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### **Photomedia e-learning journal: beyond a traditional pedagogy**

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#### **Introduction**

Photography education has shifted from its original fine art program roots (Edge 2009; Kennedy 2009; Newbury 1996; Rubinstein 2009) and now makes a valued contribution to communication in an ocular centric world, a world dominated by images. Tertiary students now value digital imagery skills as critical to working life across professional fields (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012, Gauthier 2015, Goldchain 2015, Johnson 2015, Van Dijck 2004, Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). In addition, The New Media Consortium of Higher Education Report (Johnson et al. 2014) has identified the need for new pedagogies able to build 'soft skills, individual strengths, accommodate multiple learning styles and multiple modes of thinking' (p. 4); in addition, these pedagogies must accommodate the students' desire to learn online with open access to learning anytime (Russell et al., 2014). This is coupled with the tertiary education being driven by both productivity and cost effectiveness as much as by the social change imperative to shift to blended learning environments.

The challenge is how to build critical and self-reflective artistic thinking skills using e-learning platforms. As photography education and its studio base shifts (Richon 2011) and adopts new blended e-pedagogies, this paper presents Photographic Participatory Learning (PPL) as an arts-informed method that is able to research the teaching and learning of photography teaching using e-learning tools as little empirical evidence exists about the benefits of digital e-learning in tertiary photography teaching and learning (Grushka, Bellette & Holbrook, 2015).

The paper draws on current research and elaborates on the possibilities, benefits and limitations of using an e-journal blog and related multi-media tools. Is the e-journal an appropriate toolbox for arts-inquiry strategies and can it develop reflective dispositions able to embrace an interactive aesthetic and its affordances for social media focused students? The preliminary findings will be examined using two student case studies. The benefits of the e-learning journal as a pedagogical

innovation will be discussed as to whether this pedagogy can open new opportunities for tertiary art and design education.

### **Social media pedagogies**

The art and design tertiary students now see visibility as identity. Creating and communicating with images actively constructs the learner self (Grushka et al., 2011) and is rapidly shifting the photograph away from photography as a memory device (Barthes 2000; Harrison 2002; Schiano, Chen & Isaacs 2002; Sontag 1990). Photomedia curriculum now aims to embrace these shifts and build conceptual, visual, social, technical and business skills as the line between commercial and fine art photography merges (Goldchain 2015). The e-learning journal is a tool that accommodates the interconnected communicative imperative facilitated by the Camera Phone and other multi-media devices. E-journaling may prove to be a teaching and learning tool that can both build media communication skills and visual adaptive thinking (Gauthier 2015). These skill are now seen as critical and core knowledge to working life and photomedia programs must respond to the online cultural and social learning capital of students while making them vocationally ready (Grushka et al., 2015).

Tertiary students harness techno-social objects or multi-media devices, such as the mobile phone within their communicative practice and this makes possible the emergence of the techno-cyborg who use their mobile devices for extended learning capacity (Grushka, Clement, Donnelly, 2014). Techno-objects are now part of the learners' life world (Valkenburg & Peter 2011; Brown & Bobkowski 2011). The use of these devices has profound implications for our understanding of experience, learning and communication. In art and design education shifts are occurring that seek to encourage the use of multi-media devices and little is known about how students play and use this communicative space for effective critical reflective learning.

### **Photomedia Tertiary Education goes online**

Tertiary learning is increasingly anchored in the e-learning and blended learning environments being driven by both productivity and cost effectiveness as much as by social change. Students engage in education and its online content increasingly through social media forms such as, blogs, wikis, twitter, forums, YouTube, Tumblr, apps, and email to name a few current platforms (Lenhart et al, 2015). The Student Experience and Expectation of Technology (SEET) survey, based on Australian

statistics from three universities, showed that between the years 2010-2015 there has been significant growth in internet capability and market saturation of smartphones, with increased access to broadband for the general community (Gosper et al. 2014). In addition student expectations on 'access' and learning 'anytime' are now mainstream for the tertiary student population and a wide range of digital transformations in tertiary learning exist across online management systems (Russell et al. 2014).

