Chapter 7
Visual Arts Online Educational Trends

Laura M. Rusnak
Ohio University, USA

ABSTRACT

The intent of this chapter is to understand the implications of online education for the visual arts and how the objectives of a traditional art education can be adapted to computer-mediated learning. The focus is on three trends affecting the arts: visual culture, cultural production, and originality in art and practice.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Sloan Consortium, the number of postsecondary students taking advantage of online courses rose 17% to 4.6 million from 2008 to 2009 with 25% of postsecondary students having taken at least one online course (Sloan Consortium, 2010). As more students migrate to the online classroom to fulfill their educational goals, there are a variety of students entering the realm of visual arts that are not generally part of the target demographic for on-ground schools of art. It has been noted that the current competition for recruiting students occurs within a particular educational sector, i.e., the traditional institutions competing amongst themselves, separately from the online institutions, concluding that recruiters for online institutions do not target the usual student groups, such as high school seniors who will go directly to college post-graduation, and instead focus on working adults (Maeroff, 2003; Sull, 2008). While this may change in the future due to various pedagogical and economic strategies, such as a rise in the number of blended or hybrid course offerings, students that do not fit the traditional visual art education demographic include, but are not limited to: artists and designers who are updating their skill sets, e.g. a print designer moving into web media; artists and designers who are exploring alternative media...
and fields, e.g. a painter interested in learning about digitally printing on textiles; the entrepreneur starting a new business based on creative services; the individual who wanted to pursue art in their youth, but did not have the chance due to life circumstances (Sull, 2008); and, the hobbyist who would like to know more about a particular subject matter, such as photography.

In many of these cases, students are not committed to the four-year degree structure of an on-ground institution, because they already have a degree, want an accelerated program, or they are looking for a program that can be completed based on their schedule (Schroeder-Moreno, 2010), and from any Internet-connected locale (Buckley & Smith, 2007). Knowles and Kerkman (2007) have outlined a general discussion on the motivational factors of students who are taking online classes, listing grades and funding—external forces—and “desire to learn”—internal motivation—as some of the incentives that encourage student performance and commitment to coursework (p. 71). While external and internal motivations play a significant role in student attendance and achievement regardless of field of study, internal motivation is predominant in the list of non-traditional visual art students seeking online courses previously mentioned. Thus, the intent of this chapter is to understand the implications of online education for the visual arts and how the objectives of a traditional art education can be re-evaluated and re-configured to adapt to a computer-mediated model of learning, while attempting to meet the needs and desires of a variable and non-traditional audience.

BACKGROUND

Some visual arts educators acknowledge the benefits of Internet-based art courses as effective means for distributing practice-based techniques and theories to students that had been excluded in the past (Maeroff, 2003; Stewart, n.d). Yet, there are others who hesitate to migrate arts courses to the Internet, due to the impracticality of teaching hands-on techniques and concepts—ones customarily taught in a studio setting with artist-teacher demonstrations—via a distance format, synchronous or asynchronous. The use of CMC for teaching many arts techniques is challenging, because it lacks the type of art experience in which students engage directly with artistic materials, the actual artist-instructor, or an original work of art, such as a class excursion to a museum or gallery (Bastos, 2010; Knowles & Kerkman, 2007). Therefore, visual arts educators in the online environment need to assess the roles that traditional visual art pedagogies play, as they develop online curricula, and to look potential technologies to deliver visual art content in an efficient, but meaningful way.

Paralleling the onset of the World Wide Web, Dunn (1996) has recognized that technology is and will continue to have an effect on education, with its full incorporation inevitable, while linking its successful integration to learning models based on active student participation (p. 7-10). The latter indirectly addresses a reoccurring theme within digital divide forums that questions whether simply having access to information is enough to create an “informed society” (O’Hara & Stevens, 2006). Hence, the need to package information communication technologies and media literacy skills with accessibility, in order to make full use of available information. While this is a starting point, it is not enough to promote the active learning Dunn speaks of. Active participation can be facilitated by technology that connects the student through interactive modes with the course materials (Dunn, 1996) and encourages their desire to learn (Knowles & Kerkman, 2007; Maeroff, 2003). However, content is not always presented in both a coherent and interactive fashion that stimulates and constructs knowledge.

Content organization and interactivity should depend on the field of study in question. The ways in which technology is incorporated, as well as the ways in which course materials are presented to students are important considerations in the