do you feel that you understand this idea?



Confidence Level	Count	Percentage
1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	0	0%
4	0	0%
5	3	13.6%
6	6	27.3%
7	4	18.2%
8	3	13.6%
9	4	18.2%
10	2	9.1%

How confident do you feel that you understand this idea?

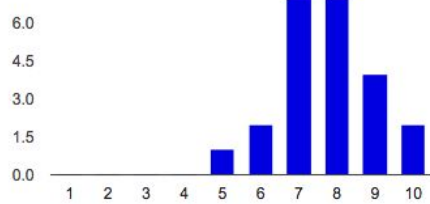


Confidence Level	Count	Percentage
1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	0	0%
4	0	0%
5	4	17.4%
6	2	8.7%
7	5	21.7%
8	7	30.4%
9	3	13%
10	2	8.7%

Additional Questions:

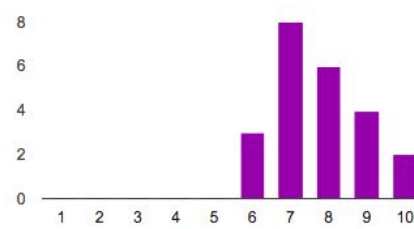
In order to ascertain the specific impacts of the mini project, the second attitudinal survey included some additional questions:

How much has your understanding of photography improved during the Saul Leiter mini project?



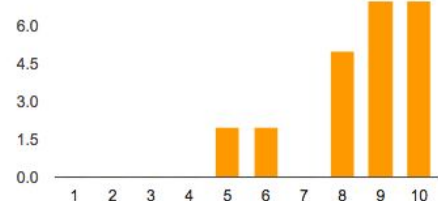
Improvement Level	Count	Percentage
1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	0	0%
4	0	0%
5	1	4.3%
6	2	8.7%
7	7	30.4%
8	7	30.4%
9	4	17.4%
10	2	8.7%

How much have your photography skills improved during the Saul Leiter mini project?



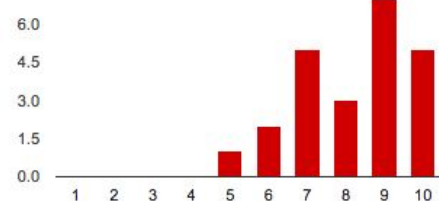
Improvement Level	Count	Percentage
1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	0	0%
4	0	0%
5	0	0%
6	3	13%
7	8	34.8%
8	6	26.1%
9	4	17.4%
10	2	8.7%

How useful was the trip to the Saul Leiter exhibition?



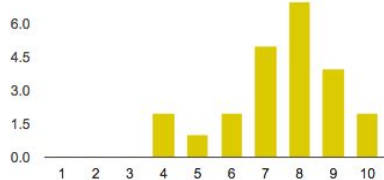
Rating	Count	Percentage
1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	0	0%
4	0	0%
5	2	8.7%
6	2	8.7%
7	0	0%
8	5	21.7%
9	7	30.4%
10	7	30.4%

How useful was the photo shoot after the Saul Leiter exhibition?



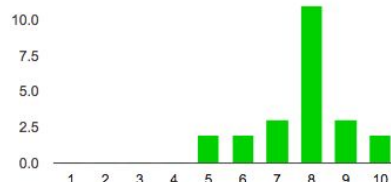
Rating	Count	Percentage
1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	0	0%
4	0	0%
5	1	4.3%
6	2	8.7%
7	5	21.7%
8	3	13%
9	7	30.4%
10	5	21.7%

How pleased are you with your final outcomes for the abstraction theme?



Rating	Count	Percentage
1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	0	0%
4	2	8.7%
5	1	4.3%
6	2	8.7%
7	5	21.7%
8	7	30.4%
9	4	17.4%
10	2	8.7%

How well do you think you have captured what you have learned about abstraction in photography on your website?



Rating	Count	Percentage
1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	0	0%
4	0	0%
5	2	8.7%
6	2	8.7%
7	3	13%
8	11	47.8%
9	3	13%
10	2	8.7%

This feedback feels very positive. Students seem to feel that both their understanding and skills have improved during the Saul Leiter mini project with over 50% of the class rating scores of 8 or above. The trip to the Photographers' Gallery was mostly well received, as was the photo shoot afterwards. One or two students appear fairly neutral about these experiences - it would be useful to know why. Most students seem pleased with their final outcomes, especially in terms of the way they feel about the quality of documentation on their websites. Here are the responses to the text based questions with my comments in blue.