Are these e-learning environments more effective at building the aesthetic, technical, creative and critical thinking of photographic students than their traditional studio or can they support studio learning? Online tutorials in photographic skills development have complemented studio learning for some time. Now the online learning environment is also shifting. Photography lecturer and creator of online courses #phonar and #picbod wants to change his position to one of curator and contextualiser able to leverage critical and aesthetic knowledge through social media (Worth 2015) rather than simply provide technical skills development. This online pedagogical model acknowledges performativity over and above the acquisition of technical skills and this makes an explicit link to the way students now wish to engage with learning when online options are available to complement the photographic studio learning environments. In these online learning environments the students themselves become mentors and facilitators working alongside the photomedia educator. Such shared experiences extend the online learning community(s). Yet Dabbagh & Kitsantas (2013) and Frydenberg (2010) both argue that the pedagogical awareness of, or research into e-learning that may build participation, collaboration and/or production remains limited

### **The photomedia e-learning study**

This paper reports on one aspect of a larger ethics approved study into the benefits of photomedia e-learning. One aspect of the study was to determine the pedagogical possibilities and limitations of using an online e-learning journal. It asked whether an e-learning journal limits or develops critical and self-reflective dispositions that can embrace an interactive aesthetic (Xenakis & Arnellos 2013). Interactive aesthetics is a term that has evolved within design to accommodate the constructed aesthetic space between the client and the designer/ audience. Will the affordances of the new online collaborative and participatory spaces help students to understand how their own critical and reflective skills are essential in building aesthetic consciousness for

the refinement of their own images. Two case studies of introductory level photomedia students e-learning journals will be analysed and discussed.

The study employs a participatory self-study methodology that positions the educator in an epistemological stance towards critical and emancipatory learning (Kemmis 2008). It employs multiple methods of data collection in order to attest to the rigor and reliability in the interpretation of the data within it (Stake, 2005). The participatory self-study methodology differs from traditional teacher/educator action research methods as it draws on self-study approaches including narrative inquiry, reflective portfolios, memory work and arts-based approaches to understanding student thinking processes and the appropriateness of the educators associated pedagogies (Lunenberg & Samaras 2011). As the e-learning journal takes a blog form, it contains many types of data. The analysis of the e-learning journal interactions was managed and analysed using the qualitative data management tool, QSR NVivo10. The preliminary findings from the case studies are discussed from the critical and interpretive lens of the photomedia educator in order to contribute to the gap in the literature about the effectiveness of photomedia e-learning environments (Bogre 2015; Edge 2009; House 2011; McWilliams 2009) in art and design education.

### **E-Learning Journal**

The e-learning journal was designed to accommodate arts-based inquiry and its embodied and reflective praxis. In particular, it draws on *theoria* (knowing), *praxis* (doing), and *poiesis* (making) theorised in *A/r/tography* (Irwin & De Cosson 2004). Students were encouraged to present their learning as images accompanied by a reflective narrative or poetic inquiry (Prendergast, Leggo & Sameshima 2009) or, an exchange between text and art (Springgay, Irwin & Kind 2005). Students were asked to articulate their artist concepts and their communicative intentions in ways that reveal their poetic imagination and artistic inquiry. Therefore the texts surrounding encoded image entries, the artist statements and the title of the body of work, are seen in this research as intertwined elements of artistic inquiry that are able to reveal the critical self-reflective artist.

The e-learning journal takes the form of a blog. A blog generates a feed in chronological order and differs from traditional visual journal/diary due to its non-linear construction as the posts and subpages randomly assemble and are tracked by the post date. The e-learning journal was the hub for documentation of digital photographic thinking, working images, reflections on progress and artistic research.

The students were encouraged to customize their blog and were given permission to experiment and learn from mistakes and to articulate this process in order to facilitate conceptual development.

They were encouraged to use the interactive tools in the following ways:

- Tag research archived links, particularly blogs with primary source documentation in order to access these anytime;
- Choose to blog privately, password protect all or selected areas of their e-learning journal research and review the sites of their peers;
- Create online tutorials of their own emerging software techniques as tutorials and archive them; and
- Document photographic studio learning.

