



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

MEANINGFUL PHOTOS FOR STUDENTS

"We are making photographs to understand what our lives mean to us."

—Ralph Hattersley

OVERVIEW

Students spend 15 minutes a day for one week taking photos of or sketching things that bring meaning to their lives, and then finish with a written reflection that asks them what each photo or drawing represents and why it's meaningful.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Anytime during the year
- To lessen students' stress by focusing on what's meaningful in their lives
- To help students connect what they're learning to their lives
- To cultivate a safe and connected classroom culture

TIME REQUIRED

- 15 minutes per day for one week + 30-60 minutes writing and sharing time

LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School
- College

MATERIALS

- Camera for each student, e.g., phone, digital, disposable

- Optional: If cameras are not available to students, then have them do a quick sketch on paper instead. (If only some students have cameras, you might want to have the whole class do sketches rather than photos in order to equalize the task.)

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Identify objects, people, pets, places, etc. that are meaningful to them
- Reflect on why these subjects are meaningful

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to look around the room and identify something that is meaningful to you.
- Using your phone camera, take a picture of the item. If you don't have a camera, then do a quick sketch of the item on a piece of paper.
- Spend a couple of minutes writing what the item represents to you and why it is meaningful.
- How did this exercise make you feel? What did you learn about yourself?

INSTRUCTIONS

PART 1 – SETTING UP THE PRACTICE

- To start the practice, ask students to take a piece of scratch paper and jot down multiple answers to the following questions:
 - What is most important to you in life? When do you feel most alive?
- Ask for volunteers to share some of their answers.
- Tell students:
 - *What you've just written on your paper gives some insight into what gives your life meaning.*

- *Research tells us that if you have meaning in your life, then your life makes sense and matters.*
- *Scientists have found that adults who have a sense of meaning can cope better with stress and have better health and overall well-being.*
- *If you don't feel like you have a lot of meaning in your life, that's okay. It's something that often gets developed during teenage years, and then may change over time.*
- *We're going to do an exercise for the next week to help cultivate this sense of meaning, or solidify what makes your life already deeply meaningful.*
- Describe the task to students:
 - *Over the next week, you are to take photographs (or make sketches) of things that make your life feel meaningful. These can be people, places, objects, pets. If you are not able to take photos of these things--like if they're not nearby--you can take photos of souvenirs, reminders, websites, or even other photos. Try to take at least nine photographs.*
- If necessary, give students a few examples from your own life.
- Tell students to print out or develop their photos (or bring in their sketches) and bring them in next week. You may also use alternative formats such as Instagram or other apps that allow students to write captions for their photos.

PART 2 – WRITTEN REFLECTION

- *Note: This can also be done as homework.*
- On the day that students bring in their photos (or sketches), give them time to look at and reflect on each photo. If students have taken a lot of photos, have them choose their top nine.
- For each photo, have them write a response to the following questions: "What does this photo represent, and why is it meaningful?"

PART 3 – SHARING AND CLOSURE

- Have students share some of their photos and captions with each other.
- Ask students to reflect on the practice:
 - *What did you think of this practice? Was it challenging in any way? How did it make you feel? Did you learn anything about yourself?*
 - *Did it help clarify what gives your life meaning?*
 - *Are there any connections between what you're learning in school and what is meaningful to you? If so, what are these connections?*
 - *What did you notice when looking at others' photos and captions?*
 - *Would you do this practice again? If so, is there anything you would change about the practice?*

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

How did students respond to this practice? Did they find it challenging or easy? Did it help build stronger connections between students? Do you find students engaging with each other or with academic content more deeply as a result of this exercise?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In a study, college students were [instructed](#) to take 9-12 photographs of things that they felt made their life meaningful; one week later, they viewed and wrote about each photograph. They completed a battery of questionnaires before and after this exercise. Afterward, they reported feeling like they had more meaning in their lives, greater life satisfaction, and more positive emotion than they had before the activity.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Research suggests that finding greater meaning in life helps people cope with stress and improves their overall health and well-being—it's what makes life feel worth living. Indeed, a [study](#) of almost 2,000 Romanian adolescents found that having a sense of meaning in life both increases psychological well-being and protects teens from risky behavior, such as drug and alcohol use, sexual activity, and unhealthy exercise and eating habits.

However, finding meaning in life can sometimes feel like an elusive task, especially to adolescents and emerging adults. Yet research suggests that there are potential sources of meaning all around us, from the moments of connection we share with others, to the beauty of nature, to the work that we do, and the things we create.

When young people identify things that give them meaning, they may be inspired to pursue important personal goals. Meaning can also give them a sense of strength and purpose when coping with stressful life events. And sharing what makes their lives meaningful with their peers can help to foster positive peer relationships based on trust and mutual understanding.

SOURCE

Steger, M. F., Shim, Y., Barenz, J., & Shin, J. Y. (2013). Through the windows of the soul: A pilot study using photography to enhance meaning in life. *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science*, 3, 27-30.