CREATING, CURATING, AND USING PHOTO ALBUMS FOR SELF-STUDY
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Our use of photo albums for self-study is informed by two sets of visual practices that combine study of self with social critique in order to imagine, inspire, or instigate change: 1) Photovoice, inspired by Caroline Wang’s (1999) and 2) critical memory work with photo albums inspired originally by the work Jo Spence in her book, Putting myself in the picture (1988), along with her collaborations with Joan Solomon in What can a woman do with a camera? (1995).

The approach we have used to creating albums is quite simple, on the surface at least, and is adaptable to working with archival and family photographs and to photovoice projects where people take up cameras to represent issues that are important to them:

- Find (not take) or take (not find) some photos that appear (to you) to be linked to some sort of theme, narrative, or question that is relevant to your life (to your self-study inquiry).
- Choose (select) and organize seven or eight (no more) of these photos into a small photo album.
- Provide a title, and write a short “curatorial” statement of a 150-200 words to introduce and frame your collection.
- Write short captions to accompany each photo, and include acknowledgements and dedication (where appropriate), and an “about the artist” (optional).
- Contain each aspect of the textual material (e.g. curatorial statement, captions, images) to what can be placed within a plastic album window (or single page).
- Make an oral presentation of your album to your intended audience (for example, colleagues, administrators, community leaders, policy makers) and take note of their responses/critiques.
- If possible, display your album (make it available) where most appropriate.

Although the steps we presented above may appear simple, doing them well requires insight or “a thoughtful eye.” Part of the challenge is in recognizing the potential significance of individual photographs as well as the links between them and in framing and ordering them so that they speak with eloquence. Further, in presenting and displaying these images taken from our lives, we are performing; we are forced by the process to “go public,” to articulate and take ownership of our images and ideas. Not only are we able to see how others react, we are compelled to step back and almost literally “look at ourselves.”
It is also important to stress that the photographs do not have to be directly related to school: our frame for self-study in education is much broader than that. Asking teachers to use photographs taken from their lives requires that they examine the personal, the everyday, and the totality of their experience, which is, after all, the context in which professionals work. Many of the participants in the photo album projects we shall describe below found this new and wider perspective on their domestic photos to be challenging, freeing, and expansive. It freed them to think differently about their own lives—in a compact yet concrete and materialist manner. As we discuss elsewhere (Mitchell & Allnutt, 2007), our protocol pointed them to their own backyard—an often overlooked source of material in professional self-study. A related point is that unlike so many other research projects in education, in constructing their albums, the participants could, and often did, include bodies, whether their own or other people’s. In self-study, the body is crucial, for it is through our bodies that we act, teach, and think.