

Action Research Project

Are younger artists/students more drawn to using modern equipment and technology as a medium due to today's societal norms in Higher Education, or do they prefer to use old-school methods and materials to create?

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Introduction/Justification of Study Area

As an alumni student at UWTSD on the photography course, (Undergraduate and Postgraduate), I've witnessed and had the chance to experience and use a lot of alternative mediums to create imagery such as; the studio, digital cameras, film cameras and analogue techniques. As the years have progressed and due to the technological advancement, digital photography and the use of computers and softwares are being utilised more.

This investigation focuses on the inquiry of whether students are more inclined and drawn to using modern and digital equipment to create their projects and photographs or prefer to use the 'old-school' methods. To do this, I will have to include factors such as; cost convenience, time and accessibility as they will have an impact of opinions and preferences, 'The use and value of appropriate learning technologies', (K2, *UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) | Advance HE, 2019*).

To make my investigation into my query more knowledgable and to gain important primary research, I will be conducting questionnaires and surveys to primarily the students. My aim for this action research project is to explore and gather opinions, answers, research and experiences to find an answer to my methodological question within the Higher Education sector. Additionally looking at the photography departments use of facilities, and to examine whether it's all primary digital or it also involves analogue photography, 'Design and plan learning activities and/or programmes of study', (A1, *UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) | Advance HE, 2019*). Whilst gathering this primary and first hand data, additional research through online sources and publications can further generate knowledge that will further lead to a more definitive answer to the investigation. Specifically looking into the diverse interests between traditional methods and equipment on the department compared to the digital facilities and cameras, could give a significant response to the investigation, along with the primary data through questionnaires with students. Covering all aspects on the subject and secondary research, will generate a bigger collection of research.

Literature Review

Action research consists of conducting research but to actively participate within it. According to, (Spencer, 2019), it says, “Action research dissolves the barrier between participants and researchers”. This means that the researcher, whilst collating data in relation to their investigation, is to actively engage and participate in the research activities. As stated, along with conducting primary research through students on the department, collating a body of secondary materials can potentially support or change the investigation. However, when conducting primary research, through means such as; questionnaires, interviews, observations or surveys, it’s critical to include the importance of ethics, GDPR and the universities protocol. At UWTSD, (July 2022), the Research Ethics & Integrity Code of Practice, it states, “researchers are expected to maintain the highest ethical standards and to foster values of honesty, rigour, openness, care and respect.” To make sure I’m abiding by ethical guidelines and principles, an ethics form is needed to propose my investigation and means of collecting the research. UWTSD ensures a high standard for conducting research, and the Code of Practice minimises potential risks to participants, the university, other additional members such as; staff or the researcher itself. Sticking to important guidelines and principles outlined by UWTSD, and the GDPR, it ensures safety, confidentiality and honesty throughout the entire process for all. In the publication, Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative & Qualitative Approaches, Punch. K (2014), states in section, 3.2, “crucial in understanding the ethical context for research, researchers’ responsibilities within it, and the resources available”, p.37. Considering all aspects of ethics, and the importance of crucially following protocol’s when conducting research, it is vividly clear that researchers must consider all aspects such as; participants, environment, location, the activities, safety and honesty.

Ideas for conducting research stems from my participation as a teacher on placement at the photography department at SCA. During my placement, I have witnessed more interest being drawn towards the studio, using photographic digital equipment and digital programmes in the computer suite. Through this, the ideology of the investigation arose, and I’m intrigued to query, question and collect data that can guide my proposed question. To do this, primary research must be conducted to gain first-hand knowledge. Referring

back to the publication, Punch. K (2014), in chapters 5.7.1, and 5.7.2, it discusses the types of data such as quantitative and qualitative data. “Quantitative data as empirical information in the form of numbers... qualitative data can be relatively unstructured at the point of collection”. Understanding the difference between both can gauge what type of research activity I want to conduct in terms of the type of responses I aim to receive. Qualitative is descriptive, and quantitative is based through numbers or is countable. During my investigation and designing the type of activity to research, I believe combining both methods will be beneficial. This is due to the ability to gain and create statistics, or graphs, but to also receive descriptive responses that are from personal interests. Utilising both methods, can support and significantly help the development of the investigation, adhering to, ‘Use evidence-informed approaches and the outcomes from research, scholarship and continuing professional development’, (V3, *UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) | Advance HE, 2019*).

