7 things you should know about...

Flickr

Scenario

For part of her upper-level course on residential archi-tecture, Dr. Ellis sends her students out into the streets on a digital-picture scavenger hunt. Most use the cam-eras in their cell phones, but a few have stand-alone cameras. Their assignment is to photograph houses that embody the architectural trends and characteris-tics in residential design from various styles and eras. Each student photographs five houses that he finds representative of three different architectural styles, uploads the 15 photos to Flickr, and adds them to the private group that Dr. Ellis created for the class. For each photo, the student writes a caption describing how the home pictured is an expression of the style in question. The students also use the note tool to outline particular features of the home and explain how that detail fits—or in some cases doesn't fit—the dominant style of the house.

On Flickr, the students look at their classmates' pho-tos, adding their opinions and asking questions in the comments section, where other students and the person who took the picture can read and respond to the collective commentary. Students can also add an-notations to other students' photos, calling attention to details that contribute to the discussion about what separates one architectural style from another, and about how some designs—intentionally or not—include distinctive elements from dissimilar architectural styles. Dr. Ellis reviews Flickr to evaluate the students not only on their understanding of the architecture expressed in their photos but also on the contributions they make in commenting on others' photos. She encourages the students to add their photos to other, public Flickr groups. Most of the students do this, which provides an opportunity to receive feedback from a broad spec-trum of Flickr users. Although some of the comments focus on the art of photography, many are from knowl-edgeable and curious people interested in architecture. The students also tag their photos with keywords deal-ing with location, color, and other attributes. With each additional tag, the picture comes up in more searches, reaching further into the Flickr community.

What is it?

1 Flickr is a photo-sharing website where anyone can upload and tag photos, browse others' photos, and add comments and an-notations. Users can create photo sets and collections to manage content, and participate in topical groups to cultivate a sense of community. Launched in February 2004, Flickr embodies what has come to be known as Web 2.0 technology. The site provides the tools, but the value derives from the contributions of the user community—photos, comments, ratings, and organization—and the connections that the site facilitates between individuals. Flickr also provides a range of privacy settings, giving users consider-able control over how their photos can be used.

Who's doing it?

2 While it is not the most popular photo-sharing site, Flickr has a very loyal and engaged user base among Web 2.0 users and strong name recognition among the general public. The site has more than two billion images and 20 million unique tags, and its collaborative tools have made it popular in higher education. Some faculty have begun using Flickr images in their courses, and art schools, biologists, and others use the site to share, critique, and analyze visual information.

In a partnership with the Library of Congress, Flickr recently intro-duced a new project called The Commons, in which 3,100 images from the Library of Congress are posted on a special section of Flickr. Visitors can add tags and comments or speculate about the provenance or significance of each image. In this way, The Commons is designed both to increase access to the collections held by civic institutions and also to enable the generation of col-lective knowledge by soliciting input from anyone about the items in the collection. Interestingly, the Library of Congress has its own online catalogue of prints and photographs; that the library chose to partner with Flickr suggests that organizers saw more potential in going "where the people are" than in hosting such an application on the Library of Congress website.

How does it work?

3 Flickr offers free accounts, which have limits on bandwidth and the number of groups in which each photo can be included, and paid accounts. Using any of several tools or an online form, registered users can upload photos to the site, assign tags, indicate whether each photo is public or private, and select other settings, includ-ing copyright, which can be traditional "all rights reserved" or any

EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative

www.educause.edu/eli

Flickr

Find more titles in this series
on the ELI website
www.educause.edu/eli

of the Creative Commons licenses. Copyright settings can vary for different photos. Users can also specify who can add comments, tags, or annotations—notes specifically about highlighted portions of an image—to their photos, and each photo can also include information about how and where it was taken. Photos can be organized by groups, which also serve as community topics. A group might be called "wooden canoes," and photos included in that group (from multiple contributors) will appear on its page along with a list of the group's members and a discussion board, for which an RSS feed is available. Flickr photos integrate nicely with blogs, and the site offers an API, which allows developers to write other applications that can interact with Flickr content.

For each photo, the contributor's name links to that user's profile page. Tags and group names link to dynamic collections of all Flickr material similarly identified. Profile pages include details provided by the contributor, as well as testimonials from other users and an e-mail tool to send private messages to that contributor. The result is an always-changing network of collections and connections, fostering a strong sense of community among users.

Why is it significant?

Photo-sharing sites offer vast collections of images that are not available anywhere else because they are owned and contributed by individuals. As a result, the range of visual resources for a specific topic is enormous. Although Flickr is ostensibly for photos, however, the site might more aptly be described as a venue for sharing experiences and building relationships. User-generated content is a hallmark of emerging technologies, and for most users, photos represent an extremely low barrier to entry for sharing creative work. Students and faculty alike often have many photos that never find an audience. By making photos easy to share, Flickr demonstrates that contribution can be easy and that almost any shared object can find an audience. The ability to engage in a conversation about a photo, and to update that photo based on comments received, builds a sense of community. Indeed, Flickr users have been described as passionate in their use of the site and their belief in its value. Moreover, the ubiquity and simplicity of digital cameras have made amateur photographers out of millions of people, and sites like Flickr provide a place to share photos and meet people with similar interests, even if photography is not their focus. Flickr's support for Creative Commons licenses adds another venue for discussion about the evolving nature of copyright in the digital era.

What are the downsides?

Any online service that hosts content raises questions about the reliability of that service and its terms of use. Institutions of higher education are generally wary of depending on a commercial service for academic content, which potentially limits Flickr's usefulness in teaching and learning. As with any user-created taxonomy, or "folksonomy," Flickr's tags are subject to the mistakes of the users who enter them. The site includes more than a thousand photos tagged with the term "Mexcio," for example, and anyone searching for content by "Mexico" spelled properly won't find them. Flickr largely depends on the community to police itself for copyright violations, and opportunities for libel or invasions of privacy abound. Moreover, despite the range of features that allow users to comment on photos, the vast majority of remarks are positive, even glowing, leaving one to wonder how much value they provide.

Where is it going?

Flickr is known for being responsive to the user community, which is at the heart of successful Web 2.0 applications, and the site might in this way put pressure on colleges and universities to develop tools that are similarly attractive to students and faculty. Flickr is developing new ways to submit photos, including sending them from cell phones, which expands discussion about what to share and how. The site also partners with companies that allow users to create printed products with their photos, such as calendars, greeting cards, and books. Some have called for more geolocation tools to pinpoint where photos were taken and additional ways of uploading material. Users can currently access limited statistics about the views of their photos, but more data might be welcome, such as how many photos have Creative Commons licenses and who is using those photos. Organizers of The Commons hope that as the project matures, other cultural institutions will add their content to the initiative.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Flickr affords an opportunity for students studying photography or other art-related subjects to receive feedback and engage with a community of experts and amateur enthusiasts, exposing students to the reality of professional practice. This dynamic can be extended to other fields, as evidenced by the success that digital storytelling projects have had in using visual media to share personal experiences. Students who are engaged with content demonstrate better learning outcomes, and the immediacy of visual media facilitates that sense of connection to subject material. At the same time, Flickr exposes students to participatory learning by capitalizing on the ubiquity of digital cameras and students' desire to share their creative work. By introducing users to social, collaborative technologies, Flickr provides an easy, comfortable platform for students to engage with content and a community in the process of collective knowledge creation.