What has been the most important thing you have learned during the Saul Leiter mini project?

The most important is that I found out that photos aren't made by someone, they are already there but the photographer just has an eye for it. A sophisticated grasp of the relationship between TC#4 and #5
That certain colours will work better together and how to make a photograph look its best. Awareness of complementary colours in Leiter's photographs.
It has been that a good photograph doesn't have to be clear it can also be abstract. Reaching towards an understanding of photographic 'grammar' TC#5.
How the colours contrast. Basic grasp of complementary colour theory.
Abstraction photographs can be taken in a range of ways. An emerging sense of photographic possibilities.
To think before taking a picture e.g angles, composition. Sense of pre-visualisation. TC#4
How to take photos better. Shift in self-perception? "I can now make better photographs"?
That every photograph can be interesting and there's more behind the picture than what we first see. Also that anything can be abstract. Developing understanding of TC#4 and #5.
How Saul Leiter looks at photos in a different way. Therefore it's taught me that there's something interesting in most things you take photos of and if you understand what you are taking pictures of then every photo you take can be abstract. As above.
Although you have taken a picture you can still edit it and make it how you want it to be. Relationship between making and refining. Disciplined.
I have learned that there are many ways in which you can display and make images. For example there are many techniques we can consider, such as tones, textures and shapes. TC#5
I've learnt that photographs don't always have to focus on a concrete idea and they can have a subject like colour and texture, just like in paintings. An exciting ontological shift!
The most important thing that I have learnt during the Saul Leiter mini project is always think about what you are taking photographs of. Because when people take photos they take it of anything they see. However, when Saul Leiter takes photos he really thinks about the subject and everything else in the photo. And that has taught me to pay careful attention to what I want to take a photo of. Wonderfully explained. TC#4 and #5.
To often change the focus of the camera. TC#5
The most important thing I have learned during the Saul Leiter mini project is that he is a good artist and I have learned to take good abstract pictures because of it. I like this personal reflection about the impact of a single photographer's practice.
How to take abstract pictures.
To be more focused. Pun intended?
The techniques and my use of language I am using when writing about his work. An interesting combination.
How to make the most of reflections and camera angles. TC#5
The techniques that I have used to make the photographs I have taken.
That distorted photographs can look good. Interesting.
Not all photographs have to look exactly like the thing photographed. Precisely. TC#4 and #5 in a nutshell.

These responses indicate a good level of understanding of both Threshold Concepts. It's interesting to speculate that the students have all entered both thresholds and are navigating the liminal terrain. In certain cases it's clear that the student has absorbed the lessons from Saul Leiter's practice and related them to the concepts. I am pleased that everyone appears to have grasped at least some aspect of the notion that all photographs are abstractions, more or less. There are frequent references to the formal elements - focus, tone, light, reflections, distortion, angles, composition, colour etc. and some very sophisticated expressions of fundamental photographic concepts.

What can I do to help you now and in the future?

Keep telling us new photographers to discover how they take pictures and link it with abstraction and to give tips on how to improve each of our websites.
Keep updating the Tallis GCSE photography website because I use it a lot at home.
You could give us ideas of how to structure our work/website and also how to structure our writing.

Maybe help me with planning my final piece.
Explain Photoshop techniques slower and clearer so that I understand how to edit photographs more.
Set prizes for completed work.
Surprises for good & completed work.
I find that when you give us sheets where they have sentence starters it helps us analyse more.
Rewards for completed tasks.
Give more criticism.
More outings to capture better images.
Push me to do my work.
To help us in the future, you could try to tells how to improve our websites and gives us criticism.
Encourage me to write more on my site.
Make sure I add more things to my website and improve my website at home.
By giving us different opinions.
Give more of a detailed explanation.
Explain the work in more detail to me.
Be more strict in deadlines and work in class.
Nothing really.
Not much.
I can't think of anything.

