

Case Study 7: Creativity at Work

Stevenson College, Edinburgh

This case study describes one further education establishment's approach to developing creativity within the context of its coursework in photography.

Stevenson College is located on the south-western edge of Edinburgh and offers a wide range of courses to students. Many students are drawn to the college by the high quality of a number of its courses including those offered in photography.

The Department of Photography and Audio–Visual Studies has a long tradition of offering a range of nationally recognised programmes of study to meet the needs of commerce and industry in the field of photography and audio–visual communication.

The photographic courses offered are:

- National Certificate Photography
- Degree Foundation in Photography
- Higher National Diploma in Photography
- Advanced Diploma in Illustrative Photography.

All the courses are validated by professional organisations including:

- The British Institute of Professional Photography (BIPP)
- The Association of Photographers (AOP)
- The National Union of Journalists (NUJ).

We set high standards but it pays off. Last year in our Advanced Diploma class all those who finished the course are now in full-time employment. You can tell from our end-of-year exhibitions that the standards are getting higher and of course that is having a positive impact on the numbers and quality of students applying for courses.

Alan McEwan, senior lecturer

These studies allow successful students to pursue careers in photography including work as photographic technicians, assistant and full-time photographers in processing laboratories, universities and government departments. Work can also be gained in public utilities, photographic studios, advertising agencies or self-employment. This area of work is highly creative and very competitive and the college has an excellent record of students finding work or progressing to even more advanced study.

The present head of department and senior staff recognised that successful photographers require not only excellent training in the basic photographic skills but also competency in a range of organisational skills in everything from communication skills to practical project management.

I have a friend who went to university to do photography. He is always complaining about being bogged down with essays whilst we are following a much more practical route which is clearly related to the world of work.

Advanced Diploma student

Courses are modular in structure with an emphasis in the lower-level courses on understanding what constitutes a good photograph.

I must confess I was a bit concerned when digital technology came into photography that students might waste a lot of time trying to edit bad photographs in the vain effort to make a good picture from a flawed shot. We put more emphasis on creating a good photograph and then using digital technology to enhance the image.

Alan McEwan, Senior Lecturer

High standards are expected at every level but there is genuine concern by staff to develop and nurture students who come from a variety of backgrounds and are of mixed ages.

The average age of our students tends to be mid-twenties. They are people who have followed other paths previously but who have come to photography as a real choice rather than perhaps acquiescing in social or family pressure to follow other courses of action.

Alan McEwan, Senior Lecturer

You know the ones who will succeed at an early stage. They look at the work of senior students and are concerned that they will never reach their standards. However in making that statement they demonstrate that they know what is good photography and indicate a will to try and succeed. The ones I worry about are those who come in convinced that their portfolio is wonderful and who clearly feel they have little to learn.

Staff comment

Competition experience is an integral part of the coursework at Higher National levels. The course is designed to be practical in focus and to reflect the reality of work as a commercial photographer and in particular the need to work to a brief.

The Bell's competition is the press photography one, and there are others like the British Institute of Professional Photography, some of which are tightly briefed and others of which are open. There are some which specialise in themes like environment. However there only a limited number which fit in with the course design and which are compulsory such as Fuji, Kodak and the photojournalism ones which make working to a tight brief a requirement.

Alan McEwan, Senior Lecturer

Competitions represent not only the opportunity to win prizes but also to make

contacts in the wider world of photography and to enhance prospects for employment. The students have an enviable record of success at national level.

The Fuji Student Awards competition is a big one, held in London. We have sent entries off to that. The competition has several categories such as social issues, advertising or interpretation of a poem or piece of writing. These sort of briefs really get the students thinking and they are very reflective of the real world and commercial competition.

Staff comment

Competitions become fewer at Advanced Diploma stage but new challenges are introduced.

The more open-ended briefs for projects at this stage are useful because you can often link it to commercial work which you may be doing. It is so much better and realistic and of course reflects the real world where the pictures you want to create are stimulated from inside you.

Advanced Diploma student

The competitions were good for confidence building and the contacts they bring although this year we are not so much involved with them. They certainly make you focus on a brief which will be the way we will often have to work commercially. However when you don't have the tight brief you feel liberated but also challenged to organise, plan and develop your work. It takes things to another level.

Advanced Diploma student

In addition to the competition network bringing students into contact with other photographers the course team involves professional photographers in the course delivery.

Adam is employed by us to work part time with students. He is a photographer for Scotland on Sunday and has an extensive picture library which is useful for his tuition work. The students also put something back by contributing high quality pictures to his library on Scotland.

Alan McEwan, Senior Lecturer

Professional photographers are also used to help students evaluate the quality of their work and to assist the process for building peer-evaluation confidence.

We utilise professional photographers to assist students with their own self-assessment of their work. We are doing, more peer-assessment but this is something we need to work on. Whether it is a Scottish thing or what I don't know but they are very reluctant to criticise each other's work.

Meeting with professional photographers is vital. It gives you the reassurance that you can make it and some of the insights as to how you might go about it.

Advanced Diploma student

Contacts in the professional world are further used to give students experience of real assignments or to form a context for the completion of a course task.

We have developed a close relationship with the press and the picture desks will contact us to provide students to cover particular stories or events for them. Of course this is first-class experience for the students. It can and has led several into jobs.

The course looks for demonstration of real commitment on the part of students whilst supporting them in practical ways with equipment.

