ASCILITE 2026

The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Reimagining the digital studio: Creative expression and participation in asynchronous photography education

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Creative disciplines are often organised around shared making, critique and co-present studio practice. This concise paper explores a foundational undergraduate photography course redesigned as an asynchronous, online creative learning space in Vietnam. Drawing on focus group data from 15 students, the paper explores how students experienced autonomy, instructor presence and peer learning in a digital studio environment. Findings suggest that students valued flexibility, self-paced practice and instructor feedback, but peer critique remained cautious and design dependent. Rather than treating this as a deficit, the paper argues that participation in asynchronous creative education is culturally and relationally situated. Digital tools can support creative expression, but they do not automatically generate the trust, legitimacy or shared language required for critique. The paper introduces participatory safety in online, asynchronous creative education as a design principle for intentionally scaffolding critique, visibility, and relational trust. It also outlines key design implications for asynchronous creative learning environments, including structured critique language, small-group peer exchange, instructor-modelled feedback and gradual movement from teacher-led to peer-supported creative dialogue.

Keywords: asynchronous learning, creative education, photography education, peer critique, teaching presence, qualitative case study

Introduction

Creative disciplines are typically organised around shared making, critique and collaborative studio practice (Orr & Shreeve, 2017). In photography education, students learn technical and interpretive processes through peer and instructor interaction. While digital platforms increase flexibility and access, asynchronous learning remains a contested space because it does not automatically reproduce traditional studio conditions (Abrahmov & Ronen, 2008). This issue is especially significant in culturally situated learning contexts. Online learning designs often assume that autonomy will lead naturally to peer dialogue and collaborative critique (cf. Garrison et al., 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Yet students may participate strongly in learning activities while remaining cautious about publicly evaluating peers, disagreeing with others or exposing unfinished creative work (Tran, 2013; Yao & Collins, 2019). In such settings, participation is shaped not only by technology and task design, but also by expectations about authority, relational harmony and reputational risk.

This paper reports on a foundational undergraduate photography course redesigned as an asynchronous creative learning space at an international branch campus in Vietnam. The paper asks: How do students experience participation, autonomy and peer learning in an asynchronous creative course? Rather than treating limited peer critique as a deficit, the paper explores how participation is culturally and pedagogically mediated. It proposes participatory safety in online, asynchronous creative education as a design principle for creative learning spaces: the intentional scaffolding of critique, visibility and relational trust so that students can take creative risks without unnecessary social or reputational risk. Building on the concept of psychological safety in team and workplace learning (Edmondson, 1999), which describes a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, participatory safety extends this idea to the asynchronous, culturally situated conditions of creative higher education, where critique is mediated by digital visibility rather than real-time group dynamics in the stable, co-located work teams Edmondson (1999) originally studied.

Background

Student engagement is widely understood as a multidimensional construct involving behavioural, emotional

and cognitive dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004; Kahu, 2013). In creative disciplines, engagement is often expressed through experimentation, reflection, feedback-seeking and iterative improvement. However, the form this engagement takes may differ in asynchronous settings, where participation is mediated by digital platforms and where students have greater control over time, pace and visibility.

Self-determination theory positions autonomy, competence and relatedness as core needs supporting motivation and sustained engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2017), requiring structure alongside self-pacing. The community of inquiry framework emphasises teaching, social and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2000), while the technology acceptance model attends to perceived usefulness and ease of use (Davis, 1989). These frameworks served as sensitising lenses for the study rather than predictive models.

Creative education complicates these frameworks because peer visibility and critique can be pedagogically valuable yet socially risky. Photography education has long been connected to studio-based demonstration, visual analysis and guided critique (Abrahmov & Ronen, 2008). In Vietnam and other higher education contexts shaped by more instructor-led traditions, student participation may be influenced by respect for authority, uncertainty about peer evaluation and caution around public disagreement (Tran, 2013; Yao & Collins, 2019). This does not imply passivity. Rather, it suggests that autonomy and relatedness may be enacted through culturally situated forms of participation.

Research context and method

The focal course was a foundational undergraduate photography course undertaken by nearly 600 students from programs across the university, teaching core photographic concepts, technical skills, and reflective practices through structured asynchronous modules and practice-based tasks. To foster peer discussion and critique, the course paired on-location video demonstrations filmed across Ho Chi Minh City, designed to capture the coordinator thinking aloud through their creative process, with seamless interactive tools, such as embedded polls, discussions, and visual Padlet sharing boards for work-in-progress sharing and critique. This structure leveraged instructor facilitation techniques like weaving and wrapping alongside low-stakes peer sharing to foster peer interaction and build an inclusive community. Ultimately, the redesign supported active, applied, and authentic learning while allowing students to explore their own environments and work within their personal creative rhythms.

