

Digital Cameras in the Classroom

Making Effective Use of a Digital Camera

It is common and rewarding practice for teachers to take snapshots of students. Classroom albums help create a sense of identity for the class. Photos of students doing different activities in class and on field trips and other special projects create a sense of shared history and remind students of how far they have come in a school year. This month I suggest a way to make extensive use of digital cameras in the classroom... without spending half your time organizing files and tracking down ink cartridges for the printer!

Why Digital?

When a simple point-and-shoot or disposable camera works just fine, why bother learning how to use and manage a digital camera? There are three primary reasons. First, seeing your pictures instantly makes it easy to retake photos as needed. Second, not paying for film or development facilitates taking more pictures. Third, using online photo services (see "Putting Pictures Online") makes it easier to share pictures with students' families and others.

Permissions

Parental permission is normally required before taking a picture of a student. Check your district's policies. My recommendation to use online photo processing to share pictures with students' families may require district review, as well.

Digital Camera Basics

When you take a picture with a digital camera, instead of exposing light to chemically reactive film, you are exposing light to an electronic sensor that creates a digital computer file. How many pictures you can take before unloading the camera varies tremendously depending on the size of the media storage (loosely called *memory*) in the camera and the size of these digital files. The size of the files in turn depends on the capabilities of the camera and the resolution it is set to. For most uses, a setting of 1280 by 960 pixels (1.2 megapixels) is about right.

Once you have set up your camera and filled it with images, you simply attach it to a computer with a cable and use either the software included or the regular file system to move the files off the camera and onto the computer. Then you can look at the pictures and resize, enlarge, or crop them as needed. For Windows users I recommend the free program IrfanView to quickly review and make basic changes to your images.

IrfanView

<http://www.irfanview.com/>

Organizing the Files

Once "going digital" has you and your students clicking away, you will end up with large numbers of files. To keep organized, it is essential to create a simple system of folders on your computer. I recommend that you use one folder for a year's worth of shots. Call it "2004 Pictures," and within that folder create a new

folder for every batch of photos downloaded. Name that folder with a three-digit number starting with "001"; every time you upload a new batch create a new folder "002," "003," etc. After the opening numeral, add a short description of the pictures included such as "140: Field Trip to Padilla Bay."

Most digital pictures are not modified in any way. They come out of the camera, they are admired, and they sit on the hard drive. For the few that you choose to crop, resize, or modify for printing or displaying on the Web site, make a subfolder inside the numbered folder. Call it "Best Pix" or "For Web Site," and put the modified copy of the original image in this folder.

Putting Pictures Online

It isn't practical to print more than the occasional digital picture on the inkjet printer in your classroom. The expensive ink cartridges get used up, the printer is slow, the higher quality paper you need quickly runs out... you get the picture. Instead, consider creating a free account at one of the online photo printing services. My two favorites are Ofoto and SnapFish.

Ofoto

www.ofoto.com

SnapFish

www.snapfish.com

Both services provide free software that simplifies viewing, editing, and uploading the images to your account at their Web site. There are three major advantages to this. First, you can choose to print only the pictures that are really worth printing. Second, your photos will be printed on high quality photographic paper, and they'll usually look just as good as prints from a film camera. Third, once the images are uploaded into an album on your account, you can select people (such as the parents of students) with whom you wish to share the album. This generates an email to those people that gives them access to view and order prints. This means that parents can view the pictures from the class field trip as soon as you can get them uploaded, and they can order prints of their favorites without any effort on your part!

A final advantage is that these online services automatically modify the images you upload to make them suitable for display on their Web site. This means that with a right-click or a click and hold, you can save the Web-prepared images and thumbnails straight from their Web site back to your hard drive. Then those images are ready for addition to the class Web site.

Digital Camera Resources

Digital Cameras and Photography
<http://www.imaging-resource.com/>

Digital Camera Basics
<http://www.digitalcamerabasics.com/>

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