

Observations on Photography Workshops by Workshop Instructor Craig Varjabedian

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When I think about photography workshops, I remember the first workshop I attended in the 1970's. The twelve of us students rose when the sun did. We met, cameras loaded, and set out to explore. We saw the kind of morning light that bathes and dazzles the world – a kind that many photographers miss. We photographed and photographed. We didn't stop living photography until well after the sun went down. Our teacher was a photographer of great acclaim who shared with us the nuts and bolts of what he had learned from a half century of photographing. We discussed all sorts of things: what developer to use to achieve a particular result; which lens provided which effect. He demonstrated to us the kind of love and commitment good photography requires. He challenged us to capture that magical moment in a photograph that takes the viewer beyond the ordinary to the extraordinary. Such passion! Such commitment! Such inspiration! It was an experience that changed my life.

This experience is what I have come to model my workshops on. I have heard of other experiences in other photography workshops. I was startled by some of the things I was told about. Teachers who spent two hours of the day with participants and then vanished. Teachers who took their own cameras out in the field and photographed, ignoring their students. Workshops held in classrooms with

no activity, no practice time, and worse, no time to process the lessons learned and to share from each other. I have little patience for workshops like these.

WHAT'S IN A WORKSHOP?

A photography workshop should be about you and how photography fits into your life. A workshop is where you work, you share, and you rise to new challenges. A teacher is there as a guide, a coach.

I think the ideal photography workshop is hands-on, where you are learning and doing. A workshop turns the technical into the practical. You can read and learn only so much from a book; a workshop gives you the experience and practice to become familiar with the technical tools. Yes, there should be lectures, discussions, and theories, but more importantly, photography should be experiential. You should photograph and photograph and photograph – where ever you are, be it in a studio or in the field.

For example, since I work mainly in New Mexico, my classrooms are the southwest's canyons, hills, riversides, and villages. Participants are up and out everyday and in all conditions to capture the light, color, and texture that are the West; they are learning the history, character and beauty of New Mexico while they photograph.

My workshops are typically field workshops, not studio workshops. That should be one criteria to keep in mind when choosing a workshop, are you interested in rambling around the countryside or working inside a studio?

There are a lot of workshops out there. There isn't a quick and easy way to figure out which one is best for you – experience is the best teacher and research the best advisor. Study the information available, be it a brochure or webpage (and remember both contain main points more than details). Read the FAQ's and students' comments. And telephone or email in with questions. I'm surprised how few people ask questions. That's when you make the first personal contact and test the waters, with your questions and requests for information.

WHERE AND WHAT

The main things I want people to consider are where they want to be and what they want to learn. Do you want to be indoors or outdoors or both? Are you interested in a particular region, such as the West or East? Desert or city? If you're interested in studio lighting or portraiture, you'll probably be working in a studio and frankly, you can do that almost anywhere. But if you want to be in a specific geographical location and photograph particular subjects (the ocean, cactus, redwood trees, cowboys, etc.), you

need to find a workshop in that area. And the instructor must be familiar with that area. The instructor should know the best light, the best locations, how to get to places (and get out of places!) and should teach you what photographing in that area really means.

I've been photographing New Mexico for over 20 years now – it's my home, where my best work is done. I am fine photographing somewhere else, the East Coast or up north – but I'm in my element here. And a workshop instructor should be in his or her element for committed teaching.

You should be pretty clear about your own skills and about what you want to learn. I remember one workshop I led that people loved but a gentleman wrote in his review afterwards: "I really wanted to photograph bugs. There were no insects or time to focus on insects." The workshop was advertised as a chance to photograph western nature and landscape, but this comment was pretty specific. So be clear on what you, as a participant, will learn or do in a workshop versus what you want to learn or do. A workshop advertising nature photography may be too general. Animal photography is a specialty, as is portraiture. When you read about a workshop, you should be given enough specifics to know where you'll be, the subject matter available, and the times you'll be photographing.

My workshops have themes more than subjects, because that allows for a specific mood while allowing for more general subject matter. For example, our Ghost Ranch workshop finds those sites and subjects that Georgia O'Keeffe painted - shadowed cliffs and twisted juniper branches - but we also look at places she lived and visited; we meet people who met her and hear stories about her. Our photographs are enriched by what we've learned, seen and walked ourselves.

BE PREPARED

Remember to be open. As one of my workshop participants has said, "I'm one of those shoppers that doesn't always know what I want but I know it when I see it." Let go of some of your expectations in order to open up to new experiences.

