

"Seeing Through Photographs" Online Class on Coursera

Pratt Institute INFO-685-02 Digital Analytics

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Introduction

MoMA has created a well-rounded class series on Coursera (www.coursera.com), an online education provider.

Their online courses cover a range of topics from fashion to photography - to broaden public knowledge and spread historical value of the arts.

Our focus: Satisfaction ratings surrounding MoMA's most popular course, "Seeing Through Photographs", with over 217,665 participants enrolled.



Figure: Depicts the the top 8 courses by enrollment

The Research Origin

The research origin lied in the completion rates as “Seeing Through Photographs” had around 154,443 participants commence the course but only 4,767 completed it.

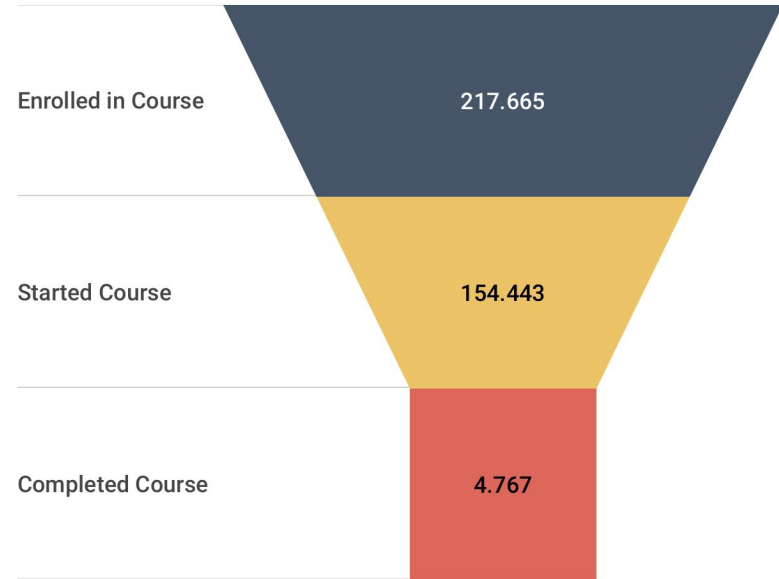
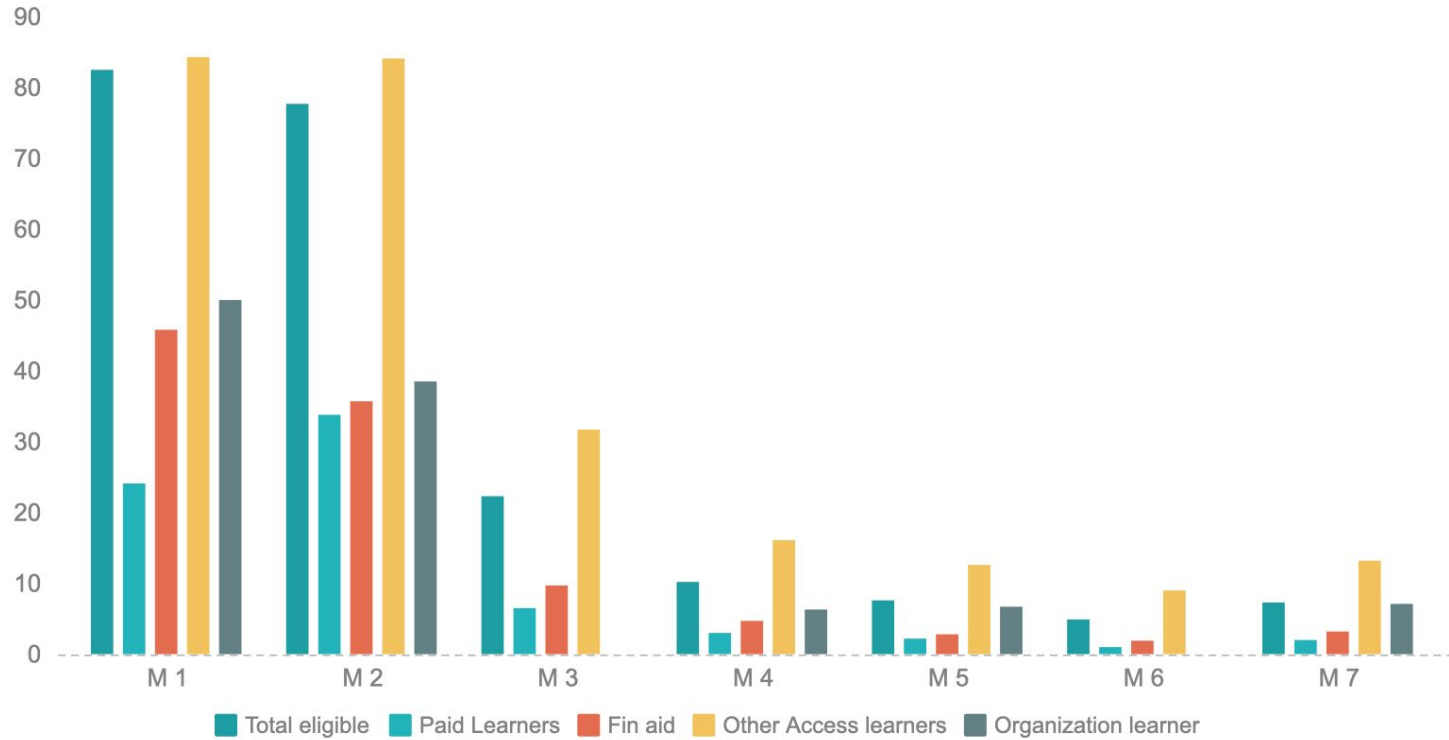