Using a qualitative framework-informed design, 15 undergraduate students participated in semi-structured online focus groups across multiple teaching periods, with recorded transcriptions reviewed and translated as needed. Analysis proceeded iteratively. Initial coding identified patterns related to engagement, autonomy, instructor support, peer interaction and technology use. A second stage interpreted these patterns through self-determination theory and the community of inquiry framework, with additional attention to culturally situated participation. Descriptive code frequencies were used to support interpretation, not as statistical evidence (Figure 1). The study received institutional ethics approval, and all reporting has been de-identified for blind review.

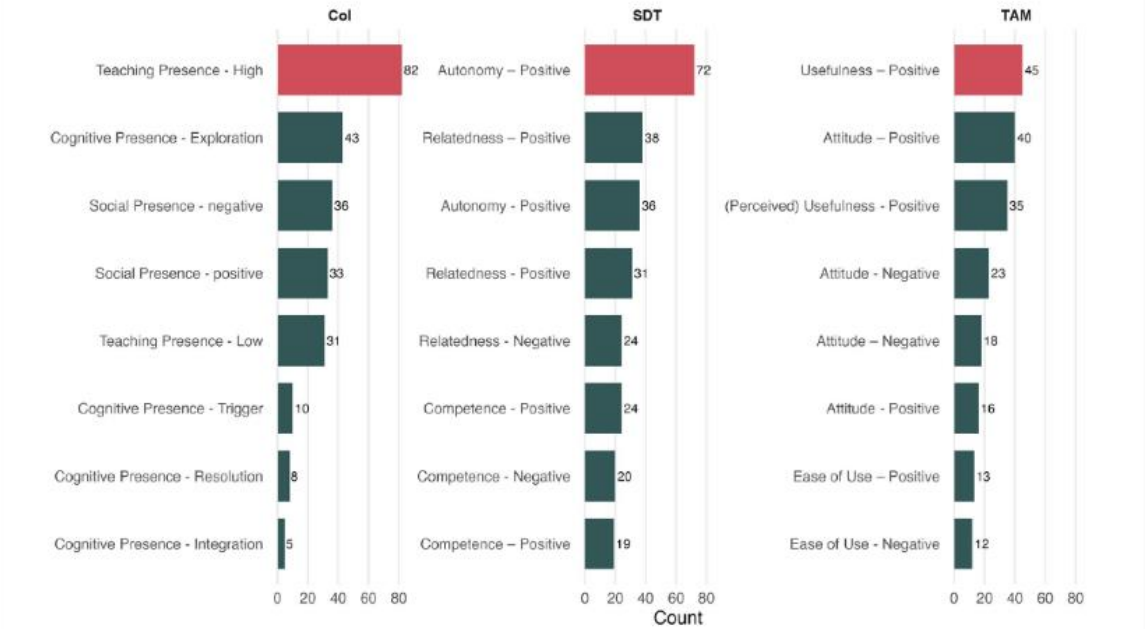


Figure 1. Distribution of coded dimensions across CoI, SDT and TAM frameworks (descriptive frequencies)

Findings

The thematic analysis highlights how students navigated the balance between individual creative agency and social learning expectations. While students actively utilised the flexible structure for independent exploration, their engagement with social features was highly mediated by local cultural risk-avoidance. The distribution of these experiences across the CoI, SDT, and TAM frameworks is quantified descriptively in Figure 1.

Teaching presence as a stabilising anchor

Teaching presence was the most consistently referenced dimension within the community of inquiry coding (teaching presence, *n* = 82). Students repeatedly described instructor guidance, feedback and visibility as central to their engagement. One participant explained that the teachers were “very enthusiastic” and gave comments on each student submission, which they felt was “sufficient.” Another noted that peer interaction often depended on instructor prompting: “Mostly it was the teacher encouraging us to engage...otherwise, the teacher took the lead.”

Instructor commentary also functioned as a shared learning resource. Students reported learning by observing feedback given to others, with one participant explaining that “even when I see the comment from other works...it is also supportive.” In this asynchronous environment, teaching presence did not depend on constant real-time interaction. Instead, it operated through structured activities, public feedback, consultation opportunities and visible expectations. For students, this presence created reassurance and legitimised participation.

Autonomy as structured flexibility

Autonomy was the most frequently coded construct within the self-determination theory coding (autonomy-positive, *n* = 72). Students valued the ability to manage time, revisit resources and develop work at their own pace. One student described being able to “manage my time freely,” while another linked flexibility to creative exploration, explaining that walking around the street helped them clear their mind and develop ideas.

