Capturing student creativity: using social network in photographic education

by

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Abstract:

Web 2.0 technology has changed the way the 21st century student thinks, learns and engages educationally and socially. The social presence afforded by Web 2 technologies embraces social interaction, collaboration, learning through sharing, exchanging ideas and production of knowledge allowing integrated life-long learning experience, (O’Reilly, 2005). Taking into account the digital age, the digitally savvy student and the digital camera it was necessary to find a resolution to teaching traditional photography skills within this new environment. Flickr was chosen as the social network that would best suit photographic education.

This paper will discuss the implementation of Flickr into an existing photographic program. Visually well laid out with a simple interface, flickr’s physical characteristics enable the establishment of improved visual literacy, access to technical metadata, immediate feedback, collaboration between all participants and an anywhere anytime capability.

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Traditional photography teaching is studio-based. Dissemination of technical knowledge and illustration of best practice are given in class. Regular assignments were completed, images were presented and feedback was given. Often these images were discarded, or mislaid and verbal feedback forgotten. The images were only visible to smaller groups of students. Considering this teaching method with its limitations in a digital environment it was necessary to review our teaching methods. Analysing the current data and accepting that our students are daily users of digital technologies, it was decided to implement a blended learning environment, both student focused and student centred.

Reviewing the popularity of a range of social networks, flickr was determined to be the most suitable for photographic education. Recent statistics show that flickr is in the top 5 social networking sites used worldwide (BBC News technology July, 2010). This generation of students are technically savvy, are visual learners, like being connected, enjoy multitasking, and collaborating. They demand a work life balance. Flickr met the needs of this group and concurrently addressed the problem of larger student numbers (150-250 students).

Teaching photography requires the ability to see and use the camera creatively, create a 3D world in a 2D space, think beyond the square and develop conceptual ideas. It was important that flickr could build upon and extend these skills. The initial planning for the implementation of flickr in early 2007 was important to ensure curriculum criteria were met. Strict guidelines had to be created in order to meet the learning outcomes of an existing curriculum. This was further evaluated and developed over the next two years. As flickr evolves and changes so do the outcomes that we apply to our curriculum, creating a constantly evolving and improving course structure.

Like all social networks, users are asked to generate their own homepage. Students are responsible for the creation of
their individual page, which later enables a record of individual progress, development and engagement. The site is used to conduct a variety of learning activities, which inform the basis of their semester's assessment.

After creating their homepage students then join a private group, where only enrolled students and teachers have access. Students must then upload a clear self-portrait so that they are recognisable by all parties within the group. The online community gives students a voice/faces: every interaction on flickr shows their portrait and is dated and timed. This feature is beneficial to all participants and counteracts issues and disputes about when assignments are handed in or completed.

Regular scaffolded learning activities are uploaded to the student’s personal site. Students are required to answer each assessment by posting a number of images (max 25 per assignment) to their Flikr page. Editing down their initial number of images ensures a level of self-critiquing. These individual images are posted to the group pool for all to see. The student then further edits their work down to 5-6 images that are then placed in a set ready for assessment. When completed and appraised by the teacher the student will see a talk bubble indicating that the work has been given feedback. Comments on technical issues, composition and assignment resolution criteria are addressed here. Students may review this feedback, re-edit or re-take images to improve upon their result. The images and comments remain on the site for consideration for the whole semester. If a student requires a more personal consultation the teacher can send a private flickr mail. Students are free to privately contact teachers this way.

All images uploaded are displayed in a group pool for all group to see. Images are no longer restricted to being seen in smaller single class groups of 20 but are visible to the larger cohort (150-250). Feedback from students suggests that this has lifted their visual literacy, motivation, engagement and encouraged a higher level of participation and sense of achievement.

On a weekly basis all students are required to critique at least 3 different images of three alternate students to encourage the improvement of analytical skills. Teachers can see what students have said, the image they critiqued, whose image it was and when they said it. This becomes an assessable part of their semesters work. All feedback received from both students and teacher is immediate, regular and timely, leading to a higher quality of outcomes. Student surveys formal and informal, qualitative and quantitative verify this.

Flickr has a discussion board where anyone in the group may post or add to a discussion relating to photography. Discussion can be on any topic from lomography to exhibitions and technical information. and often students use this to clarify assignments, ask technical information and talk about photographers whose work they enjoy. This has assisted and extended the curriculum adding to the course structure.

Embracing a key component of 21st century education, preparing them a modern workplace (Bellanca, J., & Ron Brandt, R. 2010; Fisher, T., Higgins C. & Loveless A. 2006; New Media Consortium 2008), flickr offers global platform. Classes have been run between Universities in Australia and America with all students required to resolve the same assignment then vote on images they consider the best. Flickr can also be translated into 8 languages which assists students with English as a second language who may otherwise struggle with comprehension of the course content. It is translated for the various participants.

In summary Flickr has extended interactivity, developed greater confidence in creativity, eliminated fear in presenting ideas and enhanced visual literacy; a strength being its capacity for anywhere, anytime interaction. Feedback is given regularly and immediately and most importantly it embraces new technology and the digital age. The engagement inherent within this social network has contributed to better teacher-student and student-student collaboration, encouraging a better educational environment not constrained by the traditional studio based class, unrestricted by time and place.
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November 2011 Volume II

PIEA JPE

The PIA Journal for Photography Education

is dedicated to serving the community of photography educators worldwide in support of teaching and research across curricula related to the teaching of photography. The Journal provides a forum for scholarly articles on pedagogy, contemporary and historical processes and applications, and all other aspects of photographic endeavors related to the field of photographic imaging education.

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