The specific reason for this investigation is to analyse and determine if the traditional processes are ‘dying’, or if students are still interested in utilising them for their practice. At Swansea College of Art, UWTSD, they provide a range of facilities to support students with their creativity. Online, UWTSD states, “The programme is designed to encourage the use of diverse media, using traditional, digital and experimental materials and processes, and to develop skills”, (UWTSD, 2024). The photography department at SCA provides an extensive facility to students to explore, create and experiment, similar to, ‘The use and value of appropriate learning technologies’, (K4, *UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) | Advance HE, 2019*). As a practitioner on teaching placement there and an alumni student, there is always opportunities for students to create imagery in either the darkroom or studio. The photography department gives an equal chance for all students to practice and to fully absorb into various techniques. The Royal College of Art in London provides an extensive amount of facilities and equipment for all students to use for their ongoing practice and throughout their studies, “We have a flood approach to image making. Whether still or moving, analogue or digital”, (RCA, 2024). Universities within the United Kingdom seems to be inclusive with their range of facilities to cover all aspects of the photographic art practice, history and contemporary within the Higher Education sector.

According to the Council for Higher Education in Art & Design, the Association for Photography in Higher Education (APHE), “it is committed to excellence in practice, theory

and research... relevant to contemporary photographic culture and educational practice”, (CHEAD, 2024). They provide a statement which correlates to the ideology that photographic curriculums within education, specifically HE, needs to be developed in a way that provides students with the opportunities to flourish, learn, create and practice; through theoretical and practice-based learning, and to keep updated with technological advancements, adhering to, ‘Develop effective learning environments and approaches to student support and guidance’, (*A4, UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) | Advance HE, 2019*). It seems that the photographic curriculums are determined to keep the traditional processes, whilst also modernising and including new technology that is continuously being created. This shows that the traditional photography is not ‘dying’ as such from the educational sector, as they all aim to keep it inclusive for both means.

Roland Barthes, a theorist and philosopher, discusses in the book *Camera Lucida* about the instant gratification of witnessing the photograph that has just been taken. In section 4, under ‘Operator, Spectrum and Spectator’, he states, “I am not a photographer, not even an amateur photographer: too impatient for that: I must see right away what I have produced”, Barthes, R. and Howard, R. (2020). Through the advancement of technology, artists and the ‘operators’, have become impatient to observe their imagery soon after taking the shot; this is due to the digital age. When using traditional methods such as; film cameras, developing film and the darkroom, the process is timely, but the photographer has chance to engage with the process of their own work. For this inquiry, I wonder and aim to investigate the specific reasons as to why students are not so inclined to using the ‘older’ methods compared to digital. It’s become apparent over the years as a student on the department the interest to digital cameras and equipment compared to film, equivalent to, ‘How students learn, both generally and within their subject/disciplinary area(s)’, (*K3, UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) | Advance HE, 2019*).

However, Ilford, the photographic distributor for darkroom and film equipment/materials, conducted a survey in 2018 to assess and investigate the usage of film over the last few years, (Ilford, 2019). In the survey, it states, “Surprisingly it was the younger age group (<44) who shot more film than digital, 68.4% compared to 58.3% of over 45’s”. When reflecting on the statistics from the survey, it’s evident to see that film and analogue photography is still very much ‘alive’ and thriving, especially with the younger generation of practitioners.

Considering the acts of analogue to digital, there is a significant difference between both. In the publication by Vilem Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, (Flusser, 2018), on page 38, he discusses the use of modernised photographic equipment, compared to the traditional methods, “towards ideology on the part of mass culture (e.g. not the part of mass photography)”. This correlates to the continuing change of the digital age of photography, as practitioners are able to capture and witness their images within seconds, thus explaining the overload of photographs. Linking this to the HE sector, specifically in the photography department at SCA, the usage of the facilities in the department is quite drastic. Photographers today are more inclined to use digital rather than analogue because of the fast-paced notion of taking photographs, and additionally witnessing to either confirm their ideologies, or to change setting through the camera.