Figure: Funnel contrasts total # of students enrolled to how many began and completed the course

Drop Out Module



Finding : Dropping out after the second module

Methodology

- Data from MoMA's Coursera
 - Course participants demographics
 - Course enrollment rate
 - Course completion data
 - Course drop-off points
 - Course engagement rates
 - Post-course survey
 - Public reviews (1, 2, 3 and 5 star ratings)
- Competitive Review from Class Central
- Course Feedback from Coursera
 - Week (Week 1, Week 2; Week 3, Week 4, Week 5, Week 6, General);
 - Language;
 - Sentiment (Positive, Negative, Neutral);
 - Topic (Quizz, Peer Review, Readings, Videos, Photos, Instructors, Interaction, Course)

Finding 1

Learners look for content in their own language

- The course is delivered in English language
- User demographics - majority of learners - from other languages, such as Spanish, Italian or French
- Asked for the high quality video subtitles in their own language.
- Suggested providing the translations of the readings

“It is a very good course, organized, but for Spanish speakers it can be a bit complex, as it does not have subtitles.”

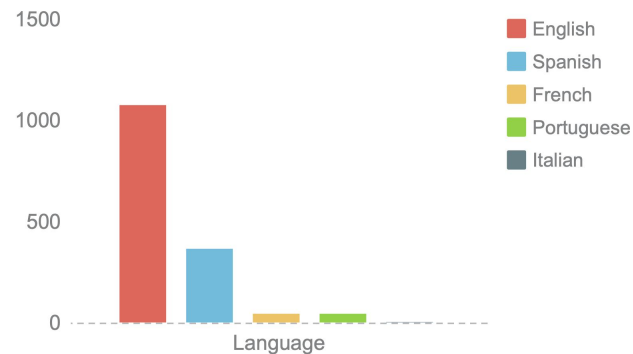
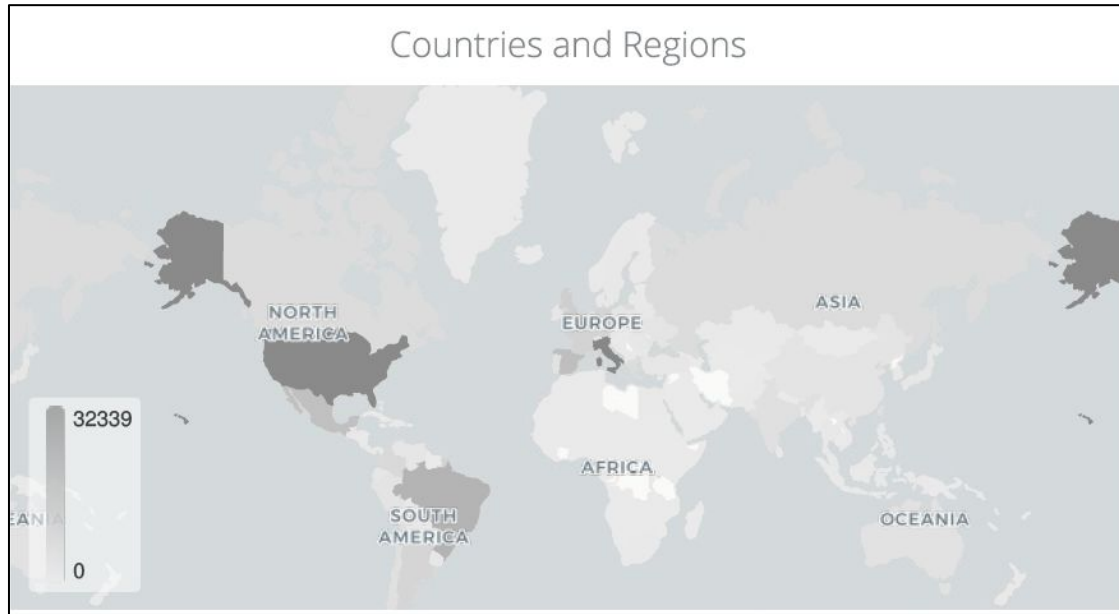