I was keen to encourage the students to feed back to me personally. I want them to be able to request support and see me as a fellow photographer, a mentor as well as a teacher, interested in how they solve problems as practitioners. There is a fairly strong desire from some students for extrinsic rewards. I will think carefully about this, perhaps devising something symbolic and photographic rather than a form of traditional reward. I did once, in the context of a different subject, experiment with various props - hats, oversized spectacles etc. - as ways to recognise particular achievements in class. I could certainly devise some badges or amusing trophies for future use, especially for those students who may need a bit more of a nudge with overt recognition. I expected requests for other kinds of support - writing frames, more detailed explanations, planning, ideas, Photoshop etc. - but I was surprised to see a few requests for more "criticism". I model success mostly using exemplar material online and my default mode in lessons tends to be reasonably upbeat and encouraging. My aim is to develop students' abilities to become more self-critical, internalising their own high standards, rather than relying on my judgement, but I wonder whether some students might need more explicit critical feedback about their work. Notions of quality in (art) photography are notoriously hard to pin down. 'Mistakes' are often highly prized because they can lead to new ways of seeing. I'll give this some careful thought before working out a strategy. It occurs to me that one of the Threshold Concepts for photographers (and perhaps students in other subjects) could be this shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. What can I do to help students develop their ability to tolerate uncertainty and trust in their own intuition? Perhaps I need to model the process by sharing my own experiences as a photographer, especially those occasions when I am unsure about a particular image or idea.

What do you find most challenging in photography?

Home learning, because I broke my laptop and find it hard to upload pictures and make time for it, because I don't want to rush it, I like taking my time with the photos.
Coming up with an idea for a final piece and actually executing it.
I have to think hard about each photograph I take and how I take them to make sure it is relevant to the work we are doing and also that it isn't the same as everyone else's photographs.
I find coming up with an idea for a final piece is quite challenging.
Being able to learn hard Photoshop skills easily and not forgetting them easily. Being able to take photographs by myself.
Taking time to write about them.
Trying to take photos inspired by the photographers in school.
I find analysing pictures after I've taken them hard. I can take lots of pictures and at the time understand them but when I write about them I find it hard to put my ideas into words.
Analysing the photos and creating a final outcome.
Evaluating my own work.
Evaluating my final work.
Getting the work done outside of school. I can do well with taking the photographs and I know my analysis is pretty decent but I never seem motivated to do it.
What I find most challenging in photography is how to evaluate my photography e.g. what I need to improve on next time, and that stops me from further on developing my ideas.
The evaluation.
The most challenging thing to do in photography is copying the artist's painting.
Taking pictures like him.
Using the dark room.
The writing side of things I don't really like...
Being up to speed with everything and home learning because I don't have the resources the same as school
Focusing in my work more.
Writing and researching.
Writing.

The most common theme here is a lack of confidence with written analysis or evaluation. I need to give this some careful thought. Have I put too much

emphasis on the need for written commentary? Despite the Assessment Objectives making clear a need for “critical and contextual understanding” I don’t want to undermine the visual and practical nature of the subject with an over-emphasis on written analysis. However, some students clearly feel that their lack of confidence in evaluating their own photographs is preventing them from knowing how to improve their photography. This reflects their relative lack of experience as photographers (and possibly their lack of knowledge of the work of other photographers) but perhaps some specific work on idea generation is needed. Where do ideas for photography projects come from? How much do you need to know about photography to have good ideas? Could I design a set of prompts, to be used at different stages of a photography project, to support students who are struggling to know what to do next?

What do you find most rewarding in photography?

Taking pictures and learning new things on how to improve the way you look at images.
Making a good image and someone telling me that it looks good.
What I find most rewarding is seeing my final piece because it shows the hard work I have been putting into my photography.
Taking pictures and seeing how they turned out and how I can improve it.
I don't find anything most rewarding in photography, everything is rewarding at the same level.
The final outcomes and people completing my pictures.
Final outcomes.
When I get a good final outcome or pictures and writing I'm proud of.
When the final outcome is made and is on a board.
Making mistakes then learning and growing from them.
Making interesting images that get to be displayed on my website.
The relief of scrolling through your website knowing everything is finished.
What I find most rewarding is when I take a really good photograph.
Making the final projects.
The most rewarding thing in photography is taking pictures.
Taking the pictures.
Finishing my final projects.
I don't know.
Trips and working hard and having a great outcome from it.
The skills and techniques have improved from when I have started the course.
The final pieces.
Taking photographs.

The benefits of resolving outcomes, spending time and resources on mounting work as professionally as possible, are clear from these responses. As a department, we should find more ways to publicly display students’ final outcomes and work in progress.

What else might you need to do to further improve the quality of your evidence on the site?