Throughout their studies, students are expected to push their imagination and creativity, to explore with new ideas and equipment, and to simply thrive through theoretical and practical learning. In the Subject Benchmark Statement of Art and Design by QAA, (QAA MEMBERSHIP Subject Benchmark Statement Art and Design, 2019), section 3.9, it states, “The practice of art and design is a creative endeavour... students learn to recognise the interactive relationship: between materials, media and processes”. The creativity in becoming an artist practitioner and photographer involves diving into new strategies, exploring with techniques and immersing yourself into different ideologies. Utilising both worlds; analogue and digital, it can extend and lengthen the knowledge, skills, understanding and conceptual thinking of the artist, adhering to, ‘Promote participation in higher education and equality of opportunity for learners’, (*V2, UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) | Advance HE, 2019*).

Methodology Used

Through the practice guide of Action Research provided by Advance HE, (Lydia Arnold Harper Adams University Lin Norton Liverpool Hope University), it states the inquiry of action research is lead throughout steps such as, “practical, theoretical, collaborative, reflexive, contextual”. Since generating a body of research to investigate my initial question, conducting primary research on students who are engaged with the photographic industry will provide additional information and knowledge that could further lead to an answer.

In the book, Introduction to Social Research, Punch. K (2014), it states, "Methodological theory concerns the theory or philosophy behind research methods... it leads on to the topic of question-method connections. Substantive theory concerns the content area of research". When considering the methods and participants of the primary research, the location and environment that would be beneficial due to the education and experience, is the photography department at Swansea College of Art. All students across 3 years of the undergraduates would be ideal due to their knowledge, skills and personal interests. Considering the environment of where the action research is going to be, it could be difficult to access majority of students for interviews or observations due to the timetable schedule and extracurricular workshops. Because of this, I believe a question-based method is the most suitable and students can access/respond in their own time.

As stated, ethics is crucially important due to the safety, respect and protection of all participants involved. Because of this, an ethics form before creating any ideas of constructing to collect primary data is needed. The ethics form was filled and approved, and so the generation of ideas to collate data from participants could commence. In terms of research methods, I'm particularly interested in conducting research that shares the same values of theories and similarities and to essentially compare the effects of digital technology over analogue. In the publication, Research Methods in Education, (Cohen et al., 2018), in section 11.8, it states, “to test a theory... to develop implement, monitor and review an intervention... what, who, why, when, where”. When considering the aspects of conducting primary research to collect data, all elements must be considered. The photography department at SCA due to their facilities and pedagogic developments, the

students as the participants because of their interests and skills, and to be conducted over the course of a couple of months to give ample time for participants to respond.

Personally, creating a questionnaire/survey and emailing it to across all years of the undergraduates on the photography course, ensures all students has a chance to either receive, observe or respond if they wish. Additionally, the questionnaires is easier to access and remains animosity and safety throughout the process. The use of Google Forms allows me, as the researcher, to create a structured questionnaire that entails detailed questions specifically related to their interests as a practitioner and to investigate the usage of digital and analogue cameras with students. Creating a questionnaire considers the ethics as their personal information is not involved, recorded or observed, adhering to, 'Respect individual learners and diverse learning communities', (V1, *UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) | Advance HE, 2019*).

