



Suburb as Site: Virtual collaborative learning for undergraduate photography

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This paper describes a learning and teaching approach implemented in an undergraduate photography unit that is designed around a virtual collaborative experience. The approach was adopted several years ago and the process of continually refining the approach to enhance the student experience is outlined as are the benefits and challenges that have been encountered to date. The primary aim of the learning and teaching approach is to allow students to develop graduate attributes and technical skills that will prepare them to work in a contemporary media context – working in the virtual so as to understand approaches to developing and presenting work in the modern photography workplace. The approach also aims to engage and support students in a self reflective process where they examine the self and others focusing on aspects of contemporary culture and lifestyle, architecture and concepts of the home. Central to the approach is a virtual collaborative project where students are matched with partners to develop and present a cohesive virtual photography portfolio that contrasts their local environment: *Suburb as Site*. Finally, the paper describes the research project that is underway to enhance the collaboration matching process and evaluate the student experience. The research aims to contribute to improved staff understanding of the student experience with a view to further enhancing the learning and teaching approach.

Keywords: virtual collaboration, photography, graduate attributes, student experience.

Introduction

In their first year of degree studies at Deakin University, Photography students work to develop a strong foundation of technical skills and competencies. In second year studies, these skills are extended allowing students to explore their creativity in the virtual environment through the unit ACM234, *The Suburb as Site* (SAS). This blended delivery unit comprises face to face lectures and workshops (e.g. night photography) which are complemented by presentations from guest artists (e.g. architecture or urban photography specialists) and on occasion external visits to sites of interest. This face to face component is complemented by several technologies that allow students to gain experience in working in the virtual, both individually and collaboratively. This paper describes how and why ACM234 was and continues to be developed at Deakin University.

Background

The *Suburb as Site* unit was developed in 2005-2006 after an extensive review of contemporary virtual photography in the media. Until that time authentic opportunities for students to explore the challenges and benefits of working in the contemporary electronic photographic media were limited within the curriculum, largely due to the absence of access to technologies that would support authentic learning activities. A key driver for the development of the unit was to overcome this gap in the curriculum by providing an authentic virtual learning experience that would allow students to build on their technical photography skills and develop graduate attributes including teamwork, communication, problem solving and technology skills (Deakin University, 2009).

Graduate attributes including communication and teamwork skills are valued by employers, enhance graduate employability and support lifelong learning (DEST, 2002). The learning and teaching approach implemented in the unit provided the opportunity for students to actively participate in their learning to develop graduate attributes and skills (Douglas, 2008). It was envisaged that providing students with the opportunity to work in an authentic virtual learning environment would contextualise the content and concepts presented in the unit and enhance student engagement (Abraham & Jones, 2008; Frawley & Litchfield, 2009).

Assessment

The unit is centered on a virtual collaboration task where students are matched with national and/or international collaborators so they can work together to produce contrasting imagery that is presented in a cohesive portfolio via a virtual gallery. Collaboration was key as it allows each individual to work in a way that emulates the professional context, and also provides the potential for students to learn more together than they would alone (Vygotsky, 1978; Warschauer, 1997). The collaboration experience forms a major portion of the unit assessment which includes a pre-collaborative task involving imagery collection and analysis. Students must also maintain a reflective journal during the collaborative project and complete a post production analysis report. Assessment for the *Suburb as Site* is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Assessment tasks for the *Suburb as Site*

Title	Overview	Percentage
Pre-production task: <i>The Garden of Suburban Delights</i>	Presentation of four images and a 500 word statement reflecting on depictions of suburbia in the media	20%
Reflective journal	Reflection on collaborative process including images, text, emails, etc.	20%
Collaborative development	four to six images each and a 500 word thematic statement	40%
Post production analysis	800 word reflection on the collaborative experience	20%
	Total	100%

The collaborative process

The *Suburb as Site* has used the aforementioned assessment and collaborative models for three years to date. Each year the Unit Chair (subject coordinator) contacts counterparts at collaborating universities and establishes relationships with new partner universities. Partnering can be difficult as such arrangements need to be integrated into the teaching and learning approach at the partner institution and equitable assessment needs to be devised.

Photography at Deakin University is a popular discipline and each year the Unit Chair is challenged to find enough collaborators for local students to work with. Special arrangements need to be made for

partner institutions where teaching periods do not align. Numbers are such that in some cases, students must collaborate with local students. In such instances, students who are studying in different cohorts are paired to attempt to ensure that the students do not know one another.

There is a significant administrative workload for the Unit Chair to match collaborators. Students are matched based on a three page questionnaire that elicits demographic information, creative and photographic preferences. The Unit Chair manually reviews the printed questionnaires that are filled out by local students and partner institution students in week one of their studies. Questionnaires are mailed to the Unit Chair who then matches students through a process that can take up to a day. Once matching is complete, students are notified via an email from the Unit Chair. The collaborators then make contact via email and negotiate the collaboration independently via email, text, instant messaging and social networking sites.

At the close of the collaboration, the local student uploads a selection of up to 12 photos into the SAS gallery including an image containing their 500 word thematic statement. The gallery is powered by open source Gallery 2 software (depicted in Figure 1). The entire class, including external collaborators can view one another's work. The reflective journal, pre and post production tasks are completed in the University's Learning Management System (LMS).

