Opening your eyes with OU

Brian Young took Course T189 – 'Digital Photography: Creating and Sharing Better Images'.

I had studied computing and social sciences with the Open University throughout the nineties and into the twenty-first century, so I was intrigued to discover a new course in 2007 which coincided with my new obsession – digital photography.

The OU website whetted my appetite as it seemed to offer something for everyone, from novice to proficient, and I enrolled on the first course due to start in the May for the sum of £175. It is a ten week course, staged twice a year from May and October, and caters for several hundred each run. Access to a computer and the internet is essential since you only meet your fellow undergrads on line, through the OU's own intranet in forums set up specifically for the course.

There is a particular excitement when any OU course package crammed full of books and DVDs arrives, but I really wanted to get started with this one since it was all about having fun for a change, and less of an academic commitment.

The material supplied several weeks before the start date enabled me to prepare for the coming quest by registering with the OU's online system and exploring the various forums dedicated to course T189.

There is a 'café' for general chit chat, and bespoke forums aimed at providing interaction between students and moderators on the different aspects of the course, such as the software for digital processing and the techniques of photography. *Photoshop Elements* is supplied with video tutorials on DVD and online, and the main hub of the course is the T189 dedicated website.

On-line features

The **website** can only be accessed by course members and apart from containing a wealth of information to do with the course it is also the springboard for everything to come. The calendar promises each week's topic and each topic has an online tutorial with explanations, interactive demonstrations and exercises to complete.

But the jewel in the crown of this course is the encouragement to take photographs, within the themes of the weekly topic, and to display them on the course's own online gallery programme called Open Studio.
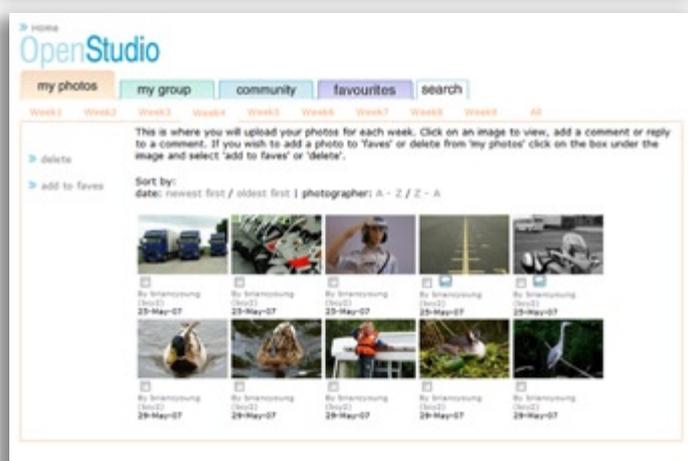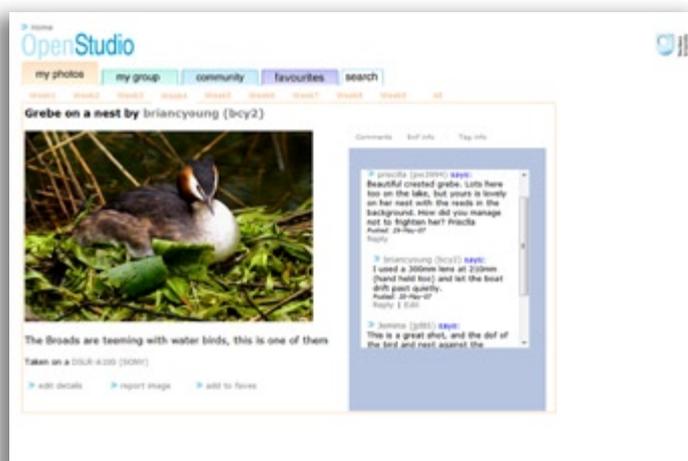
Top: my Week 4 photo posted, with comments, in Open Studio. Above: my complete Week 4 set of 10 images posted. Below: the course programme for T189 2008 as shown on the OU website.

There we are allocated ten spaces each week with at least five meeting the specific theme of the week and the rest for any photographs we might want to post, the only proviso being that they were taken by us.

The **Studio** enabled me to view my own photos by week, view those of others from my group and also the whole course (if you had the time and inclination). Everyone is encouraged to comment on any photos they felt were worthy, positive or constructively critical, and all comments could be read by all group members.

The **Forums**, which quite honestly could be avoided without any effect on how we progressed on the course, were bulging with the usual 'experts' and 'completely bewildered' that one comes to expect in any online forum these days. I did dip in and out, but there would need to be many more hours in the day if every thread were to be followed.

However I did enjoy reading some of the more bizarre comments such as one course member who had just gone and purchased their first ever camera and was asking for advice on how to switch it on! But there were also a considerable number of professional photographers in the mix who were more than helpful with their expertise.

The curriculum

This article would not be complete without a canter through the course programme and the accompanying photographs represent some of my humble efforts as I gathered pace and ability.

The first week was very much an introduction and exploration into photography entitled "Interesting images" which included video tutorials, a journey through the history of photography looking at the fundamentals of composition, and a mission to photograph letters in everyday scenes.