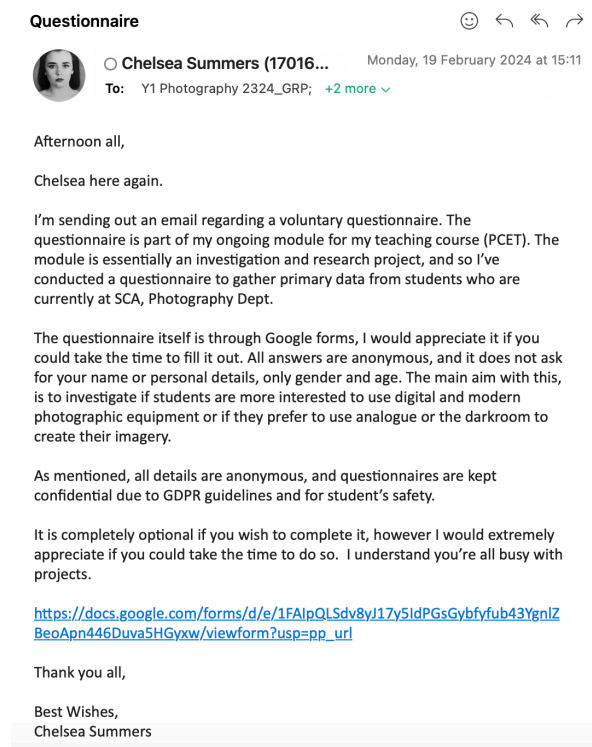


Figure 1. Email, Proof of Action Research

Results/Discussion

By creating and conducting the questionnaire/survey through Google Forms, I was able to include both quantitative and qualitative questions, to receive both types of responses. Referring back to the publication, Introduction to Social Research, Punch. K (2014), in section 5.7.2, it states, “quantitative data as empirical information in the form of numbers... qualitative data can be relatively unstructured at the point of collection”. I aimed to use both of these methods in my surveys due to having a range of responses, some descriptive and others that I could collate into data for statistics. Additionally, in the article by National Library of Medicine, titled, Broadening Horizons: Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Research, it says, “quantitative research generates factual, reliable outcome data... qualitative research produces rich, detailed and valid process data based on the participant’s”. Again, including both methods throughout the process of the action research gives a wide range of responses, that could further determine a response or conclusion to the investigation’s question.

The questionnaire/survey was sent via email to students across the years of undergraduates on the photography department, and over the course of 2 weeks, a total of 10 responses came back. In the questionnaire, there was open and closed questions, questions that provided a multiple choice or descriptive short answers, adhering to ‘The use and value of appropriate learning technologies’ through the tool of Google Forms, (*K4, UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) | Advance HE, 2019*). Additionally, the survey included a range of questions that includes personal interests, experience, future endeavours, reasons as to why they’ve chosen their preference of equipment and also, age and gender. The specific reason I chose the last two, was to gauge if there was a specific generation or age group that was more inclined to using digital to analogue. In total, 15 questions were included in the survey that covers all aspects of my action research and elements that I urge to investigate.

Throughout the discussion and review of responses, there are elements to consider. In the publication, Research Methods in Education, (Cohen et al., 2018), in chapter 11.10 on data analysis it states, “seeking patterning of responses, looking for casual pathways and

connections, action research analysis and analytic induction”. When reviewing the range of responses to the survey, it is important to collate and analyse to recognise the interests and choices, whilst also continuing professional ethics and respect, even with the data analysis; linking to, ‘Respect individual learners and diverse learning communities’, (V1, *UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) | Advance HE, 2019*).

Once I reviewed the 10 responses, I noticed a pattern evolve. To begin, question 1 simply asks about the gender of all participants. 70% female, 20% male, and 10% transgender. The majority of students taking part are female. Question 2 asks their age, in which there seemed to be diverse. 50% 18-24, 10% 25-34, 20% 35-44 and 20% 45-54. It seems that there is a wide range of people involved from a big age range, which could give more of a various outlook. Then, to follow, their level of education in the photography department at SCA. This question was included because of their level of skills, knowledge and experience within the photographic realm. 10% of participants belong to Year 1, 70% are at their second year, and 20% are in Year 3. Apart from these 3 questions relating to their personal details, all other questions involved asks about their practice as an artist and photographer, adhering to, ‘The subject material’, (K1, *UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) | Advance HE, 2019*). These questions provides me, as the researcher, as a generalised idea of what groups the participants are in.

Into the more descriptive questions relating to the investigation at hand, the first questions if students have used digital technology more than analogue during their time at SCA. The response entails a 60% of participants to using digital more, and 40% use analogue. As a follow up question in relation, it asks that if chosen yes, could they provide a reason why. This was a qualitative question method as I wanted to aim for a descriptive and personal response. Google Forms collates the data through lists, graphs and piecharts, in which the responses will be included throughout, to provide visual confirmation. The answers are as follows;

If chosen yes, can you provide a reason why?

6 responses

Just the style of images taken

Easier to use

Vast amount of submissions are digitally and therefore less hassle to work in analogue then stress over accurately portraying it for submission. Also in my case the cost of buying film for some projects even if they would fit my concept better is too great because of how many rolls I would need.

Accessability

I use both

It's just a bit easier and throughout college - I used digital. I am familiar with it and there have been instances where I have begun a project with the intentions at using film, but have up half way - frustrated.

Figure 2. Question 5, Questionnaire

From reviewing the range of responses, I realised that students seem to use digital cameras and equipment due to it's accessibility, time and ease. In the article, Co-Evolution of Photography and Technology, it says, "the digital camera, as an apparatus, enabled individuals to generate images with greater ease and control". (Yates, 2023). It's apparent that some students use this tool for photography due to the fast-paced technology of taking and reviewing their work.

