Encouraging formative peer review via social networking sites

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The delivery of a new final year module within the Faculty of Technology at De Montfort University has posed a range of issues surrounding the copyright, confidentiality and the inclusion of formative peer review of student-generated work. We describe the work in progress, problems encountered and their potential solution. ‘Advanced Imaging Technology’ is a 3rd-year module chosen by over 50 students studying BSc programmes within the faculty. The module involves in-depth study of optics and a variety of creative and technical applications (ranging from astrophotography to high dynamic range imaging).

Summative assessment of the module incorporates written exam and practical coursework including submission of a portfolio of images captured throughout the academic year. Weekly laboratory sessions involve the study of concepts of a particular application of image generation, with the resultant images critically analysed and included in the portfolio. It is recognised that all forms of assessment should primarily be concerned with providing guidance and feedback to the learner (Nicholls, 2001). The ongoing generation of a portfolio, right from the very start of the module, means feedback to students is essential to ensure that students can share experiences and learn from mistakes. A recent claim (Hatzipanagos & Warburton, 2007) is that the social dimensions of emerging technologies allow for formative assessment practices to be reinvented or at the very least facilitated by essentially participative and student-focused interventions.

The visual nature of the digital images captured or generated each week required a digital repository for ease of uploading and peer review. This raises the following issues: only students enrolled onto the module should be able to upload and review images, images submitted by students should not be downloadable and an appropriate tool for peer review should be available. A search for existing online image portals revealed very few tools that met these objectives. Flickr, an online photo management and sharing application, was the initial choice. An established website utilised by amateurs and professionals alike, Flickr fulfilled our copyright criteria. A disadvantage of Flickr is all users must have a Yahoo account. To ask over 50 students to create new email accounts is unreasonable.
Other alternative online photo sharing applications were considered, eg, Photobucket, MyPhotoAlbum and SmugMug. However, none of these met our requirements, eg, by having no facility to comment on images or requiring a subscription.

A recent study (Ipsos Mori, 2007) reported that undergraduate students are beginning to use social networking sites to discuss coursework with friends, although there are still some barriers to using them in teaching and learning. Seventy-three per cent use social networking sites to discuss coursework with others, with 27% on at least a weekly basis. Of these, 75% think such sites are useful in enhancing their learning. A recent project at the University of Leicester (Wellens, Madge & Hooley, 2008) aims to explore whether there is any role for social networking tools to be used by the university support services and academic departments to enhance teaching and learning, from the students’ perspective. A clear picture is emerging whereby the students thought the use of Facebook was most important for social reasons but not for formal teaching purposes. Although sometimes used informally for learning purposes, students were not overly keen on being contacted by their tutors via Facebook. The Ipsos Mori study however showed that overall, there is a potential for higher education institutions to take the lead; students are ready to hear about new learning styles involving information communication technology, but look for guidance from their institutions.

We considered using Facebook to create an online environment for students within the new module to share images and comments upon each other’s work. By creating a private group, the authors were able restrict group membership to bona fide students. Only these students could access the group. From the start of teaching, students have been able to upload imagery and comment upon each other’s work. To this extent, Facebook has been a useful tool. However, there have been noteworthy negatives related to using Facebook. First, students are required to have a Facebook account. While we assumed that most students will have an account with a social networking site, we discovered a small number of students who did not. Although none of these students objected to creating an account to engage with the module, we appreciate that future students may not be as accommodating.

A second difficulty of using Facebook for peer review is the inability to create albums within the group. Very quickly, the images section can contain literally hundreds of images in no organised folder structure. In addition, comments made by students on images appear on their profile page.

Our conclusions so far are that Facebook goes part way to creating an accessible online portal for image sharing and peer review, but does not prevent students from downloading each other’s images albeit in low resolution. Students can freely comment on each other’s work, but there is no facility for scoring each other’s work in any format, even such as using star ratings.

The lack of photo albums and the necessity to have a Facebook account suggest that we will need an alternative solution next year. As further work, we plan to survey our
students to establish their views on the effectiveness of using Facebook and if we should create our own in-house online image portal using, for example, Coppermine authoring tools to develop the interface and structure.

References