I should do further evaluations and do more research outside school.
Add some more detailed evaluation to my website.
I will need to write about the pictures I have taken, why I took them and why I like them
I need to write more about my evaluations.
I can add more photographs that have been taken outside of school.
Write up more analysis of photography.
I need to take more photos of certain things instead of just a few.
Take screenshots of everything I do and keep track of everything I use and how I use it.
Upload all photos taken and WWW them and EBI them.
Evaluate more.
I think I need to make more images that have been taken for a different purpose.
Definitely put more effort into my work.
To research more photographers, and evaluate 1 or 2 of their photographs.
Have more evaluations.
Evaluate my pictures.
Evaluate more.
Use secondary sources and evaluate my work. I also need to constantly update my site to make sure all my work is up to date.
Just work harder.
Explain my pictures a lot more.
Upload the pictures on time.
Write and evaluate more.
To add more pictures that I've taken.

Again, written evaluations appear to be something of a bugbear for students.

What can the photography department do to better support you and other students now and in the future?

They should look at our websites and give different opinions on them so we know how to improve it.
Give us advice when making new photographs and support our passion for photography as much as you can.
We should go on more trips as it really helped me understand more about the photographer we were learning about and it's also a more fun way to capture photographs.
They can maybe give you an idea that you can improve yourself.
Make us go on more trips and make everyone work in the dark room more.
Increase the internet speed and amount of working laptops and ethernet cables.
Nothing. Everything's good.
Make sure the Internet works.
Faster Internet please.
Sort out the Internet :)
More resources for the dark room.
Check out websites more often and encourage us to do our work if we haven't.
The photography department could hold exhibitions so we can see what other photography students in different years produce as their final outcomes.
I don't know.
Have better Internet connection.
By going on more trips.
Be more critical with our work and evaluation.
Be more strict. If I miss homework - detention.
Have faster internet.
Better internet so it's quick to upload.
Better WiFi.
Provide more opportunities to learn about Photoshop.

Not surprisingly, the speed of the Internet is a major theme given that students rely on it every lesson. Hopefully, our new IT arrangements in school and a faster connection will improve this situation. More trips is another popular request.

Students' interview responses:

What have you found challenging in this project?

Students identified a range of challenges including writing evaluations of their own photographs, responding to the work of other photographers and thinking of good ideas for photographs. Follow up questions about what students felt they had learned from these challenges elicited responses such as "I've learned to change the way I look at things".

What do you think you have been taught about photography

Alternative ways of seeing seems to be the most common theme. "When I'm taking photos, to carefully think about what I'm taking photos of." This was articulated in the following way by one student:

"I used to have a certain mindset about photography and when you taught us about obstructed views I used to think that if there was something out of focus or covering the photograph I would see it as a negative and delete the picture. Now I see there's a different view to it, a different way to look at it."

Where do you find good ideas for photography projects?

All students cited a combination of Google searches, the GCSE Photography website or bookmarking sites like Pinterest as research tools. None of the students had looked at the photography books in the school library or properly accessed the books in the photography classroom. Some students spoke about learning from classmates, either via their ePortfolio sites or through discussion.

How do you know when you are working successfully in photography?

A sense of satisfaction in having worked hard was the most common response. This could be measured mainly by content growing on ePortfolio sites and a final outcome that looked exhibition worthy.

What questions do you still have about photography?

Students seemed mostly interested in finding out more about Photoshop and how it could help them improve their photographs. They also felt that they could be better at writing evaluations and that there might be more opportunities to be taught more explicitly about other photographers' work and how photographs become meaningful.

Students' ePortfolio documentation and quality of their photographs

The following is a sample of students' written responses to various aspects of the Abstraction project. These extracts suggest that some students have absorbed key concepts in relation to their own practice and that of established artists in the field (my italics):

At the start of the project on Abstraction, my thoughts were to take images, with a camera, of subjects that did not have a concrete idea and that the viewer would not understand. Now, my opinion has not changed drastically but expanded and I am more open to the scaling of Abstraction, *the fact that all photos are abstract but some are more than others* [...] As an unusual request, we were asked to cut up our favourite photogram into an interesting pattern, which was *confusing at first* [...] This process led to developing new photograms, made up of the cut pieces of photogram. I thought this was a brilliant idea because when the new photogram was exposed, the darker areas of the cut-up would block the light, causing that to stay white. In contrast, the lighter areas where the light was blocked before would now become dark because it was easier for the light to penetrate through. *I think we were asked to do this because it would develop our creative thinking and would prepare us for when we had to do it alone*. Also, it showed us all that photography can go to many lengths and doesn't always involve the picture from the camera.

