Photo 100 is an active learning college level photography course that Penn State has offered in an entirely online format since 2004. In Photo 100, students engage in lessons, discussions, and critiques of their photographs just as we do in traditional classrooms however the technology and interface of the online environment encouraged us to reconsider the way we teach beginning photography. We redirected our instructional emphasis from traditional technique-based training to delivering a more complex set of tools that encourage students to understand and explore the greater impact photography has on our cultural. Our pedagogical rethinking was a byproduct of engaging the technological possibilities and challenges posed by the Internet, digital photography, and the new e-Learning environment. Our goal was to take maximum advantage of the Internet’s interactive abilities and create a robust classroom that students could enter any time of the day or night from anywhere they had Internet access. We developed lessons that challenge the way students think about photography and we designed custom online photo galleries and discussion forums to interface with web-based learning modules that give them a place to exhibit their photographs and engage in lively discussions about both their work and the critical topics covered in our lessons.

The first semester we offered Photo 100, our small and efficient team developed and designed the course while simultaneously teaching it to 100 students; we added new material and functionality, just in time, as the semester progressed. The working environment in which we accomplished this was exceptionally conducive to finding economical and creative ways to solve technical, procedural, and pedagogical problems. Though not trained as instructional designers we encountered many of the concerns
professional designers regularly grapple with including, developing effective course structure and management strategies, building well-organized user interfaces, creating fair grade assessment methods, and fostering good interpersonal relationships between students and teachers, which can be quite challenging in an online only environment.

Since that initial course offering, we have increased the semester enrollment to 300 students using only two instructors yet the interactive format provides a personal experience impossible to obtain during an average one-hour lecture hall meeting with the same number of students. With the e-learning configuration we are able to forgo the need for expensive and limited classroom space with an army of graduate student TAs and efficiently teach the course with a high student to instructor ratio thus making the course much less expensive to offer and more convenient for students to fit into busy or complicated course schedules.

Our experience with Photo 100 is that when developing an online course this Conference’s main themes are all inextricably interrelated. During my presentation I intend to relate our experience developing an effective interactive online photography course and describe challenges and potential posed by the intersections we encountered between pedagogy, technology, people, cost effectiveness, and the cultivation of a creative atmosphere beneficial to innovation.