Question 6 asks the participants that when they use digital technology, what kind of equipment do they tend to use. This was due to trying to establish the most popular add-ons or main body of technology for digital photography. As shown below in the graph, all participants chose; digital camera and programmes such as Photoshop and Lightroom. By reviewing the remainder of responses, it's clear to see the digital rise in photography and production of imagery. The use of the main component, the camera, and the extra equipment indicates a strong interest and compassion for the medium. In the article published by The Guardian, (Stuart Jeffries, 2013), it says, "we don't even remember the stuff we take pictures of, making the snap-happy nature of modern photography doubly mindless". The rise of digital photography, the technology and smart phones, the interest and immersing yourself into the experience of taking the photograph has been lost. The photograph is taken within nanoseconds, and reviewed instantly.

When you apply digital equipment to your practice, what do you tend to use? [Copy](#)

10 responses

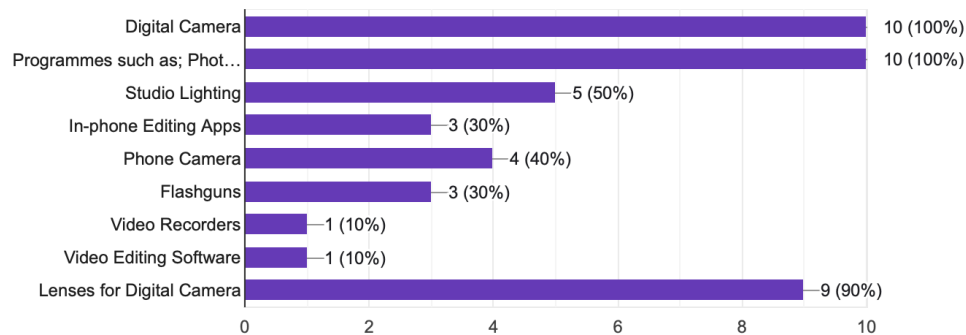


Figure 3. Question 6, Questionnaire

Following on from the review of digital technology, question 7 provides a brief inquiry into the interest of analogue. As I already asked about the digital interests, I felt compelled to know their thoughts on the traditional methods. This question asks if any of the participants have used alternative processes in their practice in the past. 60% of students responded yes, and 40% said no. Continuing on, question 8 is qualitative due to wanting descriptive responses. The screenshot below shows the various 5 responses that covers interests, skills, experiences and future aspirations.

If yes, how did you find it? Can you elaborate on your experiences?

5 responses

35mm black and white

I tried working with film and enlargers and experimenting with it times at light and developing; but it was a project that has the same/or similar images on a film and digital. it was stressful. I was scared at making mistakes and wasting materials.

the darkroom and using analogue processes are something that I am more drawn towards. It gives me freedom in my work

I'm interested in it, I wish there were more workshops showing alt. processes

I found it really useful, being pushed to use new or alternative methods enable me to see certain things in a different manner. This shaped me and my practice to being better than before as I acquire the new knowledge I can see how much better my photographs are.

Figure 4. Question 8, Questionnaire

It seems that students are gravitated towards the traditional methods. Majority enjoyed but a student says they tried to work with the strategies, but they became petrified of making mistakes. However, half of the participants responded to the use of analogue photography, and their skills and knowledge shows creativity, passion and enthusiasm, similar to, 'How students learn, both generally and within their subject/disciplinary area(s)', (K3, UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) | Advance HE, 2019).

To continue with the reviews of questions relating to traditional methods, question 9 dives into further detail by asking what processes the participants have. All participants have experience within the darkroom and black & white film developing, and other questions are varied. Chemigrams, Liquid Emulsion and Anthotypes have no responses, in which they are quite complicated processes. But, overall, the fundamentals of analogue photography and the easiest, most accessible processes have been experienced somewhat. These questions for the inquiry of traditional photography indicates that there is interest, and there are students who still pursue the mediums.