It was really interesting seeing the Saul Leiter exhibition at The photographers' Gallery, and I really enjoyed it. *I had an amazing time being able to*

see all of his lifetime's work in one building. I was able to compare and contrast his photographs to his paintings. During our journey to and from the gallery and our visit to South Bank, I attempted to take Saul Leiter inspired photographs. I tried taking **photographs of anything that seemed or looked out of the ordinary, also anything with bold colours compared to its surroundings.** I looked out for glass and anything with reflections. **I was really interested with the things on the ground for example, dirt, cigarettes, rain water, rocks etc.**

I really enjoyed visiting the Photographers' Gallery in London to see more of Saul Leiter's work as it **gave me some more ideas as to what photographs I was going to take** during the day. It was also interesting to look at his painting as well as his photographs because I could see how his paintings influenced his photographs. **During our time in the gallery we were able to write down some key features that helped us work out what we needed in our photographs for them to resemble Saul Leiter's photographs. For example the texture and complementary colours he used to make his work effective.** This really helped me work out what I needed to do to make my photographs better. We also made some light and dark drawings to see whether there was more light or not. This really helped me too as I was able to see how much light I needed.

The trip taught me a lot about Saul Leiter and about abstract photography. **Going up to London and taking pictures let me test my photography skills on a whole other level,** because we weren't taking pictures of the same things at school and I wasn't taking pictures of my area which I see all the time. **I took pictures of something new which adapted my eye to take photographs.** I also understood how to collaborate abstraction with my photography. The trip overall benefitted my photography.

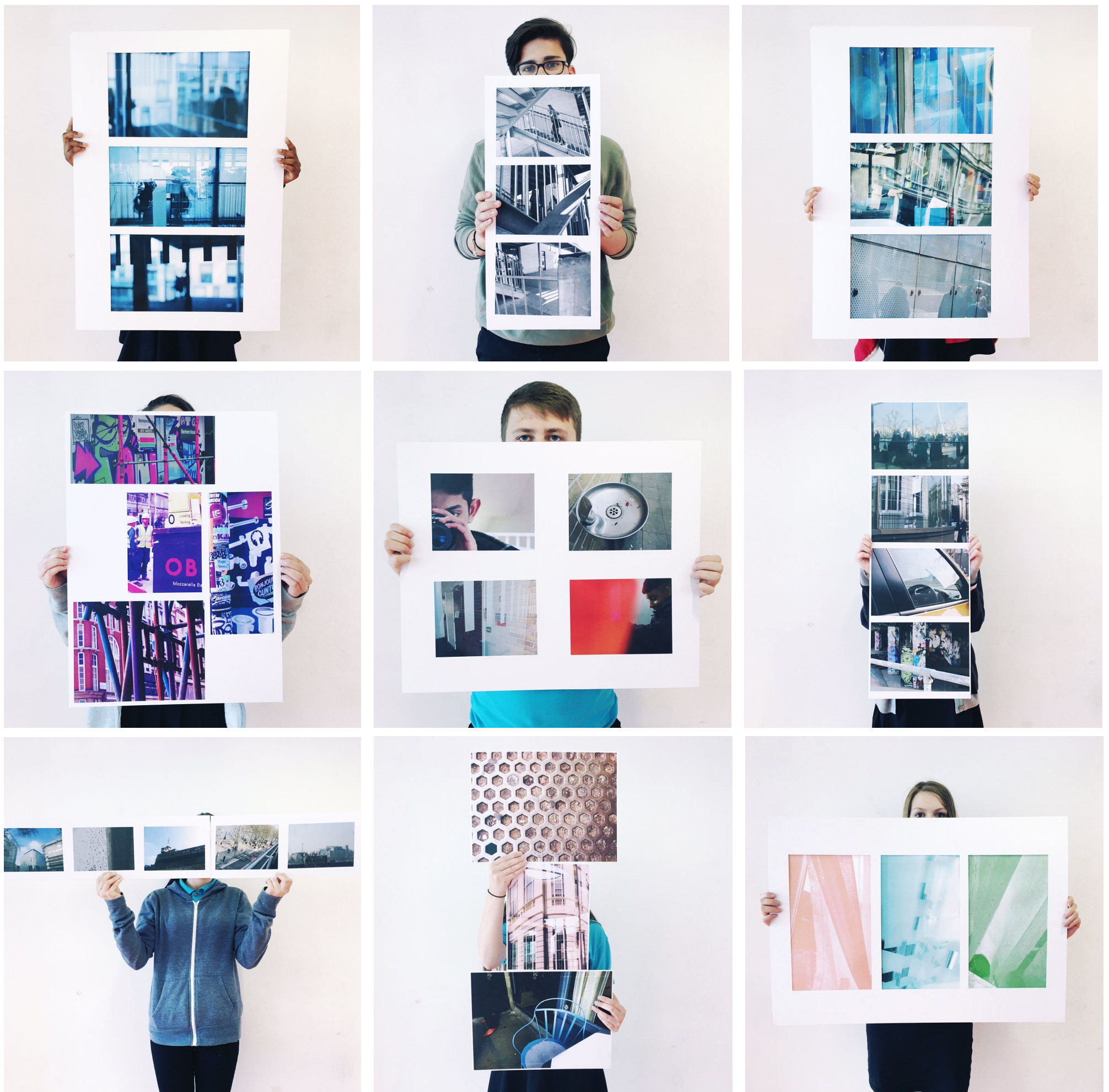
"Photography allows you to learn to look and see. You begin to see things you'd never paid attention to".
-- Saul Leiter

