

techLEARNING

The Promise of Social Networks

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While there are a myriad of photo hosting applications on the web, one of the most promising and innovative, in terms of e-learning applications, is *Flickr*. Sharing photos is an inherently social activity and *Flickr* (recently acquired by Yahoo!) is the first web-based photo hosting service to successfully translate this experience into the online space. The key element that makes *Flickr* so unique is that online collaboration and community are interwoven as main components of the platform design.

One of the main pitfalls of introducing new technology into the classroom (online or otherwise) is the risk of having the technology frustrate the user to the point that it distracts them from their original learning goal. *Flickr* is important because its ease-of-use allows the student to keep his/her focus on acquiring new skills, building on existing knowledge while at the same time developing writing, software, and strengthening social ties within their learning circle.

While not originally developed as an education tool, *Flickr*, and other social networking technologies have the ability to play an important part in student motivation, retention and learning—especially in distributed learning environments. Social networking technologies and media are important tools because of their ability to foster interaction and communication between students. This is especially important in online learning communities, where students may have limited face-to-face time to build a support network with their peers.

Flickr

The social networking aspect of *Flickr* effectively uses:

- Groups (both public and private)
- Tags (keywords)
- Notes
- Comments
- Slideshows
- Instant Messaging (FlickrLive)
- Photosets (albums)
- Email (FlickrMail)
- Real-time photograph posting

Not only is the *Flickr* user interface intuitive, visually clean, and easy to use, it supports constructivist-based learning. In addition to being able to form a private group, where users can set the level of privacy and choose who views their photos, students can interact with the global *Flickr* community. *FlickrLive* allows users to meet with their set contacts/groups in an Instant Messaging chat room to exchange ideas and discuss their photographs.

Using the *Flickr Organizr*, students can place their images into photosets (albums) and then use that as part of their digital portfolio, projects, or Weblog. Students and instructors alike can place notes (digital post-its) directly on the photos, locating detail or asking for clarification from members of the group. Students and teachers can also communicate with

each other via *FlickrMail*, an internal Email client that allows members of groups to correspond with one another.

Students and instructors can continue the dialogue via the group discussion board, where they can respond to threads started by members of the group. In addition, they can post comments below each individual photograph. In both instances, students are constructing new knowledge, while at the same time building and deepening human relationships with the members within their learning community.

Speaking of Blogs

Another key feature is the integration of *Flickr* with most of the major Weblog services, which easily allows students and instructors to upload photographs into their Weblog with a click of the “*Blog This*” button.

Flickr also provides RSS feeds so that students and teachers alike can syndicate their photos into their course Web pages, Web logs, or e-portfolios. RSS feeds also allow the instructor to have the student’s homework or projects delivered directly to their aggregator, saving the instructor the time-consuming task of having to enter each student’s URL in order to view his/her portfolios.

Photo Archives & Creative Commons

Whereas in the past, students cut pictures out of *National Geographic*, *Life* and other magazines to illustrate reports, *Flickr* gives students the ability to search a vast and growing photo archive, using tags, or keywords. After photographs are uploaded, users ‘tag’ each photo with a label or keyword, thereby allowing other *Flickr* members to search for images with that tag in the public photo archives.

The ability of users to upload (moblog) images via wireless and camera phones means that images of current events can be viewed as they are unfolding--most times reaching the *Flickr* archives faster than professional photographers’ work can reach major media outlets.

Flickr has partnered with Creative Commons licensing to provide a way for its community members to legally share content and use photographs for non-commercial use. Images are clearly marked with a Creative Commons license providing the standards for the way photographs may be reproduced or used, thereby circumventing potential digital copyright issues for both students and school alike.

Flickr in the Curriculum

Some possible applications for using *Flickr* in online and traditional classroom include:

- During an online synchronous class, the instructor uses the Photostream feature as an alternative to a PowerPoint presentation. After the class, the Photoset is available for asynchronous viewing at the student’s leisure.
- A student in a historic preservation takes a walking tour of a historic district and takes photographs of various architectural elements. These photos are organized into a Photoset and then viewed in a *Flickr* generated slideshow during an oral report to his class. He later uses them as a reference resource for his coursework.
- A botany graduate student on a field research expedition takes photographs of different types of plant life found in the jungles of Costa Rica, and then includes these as photo illustrations in her written report and/or research web log. As a graduate teaching assistant, she holds an online help session in *FlickrLive* (IM) and uses her photosets as reference material for her students.
- An American Studies professor travels to Walden Pond during the summer and uploads his pictures to *Flickr*. The photographs provide his students with visual context and imagery for the places discussed by Thoreau. This example

could work equally as well in the history, science, or foreign language classroom, and allows the student to make asynchronous connections to the content being taught in the classroom.

- After a field trip to a living history museum, student groups write a summary of their trip in a blog and use *Flickr* to illustrate their report. They are able to augment their own photos with relevant images found by searching tags in the global *Flickr* community archives. As they work on the project they are simultaneously developing writing, technology, photography, as most importantly collaborative learning skills.
- A foreign language teacher posts pictures from her travels in France, and provides descriptions of the local color, landscape, and architecture. Students are also able to practice their burgeoning language skills by leaving comments and notes on photographs in French, thereby putting their use of language in a situated context. Students form a private group in Flickr, search the global archives for photos tagged “*France*”, “*Eiffel Tower*”, or “*Paris*” and then discuss (in French) interesting or relevant photographs in *FlickrLive*.
- An online instructor scans diagrams, charts, or other materials and then posts them using *Flickr* directly into the course blog or newsgroup. By sharing the URL of a specific picture it can be used as an e-handout during a synchronous course lecture.

Summary

Today’s students have grown up surrounded by the digital world, and as a result they have developed new ways of understanding, learning and processing information. As new types of social media are developed, teachers will need to find new and innovative ways to harness the power of these technologies to enhance their curriculum, and support differing learning styles. *Flickr* holds great potential as part of a multi-faceted approach that blends learning theory and social technologies in the curriculum.

To be sure, *Flickr* and other social media can’t, and shouldn’t, replace face-to-face communication between teachers and students; rather it should be used as one of many digital building blocks that, when skillfully integrated into the curriculum has the potential to open lines of dialogue, communication, and learning.

More Information

[*Flickr*](#)

[Creative Commons](#)

Sample *Flickr* Tags

- [Botswana](#)
- [Architecture](#)
- [Eiffel Tower](#)
- [Darfur](#)
- [Walden Pond](#)
- [Guggenheim](#)

- [Flickr Group Discussion](#)
- [Asia](#)

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