The e-learning journal did not replace the studio, but became the extension of the students' practices allowing technology to enhance rather than replace their practice. The educator was lecturer, facilitator, demonstrator and online collaborator. Students were also asked to collaborate online in order to revisit ideas and clarify their iterative learning processes. Concurrent process thinking along with retrospective analysis of posts and content was seen as a way to enable students to become critical self-learners and improve their encoding processes. Students who resisted the online platform were encouraged to continue their practice stretches, notes, and diagrams on paper, but were instructed to photograph this with their phone or scan and upload to their blog.

## **Findings**

The analysis of the students e-learning journal content, particularly their writing, images and their aesthetic relationships are the focus of this paper. Focus is on whether the blogging capabilities and pedagogical strategies were different or the same as the more traditional photomedia journaling approaches. In particular, the analysis focuses on whether e-learning participatory pedagogies were able to facilitate more insightful critical self-reflective skills in the students. If so, could the findings have the potential to reframe or recontextualise how the photomedia educator could use online and studio learning in blended learning?

The findings are elaborated through the analysis of the learning of photomedia students Kate (K) and Felicity (F). All the case study students (n. 4) used writing as

refection, however K and F were selected on the basis of their concepts, representational practices and their poetic reflective styles.

### **e-learning journal and its pedagogies**

Analysis of the e-learning journals identified that all the students (n. 4) were exploring the new relationship between their e-learning journal and their social learning and communication preferences. In particular, the way they could access and interact with multiple sites and with multiple aspects of their photographic processes quickly and seamlessly,

The students were using their e-learning journal to:

- Hyperlink, evaluate and review artists work;
- Upload video footage and information from photographic technical blogs;
- View tutorials on photographic processes and the functionality of different cameras;
- Upload screen capture footage showing their editing processes; and
- Make multiple diary entries as image upload and make written diary entries.

### **Participatory pedagogies beyond the studio**

With the ability to access blogs, camera and software techniques plus research photographers and other critical blogs, the studio space shifts to one that can exploit participatory learning pedagogies (Grushka, Bellette & Holbrook, 2015). These pedagogies draw from action research but they can be described as self-study approaches (Lunenberg & Samaras, 2011) that utilise collaborative inquiry and critical reflection. Students were encouraged to document personal and collective learning through reflective narrative entries, memory work and arts-based approaches such as linking images and words as they intersect in the evolution of concept images, and then resolved images. In this learning environment the e-learning journal shifts to an interactive diary, or note pad able to upload and accommodate a range of collaborative and participatory pedagogical strategies in a non-linear fashion. An upload date means accountability but it is also a powerful tool in tracking one's creative and reflective thinking (who said/did what, when). The e-learning journal was used in this context to:

- Bridge the virtual and the material learning spaces;
- Observe, discuss, collaborate and learn new techniques, such as studio lighting, then share notes or their own personal variations on the technique;
- Collaborate to brainstorm concepts for projects throughout the course;
- Document collaborative test shots and comment on their success; and

- Document pre and post photographic experimentation with related editing techniques and share on-line.

### **Blog culture and students e-learning content**

The e-learning journal was analysed to identify shifts in cultural communicative behaviours and whether they impacted on student engagement in the post-visualisation photographic processes when blogging and writing in the e-learning journal. In the e-learning blogs of K and F, the analysis identified that their reflective writing, about their pre and post-visualisation making processes, were regularly accompanied by a limited vocabulary associated with affective response.

'Love' and 'like' were used to describe both their own work and the images of other artists and their techniques.

'I like it. I think it's really interest[ing], like all through here, these bits and all the cracks and stuff like that, but I knew I didn't like it as it was.' (K)

Word cloud showing frequency of words used is represented in Figure 1.



Figure 1: NVivo word search cloud from blog and interviews of F and K.