Figure 8: “Seeing Through Photographs” learners by their Language from 1528 comments

Recommendation 1

Highlight Coursera's Subtitle Feature



Finding 2

Course title and purpose are not clear

- Not sure about the purpose of the course - when enrolling
- Some were convinced - will introduce them into the history of photography
- Others - expecting a course focusing on teaching how to take pictures and looked for the practical part of the course

*“It give insight in the history of photography
and is a stimulating start to do more
research.”*


*“I gained a broader understanding of the history of
American photography and some of the forces that has
shaped it. Not a new skill.”*

Recommendation 2

Clarify Course Description & Course Objectives in the Introduction

- Make it more explicit in the course introduction and description.
- Reformulate the course title to touch on intended history, theory and critical thinking.


About this Course


 64,908


Although taking, sharing, and viewing photographs has become second nature for many of us, our regular engagement with images does not necessarily make us visually literate. This course aims to address the gap between seeing and truly understanding photographs by introducing a diversity of ideas, approaches, and technologies that inform their making. In this course you will look closely at photographs from the collection of The Museum of Modern Art and hear a variety of perspectives on what a photograph is and the ways that photography has been used throughout its nearly 180 year history: as a means of artistic expression, as a tool for science and exploration; as an instrument of documentation; to tell stories and record histories; and as a mode of communication and critique in our ever increasingly visual culture.


Learning Objectives

- Develop skills to better examine and understand the differences between photographs and photographic images.
- Discover how context influences the production, circulation, and reception of photographic images.
- Learn about different modes of artistic and technological experimentation and innovation in photography.
- Investigate photography's role in our increasingly visual culture.

 **100% online**
Start instantly and learn at your own schedule.

 **Flexible deadlines**
Reset deadlines in accordance to your schedule.

 **Approx. 16 hours to complete**
Suggested: 6 weeks of study, 1-2 hours/week

 **English**
Subtitles: Serbian, Chinese (Simplified), Italian, Russian, English, Spanish

Finding 3

Increase Course Accessibility

- Recognized the professional content provided
- Transcript text used in the videos is too small and uncomfortable to read and follow.
- Pleased with the videos but were dissatisfied with the quality of the readings.
- Text used in the scans were too small and very difficult to read
- Readings, at times, were very academic

“Better scans, some of them were difficult to read, pdfs should be formatted to fit a single page in full screen. It’s almost impossible to read from a cell phone.”

“The language used in the required literature is intensive for those of us who have not been back at college for a while.”

“The downloadable pdf were illegible and hardly printable.”