I have chosen this quotation as I feel it is inspiring as well as meaningful. By this quotation you can also learn a bit about his personality. It could suggest that he has **seen many interesting things through doing photography more than just what the human eye sees on a regular basis.** I also like how he has made a statement that could suggest that he is trying to tell people you can find out a whole lot more about **things you don't usually pay attention to.**

A sample of students' final outcomes from the Saul Leiter mini project:

I am delighted with most of the outcomes which reveal students' grasp of some of the key features of Saul Leiter's photography - shallow depth of field, unusual compositions and framing, obstructed views, bold colour combinations and the use of reflections. The process of editing, selecting, arranging and displaying a particular image or sequence of images has proved very useful, demonstrating again that clicking the shutter is only the start of a creative process of meaning making.





Conclusion:

The project was an attempt to strengthen students' understanding of the Threshold Concepts, with a longer focus on one theme (abstraction) and the practice of one photographer (Saul Leiter), thereby helping them to better balance their ability to make photographic images with their ability to think about them. The hope was that an extended period of intense study about one photographer's practice would enable students to experience a liminal state in which they would navigate their way through troublesome knowledge at their own pace rather than simply ticking some curriculum content boxes and moving on. The habits foci were disciplined and imaginative. I wanted to see whether it was more effective to devote a longer period of time to developing and refining work inspired by one practitioner than would normally happen. I hoped this would allow students to stick with difficulty and immerse themselves in the liminal state associated with two particularly tricky Threshold Concepts. I am encouraged by the responses from most students in the group. They appear to have appreciated the benefits of the mini project on Saul Leiter, the associated gallery visit and photoshoot. An analysis of the evidence on their ePortfolio sites suggests that, for some, the business of translating this positive practical experience into careful and detailed documentation and evaluation has proved more challenging. The project has mostly benefited those students who were ready to be challenged and able to respond appropriately with a combination of creativity, craft and conscientious effort. Based on students' feedback I have resolved to do the following:

- Design a set of prompts, to be used at different stages of a photography project, to support students who are struggling to know what to do next? These will be published on the department's GCSE website.
- Review, collate and publish the existing resources designed to support students with written evaluations on the GCSE site.
- Spend more time demonstrating how to use Photoshop in lessons to make fine adjustments to photographs. Test students on their knowledge periodically.
- Consider ways to motivate and reward students who are struggling with making progress. These could include badges, public acknowledgement, postcards home and more opportunities to exhibit work in school and online.
- Organise another trip and photoshoot for the first half of the Autumn term, making these a more regular feature of the course.
- Create a rota so that I can give detailed feedback about ePortfolio development to specific students in lessons.

On balance, I would definitely recommend repeating a similar process in subsequent years (perhaps with a different theme or focus), spending more time deliberately engaged with one or two Threshold Concepts and a limited set of practitioners as stimuli. I now need to reflect on ways to support those students who are still struggling with liminality. A little more extrinsic motivation may be required. It occurs to me that we could easily design a parallel set of Threshold Concepts focused on students' Habits of Mind rather than photographic concepts! I must keep reminding myself that students navigate their way through thresholds at different rates, some needing to remain in a liminal space for some time before they have gained 'mastery'. As David Didau reminds us:

"If we give students time and encouragement to remain in liminal space for as long as is necessary, they are more likely to make cognitive changes and master troubling new concepts rather than simply mimicking what they think we want them to say or, worse, learning that they 'can't do' a particular subject."

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