This may quickly lead to the assumption that the students use limited vocabulary and therefore their conceptual thinking and writing will reflect similar limitations. What was observed was that this blogging communication style was essentially the entry point into another level of thinking and working with their images. These levels of deeper reflection and dialogue are described below

### **E-feed critical reflections**

Art-based learning is a process of participation and interaction (Sullivan, 1993). Artists extend their thinking about making beyond the technical when they consider the intended meanings artworks generate, and how these works might be interpreted by different audiences (Grushka, 2005). In other words, they apply critical reflection when employing problem-solving strategies as they self-reflect on the material, virtual and social meanings of their work. Each artist builds their own personal critical semiotic meaning making system in order to analyse their own experiences and devise new representational practices to present their new perspective (Brookfield, 2015).

This is evidenced in the e-feed form of each journal that was individually devised, and carried a unique aesthetic signature. In Figure 2 this curated 'Instagram/Pinterest styled' layout is accompanied by an extended short section of writing that links observation, experience and reflection with an emerging conceptual position.





Figure 2: *'Fractured Florals', Kate Langbein, e-learning blog*

'Things we see as long lasting can be shattered... The glass shatters. Life is fragile... There is no sense of who has shattered the flower, or why. The viewer is left to decide' (K).

Another blog entry gives attention to the participatory learning in the studio and how this is quickly uploaded as a technical documentation in Figure 3, 'Setting up the rig' .

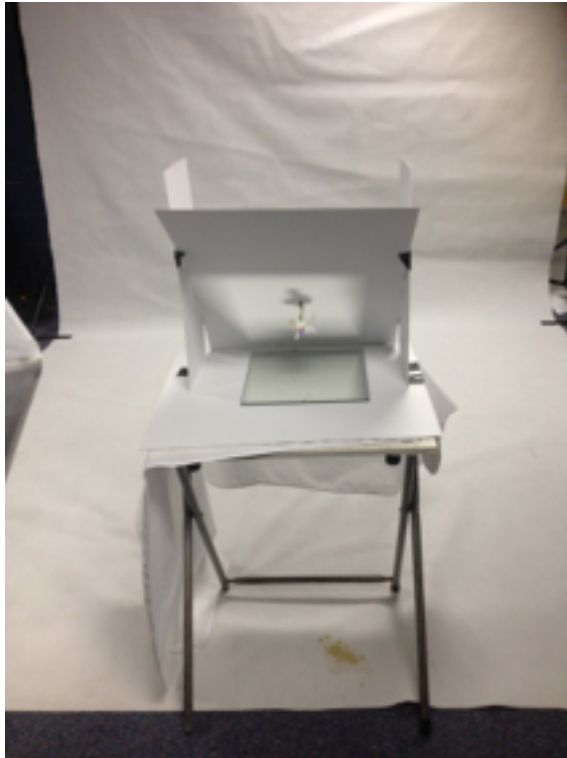


Figure 3: *'Setting up the rig': Kate Langbein e-learning blog*

The entry accompanying this post read:

'We use white chipboard.... held together with duct tape... The back was curved slightly... to conduct the light. The mirror was placed in the centre...' (K).

What is present in this image and its associated text entry is a reference to the collaborative learning space provided in the studio and its blended-e-learning components. Students are encouraged to plan, show their process on the blog and then these posts can either be extended by their fellow students or the photomedia educator in order to move from tentative conceptual and technical ideas, towards resolution. Significantly, both students used their blogging to reflect on their technical skills development and their emergent autonomy in critical decision-making. K has evolved her own visual metaphors and uses her blog (images and words) as a problem-solving strategy. The blog now functions as a cyborg reflective space to scaffold the many ideas and aesthetic solutions she is considering. Each entry act opens up new possibilities, new perspectives.

F in her reflection of her final project in her blog states

'The technical side of editing... I love to learn... I want to obtain the most skill I can in those areas... I learned a lot from both my successes and failures' (F).

Observation, research and experimentation can open new possibilities around technical and aesthetic pointers to help encode an effective message. This reflective and a critical disposition can be demonstrated in an entry by Kate below:

'reflection... doing reviews of other artist's work, I love the idea that they can give you a view of something that you wouldn't necessarily see... Or the idea of looking at something how the photographer sees it I think, because you can only see something through your eyes except in photography, when the photographer shows you how they see something' (K).