We expect them all to have their own 35 mm equipment but other more specialised equipment and special lenses can be borrowed through a lending scheme. Students pay £15 a year to cover maintenance and replacement costs and also a deposit on borrowed items. This gives them access to a fair range of equipment and the token charges are enough to discourage careless users or those who might borrow equipment for overly long periods or fail to use it fully.

The work of students is highly valued by staff and their peers and is given prominent display.

Displays of students' work are regularly changed and are used as sources of inspiration or reference points by both students and staff. In this way we give value to the work of the students but also obtain value from their work for teaching and learning purposes.

Alan McEwan, senior lecturer

Display of our work is really important. Lisa's sports photographs were very good – it is important to say 'well done! – look at the standards we need to reach'. It also gives you a bit of a lift to see your work appreciated – or indeed the work of one of your fellow students.

HND student

You look at that wall when you first come in and you think to yourself 'I will never be that good' – but you can be and you see yourself getting better over time.

HND student

'First front cover – but not the last!'

(Label on a displayed sports photograph that she had published in a national Sunday paper.)

Lisa (HND student)

Whilst competitiveness is an important dimension to the photographer so too is the development of basic communication skills and team working.

We develop further personal communication skills and basic things like telephone skills – if they don't have these they may lose contracts or not even get a bite at them in the real world of commercial photography.

At Higher National level they tend to work in pairs and at times with other people, such as a model or make-up artist. It is very much a reflection of the professional situation – work with groups rather than in groups. We foster paired activity so that the skills of working with an assistant are developed.

Alan McEwan, Senior Lecturer

However the sense, team working and shared responsibility for success is high. The work of students and staff is characterised by a real partnership and a determination to achieve high standards.

We have regular meetings with staff but by this stage it is more of team thing. It is easy just to grab one of the staff or a fellow student not involved in the work you are doing and seek comment or advice. We work together in the studio and assist one another.

Advanced Diploma student

I like the building. We are all in the one place. There is a community feel, everybody knows each other, supports each other and I think that helps to promote our individual creativity.

Advanced Diploma student

We are a team. We do have different personalities and different views on photography – indeed there are lots of disagreements but in that there is strength and ultimately shared agreement on how we proceed. We have our formal meetings but a lot of the real business happens in the informal exchanges.

Staff comment

Ongoing exchanges on refining course delivery lead staff to reflect on their approaches to learning and teaching within the context of the reality of the world of professional photography.

I am always aware that the egos of young people are very fragile. It is important to get the balance of criticism and praise right. You must never be too brutal but you must get the message across. It is great when you see them suddenly start to flower and produce work which sometimes takes your breath away. You should be honest and when you don't know you say so, and then set out together to find the answer. Teaching is very much about communication, trust and mutual respect. Relationships not technology or guidelines are what makes it happen in teaching.

*We are all enthusiasts for what we do. It is not as if we did something at university and now we **have** to teach it. We are all practising photographers and we try to bring that commitment to the students.'*

Each course has a tight structure and we do have to jump through certain hoops. I am aware that over time we build up an understanding of our students which we can share – their individual success becomes a kind of joint objective.

Teaching takes a lot of energy. It's a bit like performance and that's why it can be so draining and yet so satisfying. I also worry that there is a kind of Scottish thing that if it looks like fun it is less important.

Staff comments

Students and staff also have some observations on school experience.

The only reason I did photography was that the school got a darkroom and all the equipment when I was in sixth year. My teacher and I set about learning how to make it all work. It was great and opened my eyes to the possibilities. I just wish it had been available at an earlier stage – after all photography is such a useful tool as well as an art form.

Advanced Diploma student

I know from my children at secondary school that the pressure and emphasis is on academic subjects. I think many of the students have felt that too and that is why they come to us to do what they really want to do having tried in other jobs the route deemed for them by society. Indeed the management in some educational establishments still foster these attitudes and fail to realise the enormous potential which creative pursuits and subjects can unlock.

Staff comment

I have classes with up to about sixteen in numbers. It is easier for me to enter into a one-to-one/tight-knit group activity and that kind of relationship makes it more conducive for me to help to facilitate the creativity of each student.

Staff comment

It is a great pity that photography is not well developed in schools. Digital photography might change this with the reduction in costs and the immediacy of results. I hope so since photography has been about for many years now and it offers so much potential in the area of creative work.

Alan McEwan, Senior Lecturer

I wanted to do photography at school. We even had a darkroom and the equipment but I was told there wasn't the money to do it – in fact I think they tried to put me off it. Maybe you need to do something else

first. I became a fork lift driver and got the money together to do the course – I'm glad I did because it is what I really want to do.

HND student

The highly successful photography courses at Stevenson College throw up a number of interesting features of developing creativity and of creativity at work in learning and teaching. It is also significant that many of the less specific features are found in the generally very creative pre-5 stages of the education system.

- Students have planned opportunities to develop and apply their creativity abilities in both specifically briefed and more open contexts.
- Students are expected to apply higher order skills such as collaborative working as well as basic skill training.
- Students are supported in consolidating their skills and creativity in work beyond the course programme.
- Students are motivated, persevere with challenging tasks and show initiative in applying creativity.
- A climate of enthusiasm and pleasure in learning and teaching is fostered and valued.
- Students' work is valued and displayed.
- Students receive regular and constructive feedback and advice.
- Courses show planned progression in the skills and opportunities associated with creativity.
- High numbers of students are successful in obtaining work.
- Staff provide effective models of teaching and learning and have the explicit support of management.
- Staff work as a team and the sense of extended team working embraces staff and students together.
 - Constructive use is made of professional competition and coursework reflects the reality world of work; as a consequence coursework has relevance to students.