Recommendation 3

Rescan Readings

- To improve their quality
- Same orientation, if possible, bigger font
- Would increase their accessibility

sculpture, drawing, and traditional prints. He is reported to have one said that *his chief interest was in contemporary things before they became respectable. As a matter of record, the twenty-third work to enter the Museum Collection in April, 1926, was a photograph, Lehnshaus, Head of a Man, by Walter Evans. In 1927 the Museum opened the historic survey exhibition Photography 1839-1927, directed by Beaumont Newhall. The exhibition provided the foundation for the effective beginning of a systematic and coherent commitment to photography as an independent curatorial function. In 1940, following Beaumont Newhall, three staff members who have directed the Museum's photography program have been Nancy Newhall, Edward Steichen, Edward Steichen, and the writer. The one hundred photographs reproduced in this book represent less than one per cent of the Museum's photography achievement. In considering that small sample of a tiny part of photography's achievement. In considering that the character of this sample should be. I had first to answer this question: Should it concentrate on the medium's heroic figures, representing work by a selection of works that would suggest in rough outline the scope of its unique contribution, or should the selection be broadly inclusive, and attempt to describe photography from a somewhat more liberal and exploratory perspective? I have decided to attempt the latter. The Museum's photography Collection has not been containing an exclusive or inevitable masterpiece, but rather a small that might contribute to a fuller understanding of the medium's achievements and possibilities. Photography has learned about its own nature not only from its great masters, but also from the simple and casual works of photographers of modest aspiration and small renown. These photographers have contributed not only out of their talent, but by virtue of their numbers, their industry, and their occasional good luck. Their work also deserves, and repays, study.*

It was therefore decided that no photographer be represented here by more than one work, regardless of the importance of his contribution, or the richness of the Museum's holding of his work. It might be added that it is somewhat unsatisfactory to sum up in half a dozen prints the meaning of the life's work of an Agassiz or a Sitnikoff or a Brancusi. Although such a selection might represent the basic visual ideas that were one's own (limited to the spirit of photography, which is generous and boundless, will reveal itself. It properly sketches out the work of one of photography's greatest figures requires not six or ten pictures, but a hundred. The very modest of the subject will have his own considerable list of distinguished photographers whose work is not included here. If there have been and seem to be represented in the Collection, they have been omitted with genuine regret. The

nineteenth-century portion of the Collection, especially, has been most liberally donated. The possibility of including entirely work before 1900 was considered, and rejected. The focus of the Museum's concern is of course on the art of the twentieth century; in photography, however, no arbitrary date can be set to represent the beginning of a modern era. On the contrary, many of the most innovative workers of the past generation have found inspiration and precedents by delving back into the work of their immediate predecessors, in a more distant photographic past. As a rule, photography has not developed in a disciplined and linear manner but has rather grown like an untamed garden, making full use of the principles of random selection, laissez-faire, participatory democracy, and ignorance. Thus, several generations of photographic thought have existed simultaneously, with little real knowledge of each other. It is not unlikely that Jacques-Louis Lagrange in his early teens, and Eugene Ijigite, in his fifties, saw each other photographing in the Bois de Boulogne, in the years before the First World War.

Unrepresented here are those photographers whose most important work has been in color—a complex and largely distinct field that requires and deserves separate consideration. Even so, scientifically revised photography was for similar reasons finally and regrettably passed over. For the same, the most painful omission were of those spangled pictures that were left out because it was necessary to move to a new decade and to a different genre and species.

Finally, it must be assumed that some subjective omissions are inevitable to me, and are the result not of a conscious ordering of priorities, but of ignorance. Although the Museum has always sought to maintain an international perspective, it is true that the Department of Photography, at least, knows the work of the United States much better than that of the rest of the world. This is due in part to the fact that few foreign museums have systematically collected, studied, exhibited, and published the photography of their own countries. Happily, this situation has recently shown some signs of changing. In this context one might speculate that the vitality of American photography in recent decades, like that of American painting, has been in some measure caused by the availability, through private, considered exhibition and publications, of the decisive work of a living tradition.

It would require pages merely to list the names of all those who have contributed significantly to the growth of the Museum's photography Collection, and those who have helped would surely prefer that these pages be reserved for pictures. Acknowledgment must be, for the most part, generic. First I would like to thank the photographers themselves, who have responded to the seriousness of the Museum's commitment to their medium, and have responded as collaborators in a common cause. This cooperative has often included the gift of prints, on those frequent occasions when the Department's specific has been larger than

Introduction
THIS BOOK IS AN INVESTIGATION of what photographs look like, and of why they look that way. It is concerned with photographic style and with photographic tradition: with the sense of possibilities that a photographer today takes to his work.