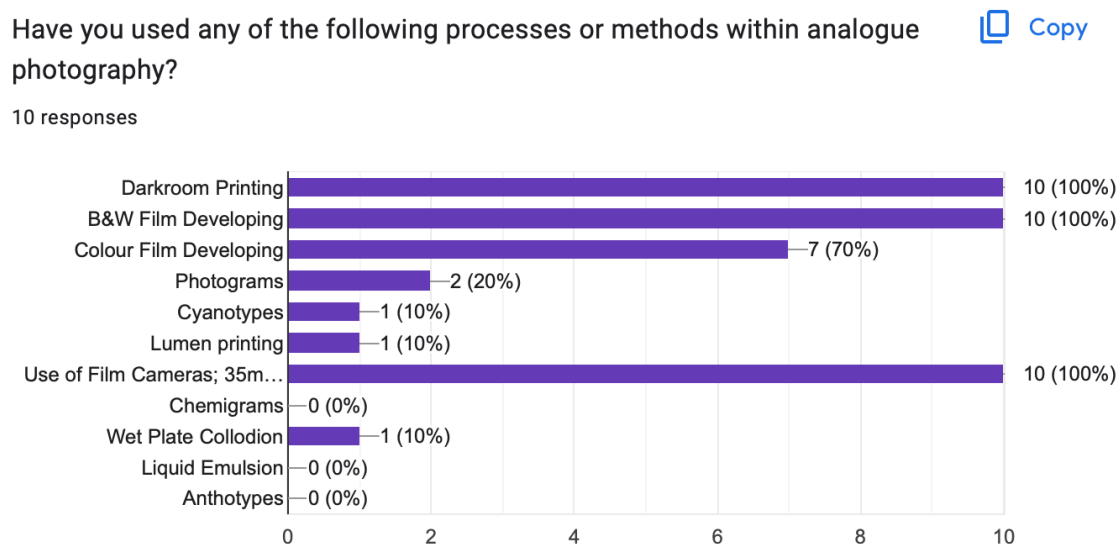


Figure 5. Question 9, Questionnaire

The following questions, 10 and 11, indicates the preferences that the students have with their practice, and if they prefer to use analogue or digital. Question 10 using quantitative data methods, 70% says digital and 30% says analogue. Then, question 11, again includes a quantitative strategy through the use of a graph. From the results provided below, there is a range of responses that all students could select through a multiple choice. The question with the most votes, 'Gives you more freedom', had 7 and the following selections is almost equal. The biggest answers, apart from the highest, is as follows; cheaper, more experimental and easier to take photographs. The results from this question provides a wide range of responses correlating to both methods; digital and analogue.

With the selection of answers below, can you chose which ones apply to your previous answer.



10 responses

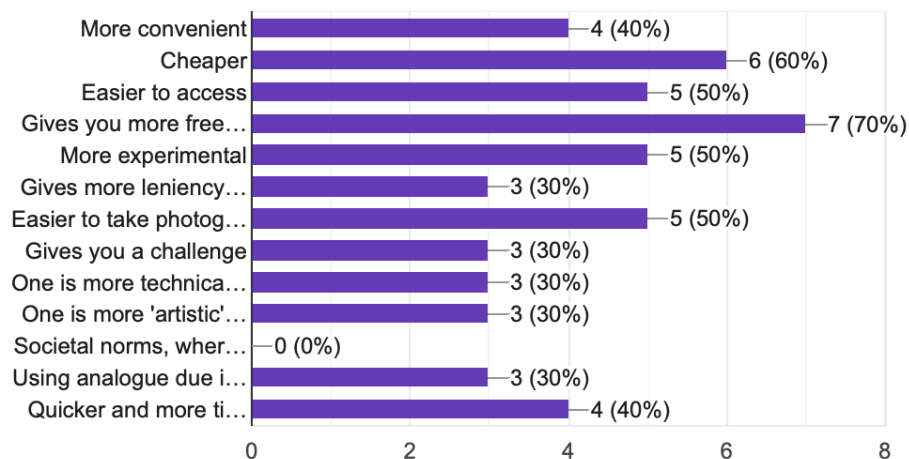


Figure 6. Question 11, Questionnaire

To gather additional research and data from participants, question 12 asks if students knew about traditional processes before SCA. 70% yes and 30% no. From this, it indicates that students have accessed prior knowledge to the historic processes of photography before starting their degree. This means, that analogue and film is not as 'dead' as it may seem, and it is still being taught through colleges. Question 13 includes another quantitative method, and it asks that since learning about the traditions and it's history, if

they would continue to experiment or focus on digital. The responses are; 70% of students says experiment with analogue, and 30% says focus on digital.

