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“Style File – Web-based Research and Education on a Global Scale”

'Style File' is a unique educational project that proposes to unite design students from around the world in an international collaborative design project, using the Internet and other electronic means of communication. It is an example of how the Internet can be used to provide students with a valuable learning experience on a global scale.

The concept for “Style File” was initiated early in 2006 by Ted Polhemus – well-known “Style Commentator”, anthropologist, author, journalist and photographer.

Polhemus is a widely-used consultant on youth marketing and style trends and is the author of several books on the anthropology of personal style and image. Many of these books are standard texts for design students and students of cultural studies.

The author of this paper has been asked by Polhemus to monitor the progress of the students involved in the project at Liverpool John Moores University, UK, a founding participant in the project, and to provide illustrations for the book and web site that arise from the project. These illustrations will also form part of the International touring exhibition that is planned to coincide with the publication of the book in each participating country.

The premise for the “Style File” project initially arose from the need to collate photographs of “stylistically different” individuals for inclusion in a book proposed by Polhemus that was to be called: “The Supermarket of Style – Explorations in Visual Culture”.

In “The Supermarket of Style” (SOS), the field of stylistic enquiry was to extend further than Polhemus’ usual frame of reference – clothing, adornment and accessories - to include marketing (brands and the role of style in selling anything from soft drinks to pension plans) and product, interior, graphic and other areas of design. Polhemus intended to use this frame of reference to consider the semiotics of image (what is being communicated by individuals via their ideas about style?), to reflect how modern society currently uses design, and to question and redefine the role of ‘fashion’ today:

“- The *Supermarket of Style* will be the first book to explore how style actually functions in the post-modern/post-fashion age. We live in a time of profound paradigm shift. Today it is not only the fashions which change but fashion itself - now transformed to the point at which is it necessary to re-christen it as ‘style’. Time too, to look to society for a greater understanding of style and to style for a greater understanding of society.”

(Ted Polhemus, “Supermarket of Style – explorations in Visual Culture”: proposal to Berg publishers, February 2006)

Polhemus’ need to collate current – and ongoing - research for the book on a sufficiently global scale led to the inception of “Style File”; Internet-based sister of the “Supermarket of Style” book.

“Style File” is an educational project that invites students of photography, design, cultural studies and social science from around the world to submit photographic imagery - of individuals whom they deem to be “stylistically individual” – to a central dedicated website: www.worldstylefile.com.

It is hoped that this photographic material and accompanying text will grow into an archive that will serve to record the personal style of individuals whose style is not dictated by mainstream fashion, of people who are not necessarily young, or fit the accepted model figure

types, and therefore would not normally be recorded via the usual routes of fashion magazines, newspapers, fashion photography or books on style and image.

“...A key point of SOS (Supermarket of Style: the book that established the “Style File” project) is that there is today no ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ style; no trend which all will, must or should follow. And SOS will celebrate the diversity which results from this collapse of the dictatorship of fashion...”

(Ted Polhemus: “The Supermarket of Style: Photos and travelling exhibition” document, 11th April 2006)

Unlike previous publications of similar subject matter – e.g. the Japanese “Fruits” magazine and celebrated “Fruits” books by Shoichi Aoki, (Phaidon Press Ltd., 2001, 2005) - it is not only the clothing of individuals that will be represented by “Style File” but also their surroundings – each subject will be photographed in a location where they feel “stylistically comfortable” – whether a room in their house, or elsewhere – and the location itself, as well as everyday objects which an individual chooses (mobile phone, furniture, screensaver, stationery, ornaments, etc) will also be documented.

Participating students will receive information and personal feedback from Polhemus on the material they have submitted, and collaborations between participating students with similar academic interests will be encouraged. Ultimately, selected images will be included in “The Supermarket of Style” book, and an international touring exhibition that is scheduled initially to coincide with the date of the books’ publication in each participating country, and annually thereafter.

The archive of personal style generated by the “Style File” project is intended to perform an anthropological function, allowing Polhemus and others to study how ‘real’ people actually use design in their style of dress and in their homes today.

Before any educational establishment commits itself to participate in the project, however, it is obviously important to consider the benefits to the participating students. To do this, it may be necessary to reconsider how education might be defined in the technological age:

“If formal education is to play a central role in shaping effective and satisfied citizens, workers and learners, it needs to recognise and harness the new means of creating and distributing knowledge.

“... Traditional classrooms and traditional bureaucratic education systems cannot provide society with what it now needs. The agenda of the new learning is to meet the needs of the knowledge society in a globalised world.”

