

GONE TOMORROW? DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHS, THE PAST AND FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Fragments of the daily lives of the twenty first century are being recorded with increasing technological ease by amateurs and professionals; children and adults. The evidence of contemporary culture is being encapsulated in increasingly tiny packages that enable duplication and modification. A wealth of information is available at the fingertips. The sights and sounds of work and play, the words spoken and written, and the performances of artists, artisans and sports people are captured and placed in the digital storehouse, to be revisited. But who will know how to find and access a particular store hidden in the hardware and software of rapidly superseded technologies? How will these digitised fragments of life be passed on to the next generation? From a vast mass of digital information, who will select the items critical to our knowledge of who we are? Will the stories of the past that shape our future selves be lost amidst this surfeit of data, which may lack the informed interpretation of people who care? These ideas and questions underpin a paper focused on digital photography. An ongoing study of adults and year eight children, is linked with the potential for school action within the framework of the draft Technology curriculum. The general appeal of the topic opens the way for technology education, in respect of this aspect of technological change, to move from school, to home and beyond into the local community. Parallel work undertaken with a local museum group provides insight into reciprocal possibilities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Fragments of the daily lives of the twenty first century are being recorded with increasing technological ease by amateurs and professionals; children and adults. The evidence of contemporary culture is being encapsulated in increasingly tiny packages that enable duplication and modification. A wealth of information is available at the fingertips. The sights and sounds of work and play, the words spoken and written, and the performances of artists, artisans and sports people are captured and placed in the digital storehouse, to be revisited. But who will know how to find and access a particular store hidden in the hardware and software of rapidly superseded technologies? How will these digitised fragments of life be passed on to the next generation? From a vast mass of digital information (Shenk, 1997), who will select the items critical to our knowledge of who we are? Will the stories of the past that shape our future selves be lost amidst this surfeit of data, which may lack the informed interpretation of people who care? These ideas and questions underpin my current study.

In the paper I have focused on the shaping and implications of technological change in the context of photography. This is then associated with a perceived need for technology education which I consider goes beyond what happens in schools. An example of current practice in a school is used as a springboard to suggest how broader aspects of the curriculum, not confined to the students' technological practice, may be introduced.

2. TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE: Photographic contexts

Over little more than a decade we have experienced major changes in the field of non professional photography. Photographs used to be taken on important occasions, or of spectacular or pleasing scenes. They often involved planning and thought, as cost was involved. Sometimes the film might remain in the camera for months until another photographic occasion arose, but eventually they would be developed. Often reasonable deals would allow two sets of photos to be printed quite cheaply and sharing of the photographs was common. With digital photography the situation has changed. After the initial purchase of the camera, which can be on a par with what was paid for a non digital camera, costs can be minimal or relatively expensive depending on what is done with the images. Some people store thousands of images on disks or hard drives or on the internet. They can be shared via computer in glorious full colour at negligible cost. Others take their memory stick to a commercial developer and get everything printed off. This can be an expensive process, especially if they want extra copies for sharing. A further alternative is to print them at home using papers and printers of greatly varying quality and cost. In between these extremes are the people who select carefully and use different means for different purposes.

Which are the most favoured methods for capturing, storing, processing sharing and accessing images is one of the questions my study addresses. Whether people fully appreciate potential consequences of the choices they make, is also considered. Although the results are not available yet, I feel sure that however the images are handled, and whatever the purpose for taking the photographs, there are some implications which may not be fully appreciated by the person who uses the camera. For this reason I see links to technology education at school and community level.

