

Navigating the Photography Workshop Experience

A photography workshop is an invaluable experience in so many ways. Besides the obvious benefit of being immersed in the expertise of a skilled instructor, a workshop pulls its attendees out of everyday life for a period of two, five, or fourteen days, getting them out of a creative rut and providing a fresh perspective on their work. And while a two-week workshop is the equivalent of a three-credit university course in terms of contact hours, the workshops can offer a great benefit that many university courses cannot: an incredibly diverse, unique assortment of people, and not only those with enough discretionary income to afford them. There are scholarship students, assistants, and work-study students who put in hard hours of volunteer work in order to attend the workshop for free. Likewise, ages can range from teens to eighties, and abilities can range from novice to professional.

As both a workshop instructor and attendee, I have perspectives on both sides. Below I offer some advice for both the instructor and the student on getting the most out of the workshop experience, culled from a decade of assisting and teaching photography workshops, and many more years of taking workshops in other disciplines.

For the instructor, leading workshops is as exhausting as it is rewarding. The instructor has to possess excellent people skills, and it is helpful if the instructor spends time alone with each student early on in the workshop to head off potential problems. For example, student abilities can range drastically. In one workshop I taught, I had beginning Photoshop students in the same class with a student who managed a digital department of two hundred employees. The inexperienced student may ask endless questions, much to the rest of the class's dismay. The opposite, however, can be worse—no questions get asked, and the inexperienced student goes home stressed and overwhelmed with unmet needs. Yet the experienced student can get bored and feel she did not get her money's worth. An instructor should come armed with an advanced project or two for those with more experience than the rest of the class.

For the workshop attendee, first, choose your instructor carefully. An instructor needs to be not only an expert in his or her field, but also an effective teacher. In truth, these two qualities do not always go hand-in-hand—we've all been to lectures by famous artists who don't know a thing about public speaking. And a workshop requires much more time and money than a lecture. Do your homework; word-of-mouth information from former students is often the most reliable source of information about instructors.

Second, be clear and realistic about your expectations going into the workshop. Write "SMART" goals down—Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Trackable! Run these by the instructor early on during the workshop.

The economy is tough; all of us want our money's worth from a workshop. What you will get is this: time away from your normal



Sally Miller, Photographers Formulary, 2010, courtesy of Sally Miller

routine, an intensely creative experience, growth as an artist, and perspective. What you won't get is this: a full body of work ready for exhibition, complete understanding of your work, complete and equal understanding of the instructor's expertise, long-term personal help and access to the instructor via constant email, and work that is flawless. These may sound exaggerated, but I have encountered them all. The source of much unhappiness is unmet expectations, and the chance of unmet expectations cropping up increases greatly when those expectations are unrealistic.

Be prepared for constructive critique at the workshop. It is hard for *everyone* to receive feedback—in the process of completing a body of work, one is personally attached to it, and accurate perspective can be difficult. But open dialogue about your work, sometimes negative, is a healthy, and essential, step that will help you and your work grow. An instructor does a *disservice* to a student if he or she does not offer honest critique. A workshop should be "iron sharpening iron."

Other tips:

- Be prepared for a mid-workshop slump where energy is low and work feels below par. This is a good event, what is termed a "pre-learning dip." Think about it—how can your work progress if you think it is already done? Dissatisfaction is the signal that you are moving forward.

- Live in balance during the workshop. Don't work round the clock, shirk sleep, and get overtired and miserable. You will crash if you do this. Bring a mindless novel to get your mind off your work for a bit. Take a nap.

- Try to leave your electronics at home. For some, being pulled out of one's everyday life may be more a *ripping* out if mobile devices are advisedly left behind. But those who don't abandon these contemporary conveniences suffer, and so do their classmates when a text "bling" or cell ring interrupts class flow and distracts you from your work.

- The workshop is an opportunity to concentrate with the expert on photography while food and housing needs are met, and pleasantly so. Food at Penland and Photographer's Formulary, for instance, is healthy home cooking almost worth the workshop experience alone. But bring along a bottle or two of good wine. Much off-the-record photography information is gleaned informally at the end of a long day's work over a glass of wine or a beer, something rare in university settings.

- Be prepared for a sense of loss or grief when it is time to wrap it up and go home. (This happens to instructors, too—an instructor really enjoys her students, but realizes that the chances of meeting up again somewhere else may be few and far between.) If possible, a day alone before reentry into "normal life" can be very beneficial. Use it for debriefing, relaxing, typing up your notes from the workshop, and even writing out a "happy list"—what was great about the workshop and how to implement what you learned in your work during the coming year.

- Do take copious notes and file them somewhere handy at home. Read the handouts that the workshop instructor gives you while taking the workshop. If questions have already been answered in class or in handouts, they shouldn't be rehashed over email after the workshop. Respect the instructor's personal email space. Chances are they have many other students to teach as well.

All these tips and suggestions would be pointless without some workshop recommendations. The following list is by no means all-inclusive of existing photography workshops, but represents some of the better-known ones. I have provided details for workshops where I have taught or attended.

- **The Center for Photography at Woodstock in Woodstock, NY**
www.cpw.org

- **Santa Fe Workshops, Santa Fe, NM**
www.santafeworkshops.com

- **Maine Media Workshops, Camden, ME**
www.mainemedia.edu

This workshop boasts a gorgeous location, a wonderful town and great food nearby. It is also very photogenic, well organized and well run, and features a large group of students in many disciplines at once.

- **Photographer's Formulary, Condon, MT**
www.photoformulary.com

The location is remote and incredible. Three large darkroom areas are at your disposal twenty-four hours a day, and it also supports alternative processes. And where else can you go and have a store right there, on location, to buy all your chemistry? The food is excellent, and the atmosphere is loose and relaxed. There is no nightlife to speak of in the area, so it is truly a creative retreat. It holds only one or two classes only at a time, so it has a small group atmosphere. Other bonuses are the fresh mountain air and the sweet smell of pine.

- **Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC**
www.penland.org

Penland is somewhat remote with a real community feel, because the school houses two hundred students at a time in many different disciplines. Events and slide presentations are scheduled every night, so it proves to be a very busy time in the scheduled two weeks. One must experience Penland at least once in a lifetime, but chances are you will go back again and again, as most participants seem to do.

- **Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass, CO**
www.andersonranch.org

- **Peters Valley Craft Center, Layton, NJ**
www.petersvalley.org

- **Museum of Photographic Arts, in conjunction with Grossmont College, San Diego, CA**

www.mopa.org

Grossmont is an incredible workshop facility, especially for alternative processes, because Suda House, one of the first women in alternative process photography, is on the faculty. Smack dab in the center of San Diego, it features great food and great art. The nearby Museum of Photographic Arts is a stunning facility to lecture in and visit. I have been forever spoiled by the excellent help given by the full-time photography lab manager there.

- **Project Basho in Philadelphia, PA**
www.projectbasho.org

— Christina Z. Anderson