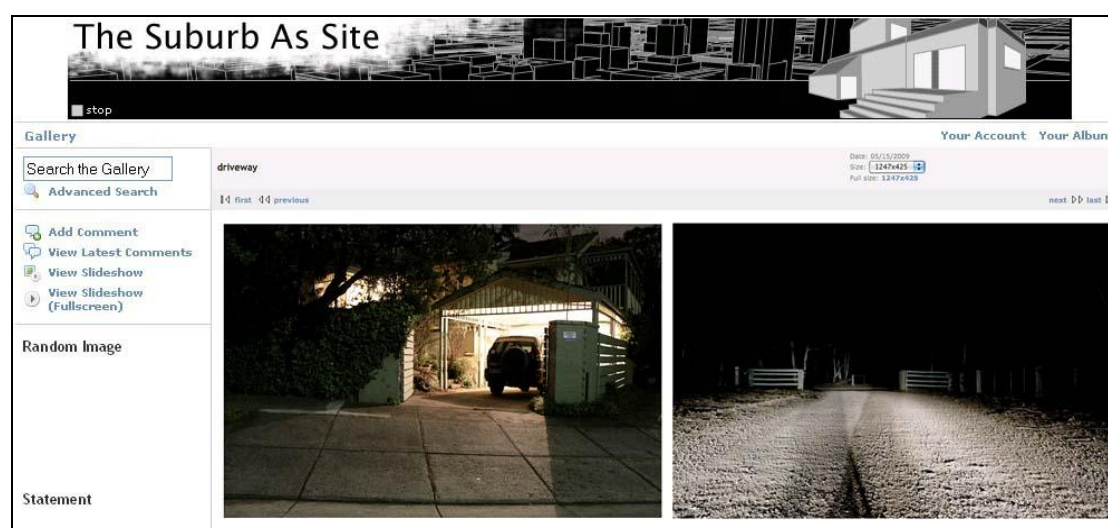


Figure 1: The *Suburb as Site* gallery featuring *Driveway* by Luke Crozier and Kimberly Dixon

Challenges and benefits

Since the unit was first delivered in 2007 the Unit Chair has progressively adapted the approach to overcome challenges that arose and enhance the student experience. In the first delivery, students were matched randomly. Throughout the semester the Unit Chair found managing partner conflicts was consuming a considerable amount of time and the students involved were distracted from learning. The second offering of the unit in 2007 implemented the pre collaborative questionnaire. The Unit Chair also explicitly introduced strategies for scheduling collaboration, meeting regularly, managing conflict and the like into Lecture and Workshop content. These interventions resulted in a noticeable drop in partner conflicts.

During the semester the Unit Chair takes on the role of learning mentor for students. For example, in some cases students can be matched with partners who have more advanced skill sets. The Unit Chair works with students on request to develop a personal learning strategy to build their skills to allow them to participate on the same level as their partner.

Electronic journals within the LMS have supported the reflective journal activity since the inception of the unit. Unfortunately, the journals are not optimised for the display of imagery. Students have struggled to present imagery that inspired their work and the photos that contributed to the development of their portfolio using the electronic journal. In 2010, students will have the option to

adopt the journal format and platform of their choice to try and overcome the present limitations. The journal is progressively completed by the student throughout the semester. In the past it has been useful in identifying collaborations that may need early intervention from the Unit Chair. The move away from the LMS electronic journal may prevent such early interventions from taking place. This maybe addressed by undertaking journal progress reviews during the middle of the trimester.

In 2008 and 2009 the Unit Chair provided students with the opportunity to exhibit their work through the virtual gallery at University events and in a (physical) gallery space. The first opportunity in 2008 was beset with technical problems (Internet connectivity) during the event that precluded the exhibition from taking place. In 2009, technical and exhibition staff worked together to create an installation of the *Suburb as Site* within the University Art Gallery which experienced no technical difficulties.

Enhancing the student collaboration matching approach

In 2009 the authors received a five thousand dollar (AU) Faculty grant to support the development of a light weight web site to support the collaboration matching process. The aim of the web site is to make the matching process faster, more efficient and accurate. Two key benefits of the system will be reduced administrative overhead for the Unit Chair, and more compatible matches due to accurate paring based on student defined preferences. The system will allow students to complete their collaboration profile online. The Unit Chair will then use the web site to review profiles and approve collaborators that are matched using a weighted algorithm that takes into account desired collaborator characteristics as specified by each student.

Conclusions and future directions

Creating authentic collaborative experiences for students is a time consuming process for unit staff. Monitoring the progress of partnerships and resolving issues as they arise can be challenging. However, the benefits that can be realised for students have made the process worthwhile in this instance. Two interventions are currently being considered for inclusion in the 2010 offering: pre collaboration virtual ice breaker exercises and video conference meetings. It is hoped that meeting partners personally (if virtually) prior to collaboration will motivate students and enhance the collaboration process.

Since the first offering of SAS in 2007 the Unit Chair has received anecdotal feedback from students which has informed the refinement of unit delivery. Feedback to date has been positive. Students especially value the opportunity to collaborate and experience diversity through international virtual collaborations. Students also report improvements in their competency with virtual communication, digital photography and online presentation, enhancing their ability to work in the contemporary digital photography workplace.

Development of the collaboration matching system is now complete. The system is being used for collaboration matching during trimester two, 2010. It is hoped that the system will reduce the unit administration load. If the system proves to be successful it may be repurposed for other disciplines within the University. The authors are working toward development of a formal survey to evaluate the student experience, including the efficacy of the new collaboration matching system. The results of the survey will be used to refine unit teaching approach and further develop the collaboration matching system.

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