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PHOTOGRAPHY; Out of the Darkroom Age

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Photos: Claudia Hart is a visiting professor of digital arts at Sarah Lawrence. There, she teaches an advanced form of digital photography with 3-D animation. Examples of her work are at top and at left. (Photo by Frances Roberts for The New York Times)

AT the Westchester Art Workshop's photography seminar this spring, among the several dozen students were undergraduates with multiple piercings and retirees with none. That those students attended was nothing new; they have always been among the photographers who have traditionally been the workshop's bread and butter. It is the position that they are in that has changed.

They are part of a fast-growing subset that small-scale arts institutions like the workshop have been seeking out with renewed vigor: hobbyists turning serious, and a relatively new phenomenon, the second-career photographer.

This newly coveted demographic is a signal of the impact of digital technology, which has reshaped photography, partly by swelling the ranks of those interested in the field. As a result, small arts institutions like the Westchester workshop have had to adjust the way they do business.

The workshop and others like it had relied on students whose major motivation for enrolling was easy access to a darkroom. But since anybody with roughly \$1,000 to spend on digital equipment and software can assemble a photo lab that far surpasses a black-and-white darkroom, those workshops have been left in a lurch, even as their potential student roster expanded.

At the Westchester workshop, officials decided to use the very tools that have cost them students to win over others. Instead of using its darkroom as a selling point, it is teaching students how to go digital.

"We still hold the belief that it's important for a photography student to be in a traditional education environment," said Lisa Mariotti, assistant director of the workshop. "But that means that from a programming point of view, we are forced over the next few years to see things digitally."

And what of those old-school photographers for whom the darkroom has been a second home? "They are home on their computer," she said.

The weeklong digital-photography session held by the workshop, which is run by Westchester Community College out of the County Center in White Plains and a Peekskill satellite, covered all aspects of photography, from lighting on assignment to assembling a professional portfolio. But it also centered on advances in digital photography.

Instead of working in an acrid-smelling darkroom, students heard lectures about photos produced under fluorescent lighting and in front of glowing monitors. Typical of those who attended was Ann Umemoto, 53, who works at the Human Rights Commission in White Plains.

Photo hobbyists like Ms. Umemoto are part of a new demographic made up of people drawn to photography as digital technology has made taking and developing professional-quality prints less expensive.

The technology has other straightforward advantages for introductory-level students, said Ron Amato, who taught at Westchester's workshop. The trial-and-error process of taking countless shots is possible without the expense of developing film. And through programs like Photoshop, all photographers can effectively enter the color darkroom. Across the local art landscape, other students and teachers are, to varying degrees, also embracing the digital age. Sarah Lawrence has a visiting professor of digital arts, Claudia Hart, who teaches an advanced form of digital photography with 3-D animation. In addition to artists, her courses draw biology majors creating undersea scientific illustrations as well as aspiring city planners looking to design buildings. She was quick to point out that though digital imagery makes reproducing photographs easier, it has limits.

"Digital production, for one, can be surprisingly cumbersome," she said. For the advanced projects she does, which go well beyond a Photoshop airbrushing, there are a myriad of programming steps that can be thrown off by a single mistake.

"People have the illusion that you press a button and it's all instant," she said. "But there are a whole new set of problems in digital that are just incredibly different."

Even those who happily shoot digitally have concerns about how the technology affects learning photography. Clint Clemens, the commercial photographer, expressed concern at a recent seminar in Massachusetts that basic elements of photography can be lost with the blind reliance on digital. Many photographers, for example, keep their digital prints warehoused on their computers, he said, missing one essential means of learning and improving: studying your own prints over time as they hang on the wall.

Still, Ms. Umemoto, the photo hobbyist, is ready to move to digital. She took seminars on lighting during the workshop, but found the digital photography class particularly useful.

"And I know it's like the computer in that the technology doesn't do the work for you," she said. "If you put garbage in, you'll get garbage out."

But, she said, "it is time for a dip of my toe in the water."