The last two questions to the survey, involves a qualitative strategy due to the descriptive inquiries. Question 14, asks about the last piece of work that the participants made, and if they could go into further detail. The responses received entails a very diverse and detailed outlook on their interests. I found that all participants have different skills, or passions within their work, and that from their statements, they engage in methods that are not all similar to one another. This provides a uniqueness to their knowledge and experiences, as each student seems to have a personal view on photography, similar to, “The subject material’, (K1, *UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) | Advance HE, 2019*). The use of different equipment, strategies, processes, concepts and aims.

What was the last piece of work that you made? Can you go into brief detail about the process, equipment used, if it was printed and the reason behind using your chosen tools?

9 responses

making photograms in the darkroom
Digital Camera, Lunaria plant
Digital camera to take images of a castle
I think it was a zine. I chose to make it by hand with a simple saddle stitch. I chose the handmade and saddle stitch to fit the context of my photography. I had selected a Dylan Thomas poem and used still life to depict a wilting flower as my way of what I saw from the poem.
Digital photograph with handwritten digital text overlay
b&w film processing then scanning in the images then editing them in photoshop to create a digital image.
Portraits 5x4 camera. Printed.
35mm half frame point & shoot, enlarged for large scale vinyl print on photoshop to make sure quality of enlargement was good and to scale for prints
It was a multimedia installation - with a printed acetate with projections and textiles and beads. the processes I used helped create a space of tranquility - with sharp details.

Figure 7. Question 14, Questionnaire

The last and final question, asks participants if they have ideas for future projects, and what they would use. In total, there were 8 responses. All answers are varied and describe their own personal interests or endeavours. From reading them, it's clear to see that they're all diving into mixed media, different equipment and processes to conduct their work. This shows that although there is a rise in digital cameras, other methods and traditional strategies are still being implemented and thought about. They're all continuing to engage with being experimental and pushing their ideas outside of their comfort zone, which additionally shows aspiration, this is similar to, 'The use and value of appropriate learning technologies', (K4, *UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) | Advance HE, 2019*).

Have you got any future ideas for future projects? If so, what medium would you use, and why?

8 responses

probably use medium format to create a series of images

Photosynthesis Photography

analogue for experimental purposes and to challenge myself

I am currently working on a still life project focusing on things not being whole or satisfyingly perfect to depict a broken reality- no matter how hard we fight or work sometimes we have to let go. I would love to do a narrative piece linked to this from the Dylan Thomas poem elegy and print it on fabric so I can fray the edges to symbolise how we have so many strands woven into our lives.

I'm currently working on producing a book of images based on events.

I am still experimenting.

I want to experiment with 'outdated' technologies such as video cassette and tapes

Digital - as it is more suited towards journalism and the speed at which my employers will want images. I want to create a photo book series on Azad Kashmir and that would require digital.

Figure 8. Question 15, Questionnaire

Overall, I received a detailed and successful response to the survey, and managed to obtain a variety of answers that will certainly assist my action research.

Conclusion

From conducting secondary research through publications, articles, theorists, statistics and journals, it was evident that the traditional methods of film and the darkroom was not necessarily lost or forgotten about in today's society, particularly in HE. Universities implement the historic roots and older processes for students to obtain knowledge and skills, as well as the digital technology. Also, the statistics and other articles suggest that there is a particular interest in the film industry, and although digital cameras have stripped the steps of photographing, students and photographers continue to gravitate to analogue.

The survey conducted to students for primary research, solidifies the collection of literature. To conclude the questionnaire, all 10 participants have their own individual interests. They are aware of equipments, processes and strategies that are involved within the photographic industry, and are passionate about developing skills and pushing their practice.

From the investigation into literature, conducting the action research, gathering responses and analysing, it is clear to say, that students in HE, are just as interested and drawn to analogue photography as well as digital, despite the advancement of technology over the last 20 years. Reviewing all of the research, primary and secondary, I have come to a conclusion that traditional photography has not 'died', due to the introduction of digital cameras, studio equipment and the fast-paced process of viewing and editing, adhering to, 'Use evidence-informed approaches and the outcomes from research, scholarship and continuing professional development', (V3, *UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF)* | *Advance HE*, 2019). It is still being used by students, and younger photographers, specifically in HE as the facilities are being used, ideas are being generated to do with the mediums and students are experimenting.

Overall, both methods of photography are being conducted within student's practice, despite their pros and cons. So essentially, there is not one process that has the upper hand compared to the other.

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