The above quote reveals how the student is negotiating the semiotic meanings present in their work by reflecting on their research into other artists aesthetic solutions.

It demonstrates how multiple levels of critical reflection are in operation when documenting levels of integrative reflective practice: reflecting on the technical side of editing, their aesthetic influences, their subject matter, the possibilities when experimenting and making interactive aesthetic judgments and most significantly reflecting on the limitations of ones own experiences.

## **Discussion**

### **The e-feed in-time personal and participatory assessment**

Traditional art journaling and the associated recorded and illustrated aesthetic and conceptual thinking have been critiqued for their inability to capture the non-linear, connected and associated thinking and memory work of the artist in active thinking and performative mode. This work occurs as thinking when making and can't be separated out as words or text (Grushka 2005). This thinking has traditionally been captured using the post reflective and rational construction of a written linear artist statement. The e-learning journal, because of its open accessibility and in-time functionality, connects observing, researching, recording, documenting and reflecting and may be a learning tool closer to capturing the cognitive phenomenon of art practice and its integration of levels of reflective thinking. The e-feed and in-time functionality allows for the clarification of processes whenever the cognitive connecting urge pushes to the surface a new idea, a new technique or simply a technical adjustment to refine the artists' intentionality.

Unlike the traditional artist journal, this journal is multi-dimensional. It can capture the linear mind-time entries as dated image or text uploads; it can date e-feed uploads and the blog can also contain vast amounts of linked data from other blogs, such as from YouTube. It can incorporate other handheld devices and display an array of screen capturing facilities that hold the entire image generation and final production processes of an artwork. The student then has immediate and continuous retrieval of this data and can make numerous retrospectively reflective acts to recall and rework memories and images according to their aesthetic and creative desire. The e-learning journal is also able to accommodate the online, open and learning anytime for a cyborg learner seeking a personalized, participatory and productive networked learning environment.

Building a more inter and intra-connected critical reflective learner and critical writer within the social media-learning environment still remains a challenge. Limitations are evident in the analysis of the e-learning journal as it was not able to identify the students' responses to learning across the personal, the participatory and the public spaces afforded through the combination of the e-learning journal in a blended learning environment. This question is part of the larger study, as the ranges of traditional to cyborg learners are present in most classrooms (Lenhart et al, 2015). There is an imperative that photomedia educators begin to examine how they can use the e-learning journal and to consider i) their roles as curator, contextualiser and facilitator (Worth 2015) and ii) how the e-learning journal becomes an in-time personal and participatory critical self-reflective tool. As a participatory research site, it may also inform the ongoing process of evaluation for the photomedia educator. However the findings are tentative in the light of the limitations of the study findings presented.

## **Conclusion**

As Art and Design programs are increasingly taking up flexible e-learning platforms in response to tertiary education imperatives, this paper begins to engage with e-feed learning in photomedia and argues for its e-feed pedagogical benefits. It introduces Photographic Participatory Learning (PPL) as an arts-informed teacher self-study method that may be useful when researching the teaching and learning of photography in the e-learning space.

The e-learning journal is a tool that aligns with both the material and virtual spaces of photomedia learning and is suitable for blended learning environments. The analysis

of the e-learning journal identified that's its new iterative digital non-linear pedagogies have significant potential to accommodate: the desire to work online and in-time; flexibility for individual thinking patterns; allow for the development of the soft skills of critical self-reflection and aesthetic refinement; and a range of arts-based inquiry methodologies. In particular, the e-learning journal actively supports becoming a critical self-reflexive learner, with rich and inter-connected links between techniques, ideas, feelings and emergent concepts as revealed through an embodied poetics of inquiry. Subsequently, questions concerning how Art and Design schools can maintain academic quality, adapt and develop the necessary rigour, flexibility to emerging cultural and social outcomes may see the e-learning journal become a central tool for new photomedia educators.

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