

Sharing Images, Creating Communities

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This case study discusses OpenStudio, a photo-sharing interface which is based on the web 2.0 photo-sharing interface, Flickr. OpenStudio is used as an integral part of student learning for a Level 1 course in digital photography (T189) offered by the UK Open University (see Minocha, 2009, pp. 54-58). The challenge faced by the course authors was how to teach a subject as visual as photography, at a distance with no tutorial support.

The course attracts around 2500 students per year, in two presentations. Students are drawn from a diversity of educational backgrounds and experience, and more than 50% are new to the university. The course materials are delivered entirely online and, as well as OpenStudio, students can communicate in a number of support forums.

Using OpenStudio

The OpenStudio environment is an unmoderated, peer support environment, although the moderators of the course forums have access to it, and some choose to engage with it out of interest. The main affordance of the interface is that students can post an image and others can comment upon it. The interface has a 'report' facility to enable students to report any problems, whether social or technical. The system administrator can, if necessary, remove or restrict images and comments.

The interface has 5 main areas:

- *My Photos*, an area where each individual posts up to 10 photos per study week:
- *My Group*, an area that displays the images from everyone in the student's allocated group week by week:
- *My Community* an area that displays all of the images from the entire course community week by week:
- *My Favourites*, a virtual album which contains any images that the student has chosen to "fave" from others' photo-collections. The images are linked so this can be used as a way of keeping track of comments on images, or keeping in touch with fellow students:
- *Search*, an area where students can search for images by photographer or by self-allocated tags.

The allocation of students to random groups is designed to make commenting more practical in a large community. Students are advised to give priority to their own group when critiquing images, though many comment on images from the community pool as well. Students can add descriptions and comments on their own images, and this is encouraged as a means of reflecting on the photography.

The interface allows the student to reveal as much or as little information about themselves as they wish, including their name (the default name is their initialised computer id). Many choose to reveal some personal details but others prefer to remain anonymous:

Students' views on OpenStudio

An evaluation carried out with a sample of students revealed that the vast majority found the interface helpful or very helpful. The most cited reason for this was the value of comments received on photos. A significant proportion of students also cited the camaraderie, motivation and inspiration OpenStudio engendered. This student comment sums it up:

“Extremely helpful. T189 was my introduction to serious photography and so I really appreciated the comments I got. I also found that evaluating other peoples work made me think about the various aspects that make a good photo, again helping me to improve.”

For the students who found the interface less helpful, reasons cited were: lack of meaningful comment; technical limitations; and social issues.

For a small, but vociferous minority, the lack of expert guidance in OpenStudio and the unsupervised nature of the interface were problematic. The issue of expert help is an interesting one. One of T189's sister courses teaches web design without any personal tuition and this has never been raised as an issue. It would seem that the intensely personal nature of photography leads students to require affirmation and approval from experts that they do not expect on other courses. This may stem from perceived differences between knowledge and skills acquisition, photography being seen as predominantly skills based.

Interaction among students

The vast majority of students comment in a constructive way on one another's images. To facilitate this, advice is provided in the course materials about critiquing and commenting. In the first presentation of the course, early guidance was by example, with explicit guidelines coming later. However, student feedback led to the explicit guidelines being moved to the beginning of the course.

The success of the interface as a social medium is evidenced by the post- course creation, by students, of a number of Flickr groups based on the course. Students write about their experience of both OpenStudio and the Flickr interface on which it is based, as a social experience as well as a learning community:

“Firstly I think of it as a social medium where I have contact with people with a common interest. Hopefully it is helping me to improve my photography and I still get a buzz when I receive comments on my images so I suppose it is also to showcase my images.”

“I miss the Open Studio community and feedback and Flickr has filled that void for me.”

Conclusion

Evaluation of OpenStudio shows that it is achieving its intended outcome of enabling students to learn digital photography through peer support. The scope for use of image-sharing interfaces in other disciplines is also significant. Engagement via the visual image is undoubtedly rich and fruitful. Possibilities might include: the use of photo-sharing in art and media courses for discussing images and the issues surrounding them; in science to collect and share samples virtually and seek opinion or comment upon them; in languages as a stimulus for discussion or as a basis for language games.

The study showed two specific areas that are critical to the success of such an interface. Firstly, guidance and encouragement are needed to enable students to engage in meaningful dialogue within the online environment. Where student skills and abilities vary enormously, the timing and pitching of this guidance is crucial.

Secondly, integration of the interface into the learning strategy for the course is important if the students are to have an incentive to contribute. In this case OpenStudio was a key element of the learning strategy and almost all students on the course used it, though the extent of engagement varied.

The study also showed that offering opportunities for social interaction can strengthen the student cohort, aid retention and encourage future studies. However, findings indicate that there is a need to allow and facilitate social interaction at different levels to suit individual preferences.

Reference

Minocha, S. (2009) *Case studies - Effective use of Social Software in Education*, JISC, UK. [<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/projects/effective-use-of-social-software-in-education-casestudies.pdf>]