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Picture this:

The mobile phone camera as an educational device

Rebecca Thomas - *Programme leader Photography, School of Creative Arts, University of Hertfordshire*

'Food4thought', a cross-school monthly discussion group initiated by Joy Jarvis, Professor of Educational Practice, first met in 2013.

These meetings were built upon previous regular group sessions carried out in the Faculty of Humanities, Law and Education, and were expanded to include other schools.

It takes the form of a lunchtime discussion group whose policy is to share both food and ideas. Centring on educational issues, the group discusses relevant academic papers.

My own involvement with the group began in December 2013, at which point a key issue being discussed was that of 'noticing', with particular reference to the act of noticing within the classroom. A special emphasis was placed on self-awareness as a teacher, and upon what one had to be aware of prior to entering the classroom, but also on how such awareness was actually applied in specific situations.

We explored the assumptions involved in our noticing and how and why people noticed differently. The multidisciplinary context was important for raising awareness of different perspectives and for learning to look in different ways. This noticing was followed by an intervention to modify the immediate context if and when appropriate.

Introducing Instagram

A consistent contributor to Food4thought is Sally Graham, Head, Centre for Leadership at the University.

Sally's keen interest in contemporary photography has led her to employ video interviews as a teaching tool. She has also become involved in the social networking application Instagram, and she invited me to become one of her followers on this site a year ago.

In June 2013 Instagram claimed to have 130 million subscribers worldwide. This site allows camera phone users to personally edit and subsequently share their photographs (with any number of followers) and to briefly comment on them. The service has in effect radically transformed the distribution and reception of photographic images, as produced by non-specialist photographers.

In her 1979 book On Photography Susan Sontag observes that 'A new sense of the notion of information has been constructed around the photographic image. The photograph is a thin slice of space as well as time.' (p. 22)

Today, with the widespread usage of camera phones, what Sontag described in 1979 has been pushed to a further extreme; the now-digitised 'extracts' of reality can be instantly transmitted across the globe. Whatever has been noticed as worthy of recording can now become part of the 'image-repertoire' (a term employed by Roland Barthes) of a select group, as chosen by the individual Instagram subscriber.

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Using photography as a teaching tool

It is important to keep in mind the ethical implications of using video and photography in the classroom.

Permission for the deployment of such aids to teaching must be sought from the students and all other person's involved, and clear guarantees that the recorded material will not be misused in future, must be given by the institution. Given the widespread usage of Instagram by students, using this technology as a teaching tool with respect to noticing seemed a readymade, and potentially very interesting opportunity to foreground and encourage the act of noticing itself.

Bringing this complex activity to the attention of the students is increasingly important in a world practically drowning in the photographic image, including all those images and fragments of images distributed through the Internet and via other digital forms.

Sally and I envisaged students using their mobile phones in the classroom, incorporating these devices within coherent learning programmes, as opposed to finding the mobile a convenient escape and distraction from the learning experience. We therefore decided to experiment with this approach, using our own mobile phones as aids with which to focus and frame classroom behaviour of a kind that we might not otherwise have noticed.

One must of course be careful to recognise that such a use of mobile phones involves an act of interpretation, and not everyone involved will necessarily agree with how behaviour recorded on the phone is to be understood.

In my own classroom practice I arranged that students employed the Instagram site so as to help them to become articulate about the conventions involved in using mobile phone cameras, as well as the general politics and ethics of the taking of photographs. By this I mean verbally articulate, and not just more accomplished in photography as a physical practice. We loaded images onto the site so that they could be more easily shared and talked about. This gave the students a helpful distance from images that might otherwise have remained at the level of merely personal snapshots.

I was encouraged in this approach by Dan Berrett's article 'How flipping the classroom can improve the traditional lecture', in which mobiles are highlighted as a commonly accessible technology open to being used for ends other than those for which it was originally designed. Photographs taken in this context by the students involved could then be openly discussed in class in such a way as to promote a greater awareness of both photography's effects, and what is generally involved in the operation of noticing. That is, of becoming aware of one's environment and the influence of photography upon it.

Given the heightened presence of photography in society, adapting the above suggestions to learning contexts involving school students is arguably necessary or at least desirable. Making the most of a technology already available to the mass of students would be to activate its potentially immense value as an educational tool, one that may be yet more fruitfully exploited in the classroom in the years ahead.

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