To illustrate some of my concerns I will tell you a story. Jason (not his real name) was born five and a half years ago. He was a happy and healthy baby, the first grandson in that family. The grandparents had a new and moderately priced two or three mega pixel digital camera. This little boy, highly photogenic, was the subject of hundreds of photos mostly taken by the grandparents. Washing the car, at the gardens, scared of the ducks, watching league; the moments were captured. Some were printed at home on an ink jet printer onto multi purpose copy paper. A few of these were given to Jason's great grandmother. Some images were sent via email to various family members. Sadly Jason's grandmother died when he was just three. Where is this extensive record, of Jason's early years? These photos are to be found on the hard drive of an outdated computer which has not been used for the last two years. It does not have a CD drive and if the computer does still function it would be at best awkward to retrieve these photos. They can be downloaded onto floppy disks, as long as those remain available, but it would be very time consuming. Someone with more knowledge than this family might be able to link the computer by cable to another computer and download the images. However, the problem does not end there because it seems that most of the images were not named and they are probably not organized into folders, or into any other system. Finding particular photos could be very difficult. As time passes knowledge of who the people are in the photographs may eventually be lost. Does any of this matter? At an emotional level it does matter to me and I expect that immediate family members will one day regret the loss of these potential photographs if they are not recovered.

At this stage of my study, given the history of photography, the desire to capture images which led to its invention, and the prevalent use of the digital camera, I would have to assume that people have a strong urge to freeze moments of time and to be able to revisit and share these. This assumption is supported by anecdotal evidence regarding what people claim they would do in case of fire, and how upset they are when photos are stolen. At this stage it seems reasonable to say it does matter to most people what happens to their photographs.

Reactions to old photographs also suggest that they provide continuity with the past and that the memories they rekindle, or the glimmerings of physical resemblance, form part of the glue that bonds people together and gives them a sense of belonging. But if we do not look ahead and plan to make our photographic heritage available for future generations it may by default be "gone tomorrow". A complicating factor is the increasingly common, one child or no child family, which may further narrow opportunities for continuity. As the extended family shrinks the vulnerability of family knowledge and artifacts, and the lack of people to link generations, may lead to the reshaping of identity formation and transmission of culture.

3. TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE: A personal history

In looking at the photographic history of my own family I can see changes through the years which tend to make the older photographs more accessible and more likely to survive another fifty years than the more recent images. I have been fortunate enough to acquire family photographs which have lasted for up to one hundred and forty years at least. The physical form of the early photographs is durable. All of the oldest ones are cartes de visite (Eggleton, 2006); photographs mounted on card and distributed to family and friends. Further protection was provided by mounting in a leather bound album. Although I know who took the photographs and where these commercial photographers were based, I do not know the names of many of the subjects. Lesson one: label photographs clearly and add information that will help to create family narratives.

My next sets of photographs from the pre world war one period are preserved on glass negatives. These could have been very vulnerable, but ensconced in boxes with soft paper layered between the plates they have survived almost undamaged, and have produced some high quality black and white prints. The mystery is; who was the photographer? The images lack the staged settings of the commercial photographers and include the hens, ducks, chickens and cows of the rural landscape as well as my great grandmother adorned in her finest garments complete with netted hat and gloves. Lesson two: place is just as important as people in establishing links to the past.

Moving on through our numerous shifts and mini disasters with leaking water the photograph albums of my mother's times have endured less well. The photos are now often very small, unlike the earlier larger images, and frequently damaged, but albums did tend to be labeled. With the advances in photography in the 1950s we were able to have colour images and black and white fell into disfavour. Those early, coloured images are now often faded and unimpressive. They were also usually printed in a small format. Lesson three: consider the durability of prints carefully. New printing processes are not necessarily better than older ones.

Further on came the age of automatic cameras, more shots on a film, more reproduction choices and larger prints. At this stage I could afford to take a lot more photographs and I have boxes and boxes of them, a few in albums, but most in their original packets complete with negatives. A very small number have been reproduced for family and for occasional display purposes. A burst of naming and dating a few years ago provides information up to that point, but nothing for recent years. Lesson four: more is not necessarily better. Having too many images may devalue the collection.

Now I take digital photographs, many more than before and where are they? Recent images are mainly in digital formats which may not be accessible to future generations. I quite often share them via the viewer of my camera, enlarging occasionally to try and highlight interesting elements. However, people cannot easily look at them together because of light reflected from the viewer. Or else I try to find a computer for viewing

purposes and sometimes the software does not suit. Some are shared via email, but what does the receiver do with them? Lesson five: Think ahead because digital images may leave few traces.

4. TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE: Societal factors

Taking photographs whether with camera or phone has become an important part of the lives of young people. Diminished importance through the ease of clicking may be leading to new motivation for photography. The immediacy of the image, the possibility of discarding or keeping, the ability to share within seconds and see the response, and the possibility of sending the image around the world with another click or two, could all be considered a form of instant gratification. Does this stem from the availability of the technology, or, does the development and success of the technology, reflect an existing societal trend. It is probably a complex combination of these factors (Compton and France, 2006). This is quite different from photography of the past where delays; first in capturing the image, itself a carefully planned action, then in processing, separated the taking from the viewing. People were prepared to wait for photographs which in extremes might be shared with family on the other side of the world. "Do you know we are wearying very much for all your cartes. You might get them taken soon and send them" (M. Merrilees, letter, September 6, 1887), was the plea my great, great aunt in Scotland made to her sister and brother in law, who had emigrated to New Zealand many years previously.

The possibility that people may be tending to live more in the present and be less inclined to consider what has been, or to plan carefully for short and long term futures has implications for technology education that go beyond photography. These two elements; drawing on the past and looking ahead to the future have long underpinned my work in technology education. They seem so obvious, as to hardly need to be stated, yet observation shows some students; adult and younger, who want to "do", without learning from the experience of others and without thinking ahead clearly.

5. LENNY THE STINGRAY AND OTHERS: Classroom examples

In working with year eight students this year, our approach to digital photography has moved well away from the "instant gratification" model. The students do not just take snapshots. In planning and creating stories and scenes, for their younger buddies in other schools, the taking of photographs is a high point in a long process. On a small scale it links the past and the future. They examine what other students have done, scrutinize children's story books, meet their buddies, research and write the stories, develop their story boards, gather resources, create their scenes and take the photographs. Then they can select the best images, manipulate them, arrange their photographs with text and decide on what form their outcome will take. This has been a successful option undertaken with more than seventy students working with three other schools where the buddies become the recipients of the digital story books.

The culmination of the work, spread over more than a term, brightened a drab winter's day. The year 1 and 2 buddies from the neighbouring schools were welcomed to the intermediate school hall where they were entertained by the authors with food, shared reading for all, and data projector presentations of a few of the stories. The marine themed books combined knowledge of the sea and its animals, gleaned from an aquarium visit and research, with imaginative story lines and original illustrations. Repetition abounded and onomatopoeia flourished in these delightful stories designed for the emergent readers who left clutching their treasured books.

Given the advent of the new draft curriculum, I have asked myself how could this technological practice lead to more critical thinking through considering the nature of technology and adding extra technological knowledge?

As part of my study I will be offering all of these students the opportunity to answer questions about their home photographic practices, hence encouraging them to think about differences between what they do at home and what they have been guided to do at school. They will also be asked about why they take photographs, what their favourite subjects are, what they do with their photographs and whether they will be able to be seen in twenty years time. Follow up interviews will be undertaken with a sample of those who volunteer and the results will be shared as soon as possible with the students. This will provide the chance to discuss aspects of the nature of technology. I will show them photos from different eras and raise questions about their durability and quality. The students can debate the advantages and disadvantages of digital formats. We can easily find examples of rapid technological change and consider how people do act, or could act, in relation to this. Exploration and discussion of web based options for sharing photographs can lead further. Privacy and internet safety can be considered and big questions such as the vulnerability of web based storage and the likelihood of future access can challenge the students' thinking. I may also be able to bring in again the photography expert who gave the students guidance with photographic techniques. As she is engaged in the photographic retailing and processing business, she has her own stories of the impacts of technological change and also knowledge of likely future directions.

What implications does this have for the ordinary classroom where a teacher educator is not inviting students to be research participants? I believe that the research approach, while it has shaped my thinking, is not an essential element in leading these students from the technological practice they have engaged in towards a wider view of technology. Instead of the rather long questionnaire I will administer, the teacher can pose a few well chosen questions, or the students may be encouraged to develop their own questions in relation to photographic technologies. Extending the latter possibility, could lead to the students conducting their own research within or beyond the class. Whatever the starting point, the questions suggested, or perhaps a newspaper article or advertisement, all the aspects I have suggested above, can then be dealt with along with many others that I have not anticipated. The students may also be encouraged to report on views of family and friends. Many of these children have previously engaged in stimulating online discussions in year seven and this could again be a vehicle for enabling students to engage in discussion of a different ilk. Through asynchronous interchanges they are able to; check up on information, canvass the views of others outside the classroom, revisit the postings and interact directly with the views of individuals. It is different from classroom discussion.

