

## Session 9 Transcript: Ralph Fletcher

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- Hello, this is Ralph Fletcher. And we're gonna be talking about ways that photography can help us teach writing. I do several things. I write books for young readers. I write books for writing teachers. But I'm also a serious photographer. And it's interesting because you'd almost think that the world of writing and the world of photography are very different. But I think you're gonna find there's a lot of connections between the two. And that in fact, the world of photography can really help us do a better job of teaching writing. I've written a book on this subject which is "Focus Lessons." And this is a book that explores this idea and will kind of extend the ideas that I'm gonna be sharing with you right now. So first of all, It's important to realize that the word photography means drawing with light. It's a kind of expressing yourself and saying something, and it's a kind of composing. And when start looking at all the different connections between reading, between writing and photography, one of the things that we're gonna realize is that it's all about story. You've heard the expression that every picture tells a story. And you can see that here with the expressions on this little boy's face where he doesn't that crazy about the pictures at first. He was a little bit worried about how he looked with the rainbow on his face. But ultimately he really was happy with the way it turned out. And also I had a chance to go to Africa and watch this interaction between a lion male and the cub. And you can see that at first, it was kind of an aggressive thing. The male was not that friendly. But ultimately the little one persevered and won the affection of his dad. So you may have heard the expression that the secret wish of poetry is to stop time. Well, the secret wish of photography is also to stop time. And it's been said that photography takes an instant out of time. Altering life but holding it still. I love this picture of my father and his friend John at a family party. And just the expression of my dad's face here is that he's laughing so hard it almost looks like he's crying. But in fact, they're just howling with laughter. And I just love that idea. Now, I want you to think about the fact that the connection between photographing and paying attention to the world, and I do find that nowadays my camera often functions as my writer's notebook. I use my camera very much the way I use my writer's notebook. Collecting things, gathering odds and ends and details and trivia. And that's one of the big ideas I want you to think about is that for a lot of our students, really, instead of keeping a paper notebook, they're using their cell phones as a writer's notebook. And that's something that I can relate to too with the different pictures I take of just sometimes they're just things that are odd and interesting that I wanna protect them and preserve them so that I don't lose them. And maybe when you reflect on your own practice as someone who keeps pictures in your cell phone, I think that you might be surprised to realize that you also do something similar. That oftentimes we react to the world by taking a picture of it and knowing that we have it and we can always go back to that. So the second idea though that I want you to think about is that I think that we need to realize that we can use the language of photography to teach the craft of writing. That's something that I'm really excited about. Really, a lot of my work in this field of literacy has been about talking about the craft of writing. And I realized that when I was taking all these classes on learning how to photograph, and I've taken many classes and many field operations where I kind of go off with a professional photographer in the field to shoot wildlife. I realized

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that a lot of the things they were talking about were things that really I could relate to in the world of writing. They talk about the point of view. They talk about tension between this part of the subject and something else. Zooming in, these are all things that we talk about in the world of writing also. So for example, let's just say that you wanna talk about focus. We say that to a lot of young writers, how important it is to focus on something that's really important and not just to have your story go all over the place. But you wanna bring the reader's attention to one thing. Well, you can show that very clearly and succinctly in a photograph. This picture of a henna tattoo that I took in India. And what you're gonna find is that when you talk to your students about photographs, it's a world that they're familiar with because the world has become more visual. They're taking pictures themselves and they're gonna be familiar with a lot of the language that we use to talk about it. And I was thinking about a craft element. If you were gonna talk to kids about the difference between background and foreground. For example, right now as I record this, the United States and much of the world is locked down fighting the coronavirus. We're all social distancing and people are kind of stuck in their houses in many cases. So let's just imagine you wanted to write a story about a tense scene in a house between oh, I don't know, let's say an older brother and his dad. And some kind of an argument that they have. So that would be the foreground, that's what you're writing about. But the background for that story would be the coronavirus and the fact that nobody can go out anywhere. We can't go to restaurants. We can't go to movies. We really can't go see our friends so we're kind of stuck with one another. That's the background. And when writers write about something, they can make the piece of writing stronger by giving the reader a sense of the background to what's happening in the story also. So those two things were kind of hard to juggle. The language of writing sometimes can seem kind of amorphous and vague. But in a photograph like this one of the Himalayas, you can really clearly see the foreground. And then you can see the midground in this case with the nice, foggy, or misty shadows in the valley. But then in the background, you can see those spectacular Himalayan mountains that are covered with snow. And I think that when you use visuals like this, you're giving the reader something they can hang on to. So another idea. And I'm just kind of giving you a quick sense of this topic because there's really a lot to delve into here. I really, I think it's a rich idea. But the third big idea I have is that photography is a way to learn. It's a tool for inquiry. We talk about writing to learn. How oftentimes, you don't really write what you know, that you actually discover what you write in the act of writing. You discovered what you know. You figured out, you learned what you don't know. You learned what you wonder about. Well, something is very similar in the field of photography. I really learned a lot about the world by taking pictures and by looking at those pictures. In the camera, but also when I look at them later on my laptop. So for example, I was on a safari and I had a chance to photograph these elephants. And when I came back and looked at this one picture, I realized that the little elephant in the background does not have a trunk, or the trunk's been kind of cut off. And I learned that sometimes this happens with crocodiles in the river. And so that's something that I didn't really notice at the time when I was photographing it but I noticed it later. And during the same shoot, I was