The second week "Light becomes data" looked at how a digital camera works in principal with various associated activities for us to explore our own camera's features.

Week three, "Exposure" did what it said on the tin utilising online graphics to help with the understanding of varying the amount of light hitting the sensor.

This was logically followed with a week devoted to "Focus and depth of field" and by the start of the fifth week I had pretty much got my head around the basic principles.

"Understanding and using colour" and "Printing and projecting your photos" filled the next fortnight and at the end of week six there was a computer marked assignment to complete on the work covered up to then. This consisted of a multi-choice answer paper completed and submitted on line and although it only counted for 10% of the total marks towards the course result it did give a sense of focus on what we had covered (pun intended).

Week seven, "Innovation in photographic imaging" immersed us reportage, juxtapositioning and mis-en-scene and a dictionary was added to my photographic kit as it really was a trip into the unknown and helped me consider my images more laterally. Mr Warhol gets a look in here and we had much fun in the self abuse and multi-colouring of our old passport photos for some of our weekly Open Studio posts.

Slide show finale

Week eight concentrated on the emotive "Critiquing and creativity" and certainly prepared me for running my own work up the flagpole for the penultimate week which was to "Share a panel of ten images and prepare for the ECA" (the End of Course Assignment).

And the final week, the ECA, required us to build a slideshow from a selection of ten photographs, write three short essays about our course work, to illustrate our understanding of the course content, and submit it online in a zip file.

In summary, I learnt a lot, although I should stress that I was very much a novice to start with. I really enjoyed the journey with a different weekly assignment to complete so my camera was never far away, and the opportunity to share discussion with likeminded folk, albeit electronically, was good, just as belonging to the Photoclubalpha forum has become.

I passed my course with flying colours, indeed I now know how those colours are represented digitally…
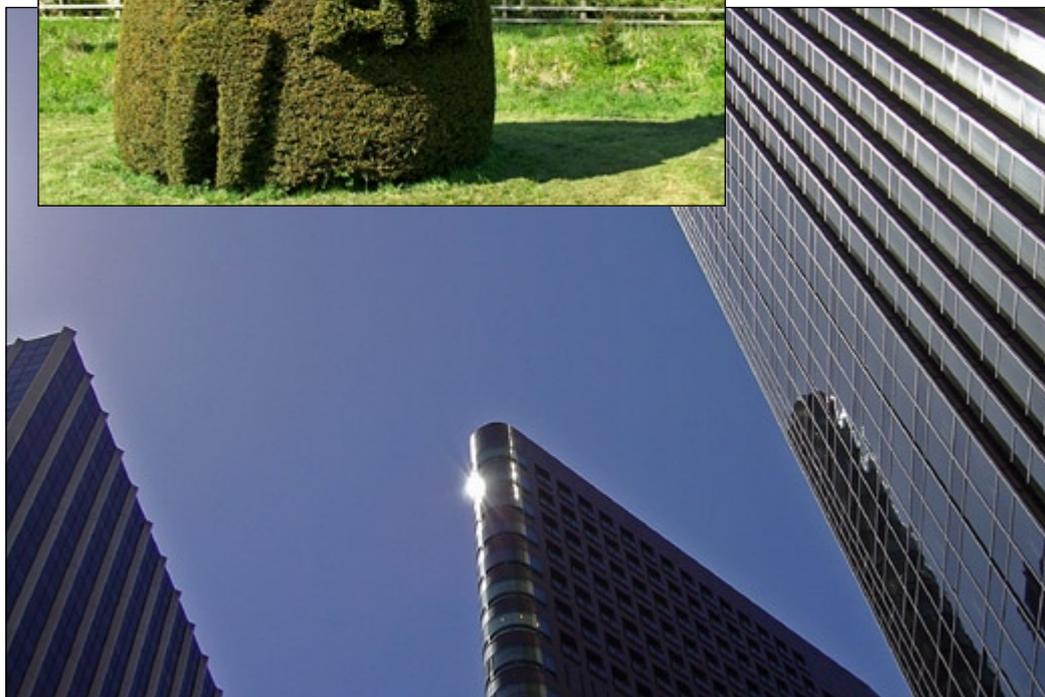– Brian Young

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See:
www.brianyoungphotography.co.uk
and for information on the 2009 courses
www3.open.ac.uk/courses/ bin/p12d11?C01T189

Left: OUweek1 – looking for letters in everyday scenes.

Below: OUweek2 – discovering how light becomes data.

Above: OUweek3 – the art of cropping from a very long shot.

Left: OUweek4 – Focus and Depth of Field.

Above left: OUweek5 – understanding and using colour. Above right: OUweek7 – digital manipulation, turning my new Bonneville into an old one with PS Elements.
Below: OUweek6 – this photo of Rutland Water attracted feedback. One comment was that it was like an Old Master, but I'm not too sure how the windsurfer fits in with that!

Below left: OUweek8 – an attempt at creativity after considerable free form straightening as it had been shot at an acute angle originally. Beloew right: OUweek9 – one of the ten photographs from my final panel for the ECA.