The invention of photography provided a radically new picture-making process—a process based not on synthesis but on selection. The difference was a basic one. Paintings were made—constructed from a storehouse of traditional schemes and skills and attitudes—but photographs, as the man on the street put it, were taken.

The difference raised a creative issue of a new order: how could this mechanical and mindless process be made to produce pictures meaningful in human terms—pictures with clarity and coherence and a point of view? It was soon demonstrated that an answer would not be found by those who loved too much the old forms, for in large part the photographer was bereft of the old artistic traditions. Speaking of photography Baudelaire said: "This industry, by invading the new territories of art, has become art's most mortal enemy." And in his own terms of reference Baudelaire was half right; certainly the new medium could not satisfy old standards. The photographer must find new ways to make his meaning clear.

These new ways might be found by men who could abandon their allegiance to traditional standards—or by the artistically ignorant, who had no old allegiances to break. There have been many of the latter sort. Since its earliest days, photography has been practiced by thousands who shared no common tradition or training, who were disciplined and united by no academy or guild, who considered their medium variously as a science, an art, a trade, or an enter-

tainment, and who were often unaware of each other's work. Those who invented photography were scientists and painters, but its professional practitioners were a very different lot. Hawthorne's daguerreotypist hero Holgrave in THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES was perhaps not far from typical:

"I thought now but twenty-two years old, he had already been a country schoolmaster; salesman in a country store; and the political editor of a country newspaper. He had subsequently travelled as a peddler of cologne water and other essences. He had studied and practiced dentistry. Still more recently he had been a public lecturer on mesmerism, for which science he had very remarkable endowments. His present phase as a daguerreotypist was of no more importance in his own view, nor likely to be more permanent, than any of the preceding ones."²

The enormous popularity of the new medium produced professionals by the thousands—converted silversmiths, tinkers, druggists, blacksmiths and printers. If photography was a new artistic problem, such men had the advantage of having nothing to unlearn. Among them they produced a flood of images. In 1853 the NEW-YORK DAILY TRIBUNE estimated that three million daguerrotypes were being produced that year.³ Some of these pictures were the product of knowledge and skill and sensibility and invention; many were the product of accident, improvisation, misunderstanding, and empirical experiment. But whether produced by art or by luck, each picture was part of a massive assault on our traditional habits of seeing.

By the latter decades of the nineteenth century the professionals and the serious amateurs were joined by an even larger host of casual snapshot-takers. By the early eighties the dry plate, which could be purchased ready-to-use, had re-



Finding 4

Assignments & Quizzes Unaligned with Course Objectives

Experienced difficulty in three aspects involving the quizzes.

- Content was not aligned with lessons' emphasis or course objectives
- Unsure how to assess which details held more value than others
- Desired questions that were less static or fact-based and more open-ended and thought-provoking

Assignments

- Felt the assignments were extensive
- Difficult to get through

Recommendation 4

Refine and Refocus Course Assignments and Quizzes

- Shorter assignments to stay focused
- Balance quiz questions from static questions to more critical thinking prompts
 - E.g. What year did x occur >> why was the notion of x influential in photography today?
- Clearly align testing content with learning objectives and module content
 - Would make quizzes and assignments feel less confusing
 - E.g. Ensure topics emphasized in a module's videos and readings are incorporated cohesively throughout its corresponding quiz, assignment and final.
- Provide an offline prompt
 - E.g. Take their own photos outdoors or researching inspiring figures in this craft.

Finding 5

Community Building Through Course Content

- Desired support - especially when experiencing a language barrier.
- Unable to discuss their new knowledge with others
- Wanted the opportunity to engage with other participants

Post-course questionnaire

- Desire for more participation from instructors and artists in the discussion forum
- More ways to stay involved in the course such as live-streamed question and answers

How could MoMA improve this course to exceed expectations? Select your top 3 options from the following list.

