The Restricted Darkroom

Digital photography training in colleges and universities.

Thoughts on the philosophical and practical considerations in setting up a photographic darkroom in an educational environment. Looking at the anomalies that have crept into the process and infrastructure in (most) institutions. Here I am looking at the difference in approach to the two kinds of darkroom, the 20th century wet based process and the 21st century digital based facility.
The focus is on the barriers that have been imposed to the creative process during the move from analogue to digital.

Stepping back to the 'traditional' (late 20th century) darkroom.
This facility would typically consist of film processing and printing rooms.

The film processing facility would provide the equipment and also a range of suitable chemistry.
The equipment and chemistry would be chosen by the staff working in the department. The students would be encouraged to bring in there own developers and experiment with different ways of using them.

The printing facility would be based around photographic enlargers again chosen by staff from the photographic department. The layout of the facility would be designed by those working in it.
Basic chemistry would usually be provided with students having the ability to bring in alternative chemistry, papers, to coat their own paper or try some of the many alternative printing processes.

This would be a 'hands on' environment where students learn to process their own film, and make their own prints. Essentially following the creative process through from taking the picture to the finished print. Within Health and Safety considerations they would be free to explore any creative approach they wished in an environment created and maintained by the photographic department.

Moving on to current, digital practice it is interesting to compare the differences in the underlying approach and the barriers that have been unnecessarily imposed on creativity.

A typical university or college digital darkroom consists of PCs. Often these PCs will be Apple computers running MacOS, usually Adobe Photoshop is installed. The photographic department will generally have had a say in both the hardware and software provided, but it often the case that this will have also been influenced by the institutions I.T. department. It is usual for the I.T. department to install, set-up and maintain the PCs, and determine access conditions. It is rare that members of the photographic department can install additional software, or make changes to the hardware.

To make an analogy it would be like the engineering department having control over the enlargers in a traditional darkroom because they considered them pieces of mechanical engineering and therefore in their domain. Then telling the photographers how they can and can not use them.

So in terms of creative flexibility, staff and students have zero options over how they use the equipment and zero opportunity to experiment with different software. They can not bring in alternative raw software to 'develop' their raw files and are effectively restricted to working in a closed narrow field with equipment and software which may not even be the choice of the photographic staff. The facility is no longer designed maintained and run by photographers, more often than not it is seen as part of a wider I.T infrastructure.
Students rarely have the opportunity to print their own work.

So how has this come about?

The first reason is that as soon as a computer is involved then it is assumed that it will be an I.T. area of expertise. IT, stands for Information Technology, and in most cases involves word processing, data storage / retrieval and 'number crunching'. **A Digital Darkroom PC is a piece of photographic equipment.** We need a playground free from unnecessary restrictions where we can explore creative possibilities but our (the photographers) facilities are being controlled by people who generally have little or no understanding of our needs.

Sadly the second reason is the general lack of understanding of computer based systems within many photographic departments. This can in some circumstances extent to distrust and fear. Sad because **photographers now need to understand and work with computers in the same way they previously did with enlargers and chemistry**. The result is that often photographic staff are unaware of the possibilities and are therefore at the mercy of the I.T. department.

The third problem lies in the areas of licensing and the legality of allowing staff or students to install software on computers. This is usually the 'trump card' in the I.T departments ability to control all computer based equipment. This area is indeed a minefield, with more litigation taking place in the software world than almost any other.

There is however an easy and free solution to most of these issues.
If within the photographic department there was a greater understanding of the processes involved and the possibilities available, then photographers could wrestle back control and remove many if not all barriers previously imposed. Most colleges and universities only provide restricted licensed software, if they switched to Open Source Software the problem would virtually disappear.

What is the difference between open and closed software? - Simplified:

Licensed software tells you what you can not do with it and how you can and can't use it.

Open Source Software specifically gives you the control over that software.

The choice is between working in a restricted, restricting environment and being free. Art should be about freedom not restriction.

An Open Source Digital Darkroom is free from legal limitations and would allow students or staff to install additional programs. They can then change and adapt them, experiment, learn, and create, free from any restrictions. This would mark return to the ethos of film based era where students take pictures, process them in an unrestricted environment and where they are free to explore and experiment. Add the ability for students to print their own work and you are back to a flexible creative environment now suitable for the 21st century.

Thoughts on openness.
If you were going to paint a picture and you needed to buy paint would you:

A: Get your paint from somewhere that let you use it anyway you want?

Or B: Buy your paint from a company that made sign an agreement to use the paint the way they tell you and stop you thinning it or otherwise changing it in any way and make sure you only paint on their brand of canvass?

If you were setting up a digital darkroom facility.
Would you ..... A or B ?