(“The Learning by Design Guide”, Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope, Common Ground Publications Pty Ltd, 2006)

Possibly the greatest incentive for students to take part in the “Style File” project is that the participants’ work is expected to be included in Polhemus’ forthcoming book, as well as on the “Style File” web site and in an international touring multi-screen exhibition: three different formats that will serve as international showcases for the students’ work, and offer clear advantages for securing future employment.

A selection of photographs and an edited form of the documentation for each chosen subject will become the basis for “SOS - the Book” and “SOS - the Exhibition”. In both cases the students responsible for locating and documenting the subjects will be fully credited, as will their educational institutions.

It is clearly important that the work related to the project is of a professional standard, so participating students will learn how to present their work professionally, and can take pride in the knowledge that any work approved for the project will perform an important function for anthropological research both in the present day and into the future.

Polhemus is also exploring the possibility of a photo-library - such as PYMCA (Photographic Youth Music Culture Archive: www.PYMCA.com) - acting as agent for the commercial usage of the photographs following the publication of the book, so that the photographers involved in the project may even receive some subsequent financial benefit.

In terms of learning, participation in "Style File" will help students to contextualise their work – this is a live project happening in real time, on a global scale - and benefit from objective feedback received from a number of sources at different levels of expertise, including a leading expert in the field of cultural anthropology (Polhemus himself), researchers, educators (e.g. the co-ordinator of the project in each participating university or college), and their peers (other student contributors from around the world).

Collaborations will be encouraged between students with similar academic interests, allowing students to consider their work in greater depth and benefit from the perspectives of other researchers who may be on the other side of the world.

The reflective practice and peer assessment of other students' work engendered by "Style File" is an important aspect of the educational value of the project. Pedagogic research has suggested that learning is enhanced by students taking greater responsibility for their own, and others' assessment, and as a result reflective practice, and self- and peer-assessment strategies have been introduced into many programmes of learning.

This consideration and reflection by students of their work is known to promote a desirable approach to learning known as "deep" learning:

"Tell me, and I will probably forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand."
(Chinese proverb)

Research (started in the early seventies, mainly in Sweden and Australia, and to a lesser extent in the UK through the work of Graham Gibbs, Noel Entwistle, Dai Hounsell and others) has revealed that the quality of outcome of students' learning relates closely to the level of approach they take to learning (Marton and Saljo in Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle, 1984).

Broadly speaking, a student may take a "surface" approach to learning, in which material is learned superficially without evidence or understanding, or they may take a "deep" approach in which the learning changes the way that the student understands or perceives the subject and its context.

Clearly it is more desirable for students to adopt a "deep" approach to learning.

The practice of self- and peer-assessment, as engendered by the "Style File" project, positively encourages the four features of "deep" learning as identified by Biggs (1989):

1. Internal / Intrinsic Motivation. Self-assessment and reflective practice encourage the student to take responsibility for his or her own learning and assessment, thereby increasing "intrinsic" motivation, and promoting "deep" learning.
2. Learner Activity. Self- and peer- assessment encourages students to take an active part in their learning and assessment, and thus their own educational development.

3. Interaction with Others. Talking and discussing ideas and concepts with others is a fundamental feature of self- and peer-assessment, providing the student with a powerful way of reflecting on his / her work and again promoting “deep” learning.
4. Well-structured knowledge base. Self- and peer-assessment promotes the discussion of subject matter in an open forum. This forces students to address and explore their own preconceptions and ideas about the subject, as well as those of their peers, and thus promotes a greater and more integrated understanding of the subject.

In addition to the benefits to a student’s own learning, the observations and reflections brought about by students in self- and peer-assessment can provide valuable feedback that may be used to refine and improve the learning environment. In this case, the feedback received from the participants could be used to improve and develop not only the “Style File” project itself, but also the learning programmes to which the participants belong (e.g. by encouraging the wider use of external, live projects; greater use of e-learning strategies; and the learning and other possibilities presented by global interaction).

It is clear then that in theory at least, the “Style File” project is educationally forward-looking, making the most of available technology and offering students the chance to present their work professionally in a world-wide context, with opportunities for valuable feedback and self-reflection built into the project’s format.

“Style File” also has much to offer as a meaningful life experience, giving students the opportunity for work experience on a global scale, with a well-known anthropologist, author, journalist and photographer, the possibility of their work being promoted internationally in three different formats and even some financial reward.

In order for the students and researchers involved to gain maximum benefit from the “Style File” project however, it is important that the aims of the project - in terms of the quality of research, scale of the project and breadth of participation - do not become diluted.

If the project delivers what it promises, and becomes, as intended, a truly global undertaking, it seems likely that the “Style File” project will deliver a genuinely valuable, exciting and progressive learning experience for the student participants, and possibly pave the way for a more innovative approach towards teaching and learning in the future.