However, autonomy was not described as unbounded independence. Students valued flexibility when it was held within clear expectations. One participant characterised the experience as being “free to do your own thing...within the constraints of the assignments.” Autonomy was therefore enacted as structured self-direction: students controlled when and how they engaged, but their engagement was anchored by clear tasks, deadlines, exemplars and feedback.

Peer learning as cautious visibility

Students did not reject peer learning, but peer critique was more cautious and design-dependent than instructor feedback. Students valued seeing other students' work and comments, but they were less likely to describe direct peer evaluation as central to learning. This pattern suggests that social presence was experienced through visibility, awareness and structured interaction rather than open-ended public critique. This finding is important for creative learning spaces. In studio education, critique is often treated as the engine of learning. In the asynchronous course, critique required additional social and pedagogical scaffolding. Students appeared more comfortable engaging with peer work when the activity was framed, prompted or legitimised by the instructor. This indicates that peer participation was not simply a matter of platform availability; it depended on perceived safety, clarity and purpose.

Digital tools as enabling but insufficient

Digital tools supported participation by allowing students to revisit materials, post work, observe examples and engage asynchronously. These affordances reduced some pressures associated with immediacy and supported reflective creative practice. However, acceptance of the tools did not automatically translate into expressive peer dialogue. Students could find the platform useful while still remaining cautious about public critique. Technology therefore enabled the possibility of participation, but learning design shaped whether students experienced participation as safe, meaningful and worthwhile.

Discussion: Supporting peer participation in the digital studio

The findings suggest that asynchronous creative learning spaces require more than access to content, discussion boards or peer feedback tools. They require participatory safety: a designed condition in which students understand how to participate, why participation matters, and how critique can be offered without threatening relational harmony or individual reputation. Participatory safety does not remove challenge from creative learning. Rather, it creates the conditions in which students can take creative and dialogic risks.
This concept reframes autonomy and relatedness in asynchronous creative education. Autonomy was not primarily expressed through open peer-led dialogue, but through self-managed creative practice within a structured environment. Relatedness emerged through instructor visibility, shared feedback and awareness of others' work, rather than continuous peer exchange. Teaching presence therefore acted as a bridge between individual creative autonomy and social participation. This reframes a common assumption in autonomy-support literature, which tends to treat peer dialogue as a natural extension of autonomy and relatedness rather than as something requiring its own scaffolding.

The study also suggests that culturally responsive design should not attempt to remove hierarchy from learning spaces. In this context, instructor authority supported participation by providing legitimacy, reassurance and shared standards. The design challenge is to use teaching presence to gradually redistribute participation: moving students from teacher-led feedback to scaffolded peer response, to more confident peer critique. Table 1 summarises design implications arising from the study.

Table 1.
Design implications for culturally responsive creative learning spaces

Design challenge	**Design response for the digital studio**
Students value autonomy but need clarity	Use structured weekly pathways, explicit criteria and examples of successful creative process.
Peer critique may carry relational risk	Model constructive critique language and frame feedback as collective improvement rather than individual judgement.
Public posting can feel exposed	Begin with small trust-based groups or optional anonymous feedback before whole-cohort sharing.

Instructor feedback dominates participation	Use instructor-endorsed peer validation cycles that gradually move responsibility toward students.
Tools enable but do not guarantee dialogue	Align each digital interaction with a clear creative purpose, such as noticing, questioning or refining.

These findings are drawn from a small, single-institution sample of 15 self-selected students, and should be read as indicative of culturally situated experience rather than generalisable to all asynchronous creative learning contexts.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how participation in asynchronous creative learning is shaped by culture, pedagogy and digital mediation. In the focal photography course, students engaged strongly with flexibility, self-paced practice and instructor feedback, but peer critique remained cautious and dependent on structured prompts. These findings challenge assumptions that digital learning spaces automatically generate collaborative critique. They also challenge deficit interpretations of limited peer dialogue by showing that participation can be active, thoughtful and creative even when it is not highly dialogic.

For ASCILITE's 2026 theme of connection in a digital society, the study highlights that meaningful peer connection in creative learning is not an automatic by-product of digital access, but something that must be deliberately designed for through participatory safety. Asynchronous creative learning can support experimentation and expression, but students need clear pathways, visible teaching presence and carefully scaffolded peer interaction. Future work could examine how participatory safety develops over time and how different critique structures influence creative confidence, peer learning and the quality of student work.

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Cleveland, D. & Stubbs, S. (2026). Reimagining the digital studio: Creative expression and participation in asynchronous photography education. In Cochrane, T., Narayan, V., Poole, T., Lai, P., Lake, P., Moore, O., & Li, L. (Eds.), *The Future is Connection: Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society*. Proceedings ASCILITE 2026. Brisbane (pp. 528–533). https://doi.org/10.65106/apubs.2026.3361

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