6. NEW DRAFT CURRICULUM LINKS

The "Technological Knowledge" strand of the draft curriculum, was strongly embedded in the students' technological practice, particularly through the "technological modelling" achievement objective. Detailed storyboards, produced to enable them to work effectively on their one visit to the computer suite at the college of education, yielded useful formative assessment opportunities. According to the draft curriculum, this approach, focusing only on the story board, could be considered to have left their understanding of modelling at a lower level than "should" be expected for year eight students. This does raise questions about teachers striving for "progression" for their students and possibly introducing unnecessary complications, of minimal relevance for the children at that time. Having had experience of one form of modelling I would see consideration of other forms of modelling as being drawn from prior or subsequent experiences, as and when appropriate.

As part of my research project the same children who made the digital story books are being given the opportunity to complete a questionnaire and engage in follow up sessions. In doing so other aspects of the draft curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2006) are being addressed, in shifting from technological practice involving digital cameras to wider questions linked to technological change in the context of photography. Compton and France's background paper (2006: p. 6), points to this coming within the "Nature of Technology" strand in the draft curriculum. It is stated that "Technology provides potential to enhance the capability of humans to transform, store, transport and control materials, energy and information". In some ways issues relating to digital photography can be seen to fit with this description. Where and how is it best to store the images and/or move them from one place to another to enable sharing of the embedded information? In what circumstances is it ethical to transform images through digital manipulation? However, we could also look deeper into this description and pose other questions. When we alter or extend human capability, through use of technology, is it necessarily enhanced? If digital photography technologies have the potential to improve outcomes for people, is this potential being realised? I would suggest that critical factors we would want students to consider in regard to any technology relate to differing ways in which the technologies may be used, differing consequences depending on the chosen purpose and situation, and the desirability of considering short and longer term implications.

One tends to think that taking good quality photographs has become increasingly easy and that we are fortunate in having many more output options than previously available. But the photographer needs to think about both the physical nature of the desired outcome and also the purpose for taking the photographs (their function). These aspects also come within the "Nature of Technology" strand. The simple act of taking a snapshot is now surrounded by an increased range of decisions to be made in order to avoid future disappointment and the loss of family, personal, or community information.

Without having tried to work with the new draft curriculum across a year programme, I can only speculate, but at this stage I am strongly inclined to develop deeper understanding of the "Nature of Technology" from the basis of students' practical experience. In the example given I would not recommend providing these learning experiences in reverse order. However, the teacher's personal awareness will blend aspects of the other two strands, as relevant, with the technological practice as discussed with respect to "Technological Knowledge".

7. A BROADER VIEW OF TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION

Moving away from the school context, I want to touch on possibilities for technology education that extend into the community. I am currently doing some data entry for a local museum run by volunteers. Among the museum's stock is a large collection of photographs. Currently, as with many such groups, this historical society is dealing with problems such as inadequate information, lack of systematic recording and variable quality of photographs which are all products of the past. These problems reflect many of those experienced by families and individuals who may not know what to do with photographs, or have just not thought about future consequences of inaction. Existing community groups with an interest in their heritage tend to be aiming at conservation, or discovery of the past. The Historic Places Trust, genealogical societies and local museum groups are examples of such organizations. Technology education delivered at community level, through socially conscious groups, could alert people to the possibility of future focused, creative action, rather than reaction to what has been. My dream is for children, families and community groups to be more actively involved in deliberately choosing from the present, the legacy they wish to present for people of the future. My struggle is to find evidence to support a belief that people need to experience continuity in their lives and that photographs have an important place in life stories which go beyond the known generations and also encompass places of importance.

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