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watching these elephants cross the Chobe River, in Botswana. And that's a picture that I really like a lot. You can see the watermark or how deep they had to go in. But one thing I didn't really notice was that I was looking at that baby elephant, and I noticed later on that the elephant had a little bit of a growth on its trunk. And again, I didn't notice this until I went back and took a really close look at it. So I just can tell you I've got many, many examples where photographing the world, being able to look closely at the images, revised and deepened my understanding of the world. And by the way, I just wanna mention, this is happening all over the world in every field. Fields like forensics and medicine and astronomy. Almost any field that you can imagine has been revolutionized because the viewer, the people looking at the images have really deepened their understanding by looking at photographs. So photography is a powerful tool for inquiry. And we want kids to be having time to take a close look at their images after they take them. So when the kids do take images, I ask them to think, to reflect. You might give them some questions like, "What did you notice? "What fits in the scene but what doesn't seem to fit? "What's something that kind of surprises you "that you didn't expect?" And I showed you this picture before about my dad and his friend John at the party laughing hilariously at something. But if you look at the picture again, you notice that in front of my dad there's a baby bottle. So sometimes you'll see in a picture something, when you look at it closely, that you didn't really expect before. So the next idea that I want you think about, and I'm not gonna really show you many images about this but I just want you to really think about the fact that I think it's important that we encourage kids to be taking their own photos. Just like in the writing classroom, as much as possible we want students to be choosing topics and writing about things that are important to them. I think that kids will be more invested in the photographs that they're taking and looking at if they actually are taking them themselves. So yeah, there's a place for us to give them images that we want them to look at and think about and maybe spark their own writing. But I think we really want to as much as possible encourage kids to be taking pictures. Which is something they're already doing. And something that could happen in school perhaps, depending on the regulations in your school. But to encourage kids to be taking images and looking closely at them. And then, so what happens to those pictures? You take the pictures. What do you do with them? Well, one of the things that we want to consider is that photographs can be a great springboard into writing. And we wanna encourage students to write from their photos. And what I would recommend first of all in this regard is look at what kids are already doing in this regard. Because already you're seeing our young students are taking pictures. And when they share them either on social media or with friends, they're oftentimes including a caption, or perhaps they make it into a meme. Perhaps they're just labeling it with one word or two or making a comment or asking a question. And so these are things that kids are already doing when they write, when they take pictures. And so we can build on that and encourage them to do more of that. And maybe to take from a sentence or two, you could write a longer piece than that. Just see if they could say a little bit more about the image. I took this picture of a cormorant, Double-crested Cormorant. And one thing that's interesting about these birds, and I learned this by taking

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pictures and doing some research is that cormorants, they're diving birds, but they don't have much oil on their wings which allows them to stay down longer. It decreases their buoyancy. And as a result of that, you'll often see cormorants standing up and drying their wings. A lot of like ducks, the expression, water rolls off the back of a duck because of that oil on the wings. The cormorant does not have that oil. So anyway, a picture like this, you might invite kids to make their own meme out of it or their own comment or imagine what the cormorant might be saying in a humorous way or a playful way or a serious way. And I would say that in terms of writing off of photos or writing from photos, we definitely want to invite kids to do it. We want to encourage it. But don't force it. If it comes naturally, that's great. But sometimes a photograph just needs to stand on its own. And sometimes you can take a powerful photograph and by adding words you almost can decrease the magic or the power of that image by explaining something that doesn't need to be explained. So again, I would say that you want to make this part of your writing classroom. Bringing in images, bringing in photographs, encouraging kids to use the images that they themselves have taken. But I wouldn't force the issue here. Because it's something that's gonna happen naturally or it's not gonna happen at all. So yeah, that's my book, "Focus Lessons." And I have a lot of other interesting information in here. I include 15 actual craft lessons that include how we might discuss the image with students and how we might segue from the photography to the element of writing. And so I think that you might find that to be useful. And I guess the last thing I would say to you to think about is I remember Don Graves used to always talk about how it's not just that we want kids to write, we need to write. Kids need to see adults that are passionate and that are engaged in the same things that they're doing. And I think that's true with photography. I would encourage you to wade into the water and get your feet wet and try it yourself. Try, start your own journey of photography. It's not gonna be something you have to publish stuff. But you're already probably taking a lot of pictures with your camera and with your cell phone. And I would encourage you to take those pictures, maybe find some that you could bring in to share with your students. Because oftentimes we can all look together and sometimes I think as teachers, we feel like we have got to have a subject all figured out before we teach it to our students. In fact, the world of photography is one of those things that you can stand with your students side by side and say to the kids, "I'm learning to become a better photographer just like everybody else is. "We can learn about this together. "You can learn from me but I definitely can learn from you." Because already a lot of these students when they're taking pictures, they are using the element of craft that they have already soaked up of what makes a good picture. Close-ups and point of view and do you wanna shoot it from the high or shoot it down low. These are all things that's already happening as kids are taking pictures. So the last thing I would like to leave for you is to consider about taking the leap, taking your own stab into photography. And I think that when you do that you'll find that you've got more things to share with your students. So thank you very much. I hope that I've given you some things to think about about how the world of photography and the world of writing are not polar opposites like sometimes we may have thought they are. But in fact, that

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the world of imagery and photos can actually enhance the way we teach kids about writing.  
Thank you.