What about your colleagues? How many will there be? What will be the ratio of students to the instructor? What will the various skill levels be? If you think you only want to be with other beginners, you might want to focus on that type of workshop. And if you've been photographing for years, you may want to be with similar folks.

Be clear about your comfort level, not only with other participants but with the workshop location and housing. Some questions to ask yourself: do you want to find your own housing and meals, do you want the workshop to provide these; do you want to stay by yourself or with the group?

Will you be traveling during the workshop, will you need a car, what weather changes might you expect?

I find participants do better when they stay together and commit as a group to the workshop. They help and support each other, encourage and challenge each other. Staying together focuses the group on why they are there – to become better photographers. Participants in my workshops need to stay for the duration of the workshop too; arriving late or leaving early means they are missing out.

THE INSTRUCTOR

A final and important factor in a workshop is the instructor or instructors. You should know how much time the instructor will spend with you and what the instructor's background is. Do you want to work with a fine art instructor, a commercial photographer, or a landscape photographer? Is the instructor familiar with the area in which you're going to be photographing?

A lot of workshops have but one instructor who you work with the entire time. Other workshops have guest instructors who may be there for only a brief time or may be there during the entire event. These instructors may be well known photographers who have just finished a big project or are in the middle of one and may have time for only a brief session with the workshop participants. Make sure you understand how much time is available with the instructor.

Some instructors may have a large portfolio of work, and teach rarely. Others may commit more of their time and energy to teaching, and as a result, have a smaller portfolio. You can't necessarily tell good teachers by their own work (though I'd avoid any photography teacher who takes poor photographs); some brilliant photographers may not be very good teachers; and on the other hand, some wonderful and insightful teachers may rarely have time for making their own photographs.

A good teacher should be actively involved in his or her own field, in making photographs, writing about photography, doing something to stay current in the profession. And a teacher should be immersed in the teaching process and experience when the workshop is in session, focusing on the participants and their needs. Good teachers are passing on information from their own photography life experiences, not only teaching technique and equipment. They must be committed to photography, the workshop, to the individual, and to teaching.

I remember an important learning experience I had was when I was in physical therapy after a leg injury. I had a coach, who worked with me every day. He explained simply and clearly what the process would be like. My coach encouraged me to reach just beyond

my ability to keep me challenged (yet safe). This is an ideal teacher to me, and these characteristics are what I expect in a workshop leader.

COMMITMENT, INSPIRATION, PASSION

The workshop leader is an important factor, but not the only factor in making a successful workshop. You need a blend of leadership, participants, lessons learned, time, patience, and some luck.

Participants in my workshops range from novice to experienced. Because my staff and I work one on one, we're flexible in assisting a variety of needs—novices don't feel overwhelmed and experienced photographers don't feel slowed down. We're prepared for our participants because we know about them; we send out a detailed profile for participants to fill out so we will have a greater sense of who you are and what your skills and needs might be.

I want students to work and discuss their photographic lives together; if two heads are better than one, imagine what 4 or 8 heads can come up with in sharing techniques and experiences. Participants in my workshops stay in the same residence or hotel. I want students to fully engage with photography, from loading film (or downloading memory cards) to cleaning lenses after a dusty shoot. I can explain and teach the technical aspects, but what I enjoy the most is helping people to experience and enjoy different ways of making photographs.

One workshop participant favored "shooting from the hip"—making a photograph spontaneously the moment the image or vision appeared. This technique calls for a certain skill that must be developed, and we work on that in our workshops. I favor a slower process myself and many participants learn the slower New Mexican lifestyle as a result. We range around and explore a site seeking images; we wait for the light that creates perfect shadows; we shoo away dogs, gophers, cats (and more) out of the image; and then, sometimes, just as we're ready, we're rewarded: a hawk flies over, a cloud formation appears, the wind blows and tree branches raise up and shake in the wind – as we form a photograph, we form a relationship with our environment.

After 20+ years of teaching photography workshops, I've found what works (and doesn't work). Commitment, inspiration, and passion – combining in the opportunity to experience and share the extraordinary with other photographers. To me, a workshop participant is learning new skills in order to achieve better photographs, more insightful expression. The point of a workshop is to help people focus on their own unique visions, while teaching them skills and knowledge that will further their photography, not just from sunup to sundown, but for an entire life time.