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Reflection on Professional Online Communities

Early in the Fall of 2012, I learned about the Kahn Academy (<http://www.khanacademy.org>), an online lecture hall with 10-15 minute lectures covering a range of math and science courses. After watching a [TED Talk](#) by the creator of the Academy, I created an account and invited my students to join and add me as a coach, so that I could help them through their work. Then, I found the fatal flaw in the design of the program: the students didn't participate if it wasn't assigned, as that would require them to spend time working on a lecture outside of class. The Kahn Academy is most effective for self-motivated learners, because it requires a certain amount of discipline to sit through the lectures and take notes without the guidance or setting of a classroom.

The trouble with any online community is that it only feels like a community if you participate in it. You need to make connections, and work to maintain these by being a producer, consumer, and reviewer/critic of the material being shared. For the Kahn Academy, I planned to build a community with my students based on a real-life community already in place. However, when they didn't participate, I stopped trying to build connections with other users on the site – now my profile is languishing. These sites are only as useful as you make them.

Realizing this, I have had significantly more success with the online communities I use in my Photography club. I have greatly stepped up my participation in groups and forums on Flickr to help me progress as an amateur photographer, and to learn better techniques that I can relay to students. Flickr, when it was first created, served basically the same purpose that Instagram does today, the hosting of user photos on a well-designed site that could be easily shared. What made Flickr special was the ability to connect with other users and share ideas through a sophisticated platform of forums, comments, and easy web-link sharing. Much of this platform was copied by the social networks which followed, and as the casual users left the site to join the Facebooks, Twitters, and Instagrams we see today, the user base for Flickr slowly became a smaller, more devoted core group. Many who actively participate in the community today are professional or semi-professional photographers.

Because of this, the Flickr Groups (user-created and maintained sections of the site surrounding a certain photo subject, style, or topic) are now an invaluable resource for learning specific photography techniques or picking the brains of experts. In addition to several subject and style-specific groups, I am a member of the Getty Images Contributors and Getty Artists Picks groups, which are private on the site for semi-pro and pro photographers. In these, I contribute to forum discussions and get help/critiques from others on advancing my photography. While these are very good resources, they are closed to non-members.

To help the students get access to some similar tutorials, I have been following the advice of many Flickr users, and reading to the RSS feed of Digital Photography School (<http://digital-photography-school.com>). This is hands-down the best photography blog I've come across, delivering free and insightful guides to my RSS reader each week about photography technique and skills development. In addition to having an active community in their own articles' comments, there is also a Flickr group devoted to the blog's readers (<http://www.flickr.com/groups/digitalps/>). I also use the articles and helpful comments from fellow users by offering their lessons to my photography club students to explore and try, and encouraging them to participate in the Digital Photography School weekly challenges, even if they just take the shots and never actually post them (which most choose to do – active users of the site, in contrast, normally post on Flickr, then add links in the comments on challenge page). These challenges are not contests for prizes, but rather a challenge meant to challenge your skills as a photographer and artist, regardless of skill level.

Next semester, we will have a new group of students in Photography Club. On the first day, each student will get a Flickr account, and join a group I have set up on Flickr for us (<http://www.flickr.com/groups/brhsphotoclub/>). I tried to add this group to the current club midway through this semester, and it received a rather lukewarm greeting. By incorporating it into the club from the start, I hope to get the students in the habit of joining these professional communities, and using them to advance their skills.