

Digital Capture and the Club Med Test

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Over the Easter break, I took the opportunity of a skiing trip to the French Alps. Nothing unusual in that, in fact it has become a bit of a family tradition to have a week with Club Med. And one of the constants of a Club Med skiing week is the photographer. Regardless of the weather s/he will be out on the slopes busily snapping away at groups and individuals – and particularly of course at the toddlers and youngsters. Most parents are delighted to buy a good photo of their offspring gradually getting to grips with the tricky art of staying upright while travelling at speed downhill on a couple of slabs of reinforced resin.

For the last decade or more I have become very familiar with the evening hunt through a wall full of photographic prints. Usually the wall is subdivided by days (Mon – Tues etc. indicating when the photos were taken), but otherwise it's just a matter of scanning through dozens of prints to spot the ones you might be interested in buying. For that of course is the aim of the game from the photographer's point of view. The concession has to pay for itself in the sales that are generated.

The part of the process that we don't see of course is the bit in between the snapping (on the slopes) and the hunting through the prints (on the wall). The processing itself is always out of sight and never something that troubles us much. That was the photographer's problem.

But this year there was a dramatic change in the technology; the **product** of the photography stayed digital, and the photographer was selling CDs instead of prints. No more wall full of prints. Instead there was a PC and – on request – the photographer would take you through all the jpegs of the day. When you found the one (or the collection) that you wanted, he burnt them onto a CD and 'Bob's your uncle'. Was this clever? Was it an improvement on previous practice? Did it sell more photos? Sadly the answers are No, No and No. In fact it was such a disaster that the photographer was losing money.

The most obvious failure was at the purchaser level. There was always a queue of potential customers trying to find what they wanted, and access was only through the expert operator. Even when it was your turn and you had his attention – there were so many un-named jpegs to open and look through that it took ages. Initially the queue got longer and longer – but increasingly as the week wore on, people just gave up on it and resorted to their own cameras. The social custom of good-humoured jostling in front of the wall of prints was replaced by an apparently endless wait for service, followed by an infuriatingly random search through a maze of un-catalogued jpegs.

It is not difficult to see how this system might have been improved. But, forgetting for a moment the specifics of this example of photography at Club Med, the episode does stand out as a warning that the change from an established analogue system to a newly created digital system is not entirely simple. These issues have become very familiar over the last few months, since we in TERU have been working on a research project for DfES / QCA concerning e-portfolios.

The *potential* advantages of digital portfolios over normal paper-based ones are pretty obvious. Whole projects on a disk – or accessed through a website – could be fantastically useful for teachers and examiners quite apart from the benefit to students. The range of digital data that might usefully be contained allows us to go well beyond the constraints of normal portfolios:

- digital photos (e.g.) of work in progress – possibly extended into animations and/or morphs;
- sound-files of interviews with clients;
- files of CAD drawings with time-logged modifications;
- video clips of users trying out the product.

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But equally there are some potential hazards, not unlike those that sank the Club Med photographer. For the hard truth is that while digital systems are fantastic at *capturing* data, they seem less inclined to give it back. How are we to get access to all those digital goodies that we shot/recorded so easily?

In a project we have just completed for DfES/QCA, *assessing design innovation*, we developed a photo-story-line system to capture students' modeling (broadly one photo every hour for six hours). It was the easiest thing in the world to take the photos – but we wanted to give the image straight back to students as an instant 'moment in time' statement of where they were. It took a mere moment to snap the photos. But it took a great deal of thought, and careful purchasing before we were able to develop a system that enabled us to give thumbnail photos back to the students within an acceptably short time (two minutes) and without a lot of fiddling. We didn't want to have to go via a computer – or Photoshop – or the school's networked printers. We needed an *instant* solution. And having developed it, wherever we took it into a school for trialing purposes, the students loved the result and inevitably the teachers wanted to buy the system.

The important point here is about the nature of a D&T portfolio. It is *not* just a repository of loads of stuff. As students make a start on their work, a good portfolio does more than merely store it, it has a generative quality that feeds the process of development by provoking new thoughts and ideas. It is a dynamic, creative entity. On the face of it, there was nothing particularly wonderful about the thumbnail images we managed to return to students. But as they evolved into a story-line, they acquired a dynamic quality that helped to drive forward the activity.

The key to making it happen is that the digitally captured material has to be returned to the students in a useable form, so that they can do something useful with it. A client interview is no use if it remains 'captured' in a digital prison.

It only starts to be useful as a generative tool when it is liberated from that prison and given back to the student in an immediately accessible form that they can work on. But it is not immediately obvious how to do that. Nor is it immediately obvious how teachers/ assessors can review all that digital stuff that was so easily captured. Do they have to watch all the recordings? Even a single 15 minute video interview per student would commit the teacher/assessor to six hours of viewing for a group of 24 students. This is what I shall hereafter call the 'Club-Med Test'. A similar 'output' problem arises simply from the size of the screen (the most normal output system). Years of custom and practice has taught us how to scan rapidly through whole portfolios, for example by laying them out on the floor to get a 'bird's eye' overview of the whole. How do we do that digitally? Flicking through screens one at a time is just not the same. Where is the overview?

Digital portfolios will become really important for D&T in the next few years. But we need to spend much more time developing systems and protocols for liberating – in useful e-portfolio form – all the 'captured' data. Digital capture is easy and seductive. Digital liberation is much harder, and a much more important challenge to us all.

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