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Opening Up The Conversation: #CClasses, The Future of the Photographic Community?



I have long spoken out about the need for those in positions of responsibility and those whose knowledge is of value within the photographic community to share their experiences and time with those who are most in need for free alongside any other form of income they may have.

I have been an enthusiastic adopter of online initiatives, platforms and software programmes that bring our global lens based community together. I have also commented on the need for photographic education to be both engaged and informed by the realities of professional photography across a broad spectrum of genres of work and taught by those who respect and understand work outside of their own personal practice. This post brings together all of these beliefs within an academic perspective that could possibly bring a new approach to many aspects of the photographic community.

There can be no doubt that the proliferation of self-initiated start ups relating to photographic practice (photo books, print sales, exhibitions, competitions, talks, zines, publishing, meet-ups, podcasts and festivals) over the past few years has been facilitated and driven by and through the ease by which social media and associated online platforms are used to build community outside of the established associations and magazines that for too many years held the monopoly and moral high-ground concerning lens based conversation. The direction, subject matter and tone of that conversation is now in the hands of whoever wishes to commit the time and effort to develop a dialogue and keep it alive.

This democratisation of conversation amongst those passionately engaged with their creative practice is not confined to the world of photography. Musicians, filmmakers, writers, journalists, artists amongst many others are connecting with each other outside of established networks to collaborate and communicate in ways that they feel appropriate to the creation of loosely associated supportive communities. As photographers we are not separate from that landscape in fact we are increasingly part of it as we seek to expand our creative possibilities and collaborations through moving image, events, publishing and sharing. If you are reading this, you are probably part of that landscape and therefore not surprised by anything I have said so far.

However, my personal creative practice requires me to wear many hats: photographer, writer, publisher, art director and academic amongst a few others and it is when I am wearing my academic hat that I find myself most frustrated by an attitude from some lecturers to all that I have just mentioned that veers between that of King Canute holding back the waves to a perverse intellectual snobbism that revels in its ignorance and non-involvement with the digital world.

As an academic teaching photography I see it as a moral obligation to ensure that my students are fully prepared for the real world. I believe that they should leave after three years of learning not only informed about the profession and business of photography but also with a rich portfolio of transferable skills that allow them to engage fully with the creative world they wish to enter. To ensure that this happens I have to be as involved as I wish them to be in all aspects of the new photographic landscape and that includes taking part in online debate, discussion and dialogue.

To facilitate this within an academic environment is not easy. It requires imagination, forward thinking and hard work outside of existing teaching frameworks to both establish and implement a conversation that is both collaborative within the classroom and reaches out beyond the university walls to collaborate with a wider community. It is that wider community that the students need to feel part of and it is not a feeling that can be left until a degree show opening night to be experienced.

Alongside teaching both the creative and business aspects of professional photography I teach the importance of understanding how to navigate and utilise to best effect various social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram and ensure that the students are marked on their professional application of these platforms within modules, but this remains an independent process for each student. The responsibility is with them to reach out but they are reaching out as an individual not as part of an institution or course.

I often hear how difficult people on the outside of academia find it to penetrate the levels of university management and bureaucracy, how difficult it is to start a conversation with those students and lecturers who might or should be interested in an opportunity or collaboration. So when Jonathan Worth asked me to get involved with #CClasses I had no hesitation in accepting his offer.

#CClasses is a collaborative project between lecturers across universities and teaching subjects as geographically diverse as the University of California Irvine, USA, University of Otago, New Zealand, Kennesaw State University USA, University Leeds Beckett and the University of East Anglia amongst others designed by Jonathan Worth at the University of Newcastle whom many of you will know of from his work with [Phonar](#) and [Phonar](#)

[Nation](#). What Jonathon has created with #CClasses is a learning framework that uses the social media platforms Twitter and Storify as well as various blogging platforms such as WordPress as a series of tools to open up classroom conversation to a global community across a digital environment, whilst not losing the intimate discussion that occurs within a confined lecture space.

Prior to the class lecturers promote the class as being 'open' and make the students and wider community aware of the content of the forthcoming class and a 'big' question that is being considered. The time and day of the class is also promoted to ensure maximum participation. Students are encouraged to tweet notes taken whilst watching a pre-arranged film or whilst listening to a piece of audio. In my situation this involves a photographer or photographers discussing their work and/or practice. After a twenty minute session the tweets are then gathered via a decided upon hashtag and collated into a Storify published page to identify recurrent themes and concerns the students have voiced via their tweets in response to the material they have been shown. In addition to the students tweets a discussion follows based upon those themes. How the class develops can be see in these Storify pages <https://storify.com/unofphoto/connected-classes-part-1> and <https://storify.com/unofphoto/connected-classes-part-2-eapp2>. After the class has finished I respond to the issues raised by enriching the Twitter feed with additional films and links for the students to consider independently. The students set the agenda for the following week based upon our discussions and the 'big' question that has been set.

The process set out by Jonathan develops from that point and you can find out more by visiting http://jonathanworth.org/connecting_classes/. However, if you are not involved in photographic education this may not seem relevant to you, but I have a suggestion that may make you reconsider.

I have been to many events where the event organisers or an audience member have taken the responsibility of 'live tweeting' throughout the day or evening. It's a great idea but too often it feels as if the tweeter is speaking at and not with the community it is trying to reach out to. The template that #CClasses provides allows such events to become far more immersive happenings that allow the online community to participate in the moment and reflect upon the event via an enriched Storify experience. To test this theory I have created a Storify of our recent day of free talks at the Natural History Museum, London titled *Photography A Visual Language: A Day of Conversation*. Have a look and see what you think <https://storify.com/unofphoto/photography-a-visual-language>.

The creation of a #CClasses takes little time and no financial outlay but it does take a desire to share and communicate, to be open with knowledge and experience. To be engaged with the subject you are teaching, where it is today and where it is going not only where it has been. All important aspects I believe in the teaching of photography. It also allows those who participate both within and without the physical classroom to share and debate in a digital teaching space that is both democratic and non-judgmental.

But perhaps most importantly it allows those who have invaluable things to say and contribute to a conversation, who are working as photographers, art directors, curators, photo editors, publishers and fellow educators outside of the formal education system to connect directly with students, share their knowledge and challenge ideas and perceptions.

#CClasses is just beginning and it's sophisticated educational logic and outcomes are in development but I can already see that it has the potential to not only challenge perceived teaching practices but also to establish new ways of building online communities and conversation and I'm open to that.