Life-changing learning or ticking the box?: evaluating engagement with the OU's digital and information literacy framework (0126)

Katharine Reedy
Open University, UK

Abstract

The OU's digital and information literacy framework (Reedy and Goodfellow, 2012) was designed to promote the integration of digital skills into the OU curriculum, supporting strategic priorities to develop student employability and digital citizenship. The framework, being used by creators of OU courses, suggests how learners can demonstrate achievement and progression in a range of skills, and is aligned with institutional approaches to learning design, assessment and accreditation.

However, initial evaluation (Reedy and Goodfellow, 2014) shows that broader cultural change in the digital practices of teachers and learners has been slower to materialise. In this paper I will use the conceptual frameworks of Bruce et al. (2006) and Whitworth (2014) to examine the extent to which the OU's digital literacy interventions have resulted in real change and empowerment for learners. I will also present some of the initiatives under way to engage students as partners, and enable them to own their digital skills and practices.

1000 word summary of paper

This paper asks questions about what constitutes success in 'doing digital literacy' in universities. High-level strategic aspirations often refer to the role of the university in maximising student success and supporting life-changing learning. Open University (OU) priorities include developing student employability and digital citizenship. Institutional strategies may involve the use of frameworks and policies to integrate digital literacy into learning and teaching, and the provision of guidance on how to use specific digital technologies. So far so good, but how are these measures being experienced or enacted on the ground, by learners and teachers? Do institutional frameworks lead to the desired skills, behaviours and attributes, or are other factors more important in the learning journey?

At the OU, digital literacy is endorsed and promoted at the highest levels, and 'informed access' for all UK citizens is being championed through the OU's Chancellor Martha Lane Fox's Dot Everyone campaign. Digital literacy strategy has so far focused primarily on embedding of digital and information literacy skills into the curriculum. Another strategic aim, not yet fully realised, is to increase staff digital capabilities and enable teachers and learners to be confident in their use of digital practices.

In common with many other universities, the OU had been engaging with information literacy as a key skill for academic study. However, with the digital literacy development initiatives of Jisc and others, it became apparent that a different approach was needed, and a framework for digital and information literacy (Reedy and Goodfellow, 2012) was developed. This brings together 'traditional' information literacy (focused on university study) with the broader range of digital skills and practices needed for work and everyday life: communication, collaboration, networking and production of digital 'texts' (Whitworth, 2014). The framework sets out skills and competencies in five broad areas, covering all levels of taught study from pre-university to Masters. The purpose of the framework is to provide a common reference point for module, programme, and qualification teams to use in determining markers of progression in digital literacy that can be integrated with other learning outcomes and student attributes.

The framework has been endorsed by all faculties and is being used in a variety of ways, including mapping digital and information literacy skills to generic employability skills for degree programmes and qualifications (CBI / UUK, 2009). Initial evaluation of engagement with the framework (Reedy and Goodfellow, 2014) suggests that it has been more successful as a tool to facilitate embedding of digital literacy into the curriculum than it has been in achieving widespread cultural change, though one side-effect has been to promote more diverse information-finding practices. Since the OU's DIL framework is rooted in information literacy (IL) concepts and approaches, I have used theoretical frameworks for information literacy education proposed by Bruce et al (2006) and Whitworth (2014) to view the framework through a student lens. These frameworks focus on a relational and learner-centred view of IL, and affirm the importance of context in determining how information (and digital) literacy is communicated and learned: "Peoples' approaches to IL and IL education are informed by the views of teaching, learning and IL which they adopt either implicitly or explicitly in different contexts" (Bruce et al., 2006, p. 1).

Our experience suggests that the framework is a useful starting point for the discussion around digital literacies and skills in specific contexts, facilitating collaboration and a shared language between library and academic staff. In this respect, the framework is successful in connecting theory and policy to real life and 'making it happen'.

However, feedback - gained through informal interviews with a number of academic and library staff who have used the framework - shows that the framework fits better with some disciplines than others. It may also be perceived as a tick-list or separate curriculum in its own right. Viewed through the Six frames of information literacy, the DIL framework can be said to address the 'content', 'competency' and 'learning to learn' frames. However, only in some cases are learners stimulated to ask the questions articulated in the 'personal relevance', 'social impact' and 'relational' frames, that is: 'what good is (D)IL to me?' 'How does (D)IL impact society?' and 'What are the critical ways of seeing (D)IL?'

Criticality is at the heart of digital and information literacy. This is fundamental to empowering learners, and to bringing about real change in attitudes and behaviours. In terms of the curriculum, digitally literate pedagogy demands a paradigm shift in the university's approach to teaching and learning. Rather than positioning students as consumers of content, we must engage them as co-creators and equal partners in the learning experience. The risk in doing this is that learners may question the expert view and authority located in their course materials. However, the dangers of not fostering critical thinking skills about digital information are even greater. Graduates who are going to bring about real change in the world must be confident, fluent and discerning in their use of online information and networks.

If opportunities to reflect on one's own starting point and digital literacy requirements are not built into disciplinary teaching, it seems that students are less likely to make the necessary connections between study and their life beyond the institution in order to transfer what they have learned. Therefore, if digital literacy skills are to be effectively embedded, the learner needs to be actively engaged at the centre of the process, with authentic assessment that enables them to demonstrate their digital literacy skills in meaningful and relevant ways, going beyond essays and exams. To make this kind of creative teaching a reality, staff digital capabilities must be developed beyond basic use of VLE tools, and institutional learning design practices need to facilitate such innovative digital practices.

In OU terms this is being addressed on several fronts. A key way is the involvement of students in developing a new version of the DIL framework. Student consultations show that students value the

research skills they gain through independent learning, recognise the importance of taking a critical approach to online information and people and are keen to shape their digital skills development. Another route is via live online events, which use digital media such as Livestream or Facebook to engage students and staff in real-time conversations about their digital practices and build community. Through these types of interaction, learners are being enabled to make meaning and create new knowledge and staff have the opportunity to learn directly from student experience.

References

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