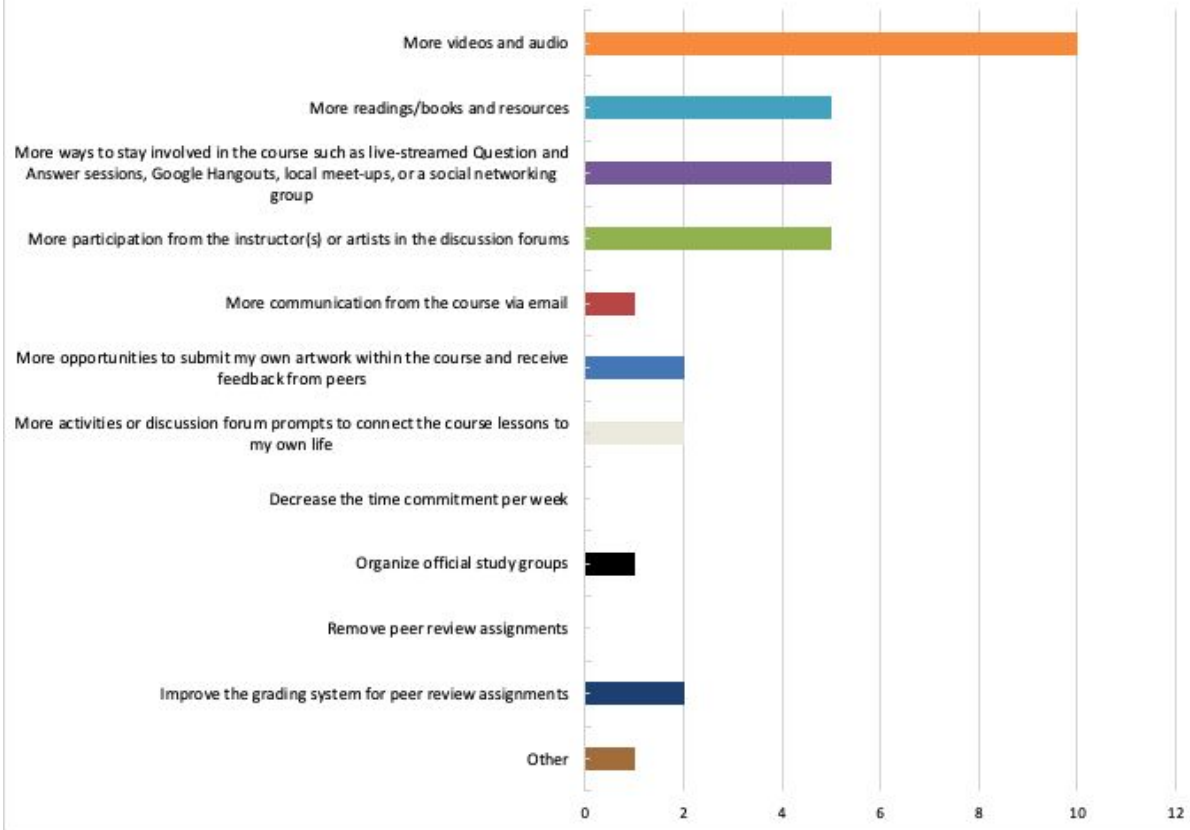


Figure: Depicts participants top preferences for course improvement from post-course questionnaire (14 replies)

Recommendation 5

Connect and Expand “Seeing Through Photographs” Community

- New Course offerings
 - To further develop their skills focusing on theory and critical thinking
 - Requested a chance to learn practical photography skills
- Active participation in the online forum
 - Open forum moderator roles to course alumni and past students
- “Seeing through the photographs” in social media
 - Create a course inspired hashtag. E.g. #momathroughphoto
 - Create a course-dedicated Instagram page, Flickr or Facebook group

Conclusion

“Seeing Through Photographs” course fits into this mission - To educate the audience.

The learners:

- Say the focus of the course “... *it is about understanding photographs, not about taking photographs.*”
- Appreciated the opportunity to learn both the critical thinking and the history of photography.
- Were inspired by the quality of materials and the professionalism of the course.
- Noticed, that MoMA allows them to access the knowledge, which otherwise would not be accessible for them.
- Were thrilled about the course content and look forward to the more advanced versions of this course.

Implementation of the above mentioned recommendations, can increase the learners satisfaction and increase the completion rate of the course.

Let's take a look at the Infographic!



Thank
you!

The image features the text "Thank you!" written in a white, cursive, handwritten-style font. The text is centered on a light pink background. Scattered around the text are several small, teardrop-shaped confetti pieces in two colors: red and teal. The overall aesthetic is cheerful and celebratory.

Any Questions?