Jisc Digital Learner Stories

Adriana

This is one of twelve ‘digital learner stories’ collected and published by Jisc as part of its Digital Student project. You can read other stories and follow up the themes from Adriana’s story by visiting the Jisc Digital Student blog: https://digitalstudent.jiscinvolve.org/wp/

Adriana's video

http://bit.ly/2kthoSx

About Adriana

Adriana is 40 years old and is studying German and French on two separate evenings a week with Derby Adult Learning Services. She works full time.

Adriana's digital learning

- Adriana loves using free apps and websites, which she accesses on her mobile phone and tablet. These allow her to:
  - practice her language skills anywhere, anytime
  - be an independent learner who can find her own resources
  - link her personal interests to the language she is learning
  - save money on textbooks and CDs – which don’t suit her learning as well
  - use games and online quizzes to assess her progress as she studies
- Adriana also uses DerbyLearn, the VLE used by Derby Adult Learning Services. Through this site she can:
  - communicate with her classmates and tutor at a time to suit her
  - know that her communications are safe and secure
  - always be ready for class: she doesn’t worry about holding others back
- Adriana’s key message is that online learning can be relaxing and fun – you just have to find the tools and resources that work for you.
Adriana's story

Adriana is enthusiastic and passionate about the use of digital tools to help her learn languages. Adriana studied economics and tourism at college in Poland and settled in the UK permanently 11 years ago, having learned English on her own using books and sometimes CDs. “I have used CD courses which were great, but they were restricted. They cost money and you don’t have everything that you need with them. They are created by one person or group and sometimes there are more ways of showing things than that one way.” The cost of textbooks and English courses made study difficult at that time, and she appreciates the range of materials she now accesses for free, saying, "You don't need to have a lot of money to learn valuable things."

Adriana says that she's "rubbish at technology! I love using it but I am an expert at not making them work. My husband is technical so he is my first source of help. Nowadays, there are many people around who are good with technology and quite a lot of [them] are willing to be helpful. Generally speaking I just ask people.” It doesn't stop her from helping others in her class though. How does she react when she sees people in her class who are struggling with technology? "Most people, even the older generation, I have found they are coping well with technology because they can use Google for their personal needs. If someone is unfamiliar with it, I take my iPad to class and show them what to put into Google or YouTube and how to use that. Most of those things only need intuition really, not technological knowledge."

In addition, Adriana credits digital technology for helping her discover a new interest in history, a subject she didn't like at all at school. Now that she can access a broad range of resources in different media, she finds she looks at past events in a different light. And she has discovered that she can enjoy both independent and collaborative learning, depending on the situation.

Adriana reflects that finding the right device and medium can turn around a person’s experience of learning. She's noticed that “a lot of people give up with languages. They find it stressful, [or] they think they aren't the right type of person to learn a language, but they just need access to more relaxing devices or programmes or ways of learning. If we made learning more fun and made it more like realistic situations... maybe that would be a better way of helping people be aware that they can do things... they can overcome weakness and help themselves simply enjoy what they are learning."

So what devices and online tools does Adriana use to help her learn languages? She has a number of mobile devices she can access, and she uses those to find apps and web sites that appeal to her, even if she has to try several before she finds the right one. "I am now using a tablet to do quizzes and games to verify grammar. I use a Kindle to read e-books and revise my grammar in more relaxed way. It happens that sometimes there are difficult words or phrases, so I can listen to them in a movie or read them in a book and now it stays in my mind. I love watching YouTube, finding movies and interesting programmes, which fit my interests and helps me to revise in a relaxed way." She talks animatedly about how she used Facebook to find and bring together a group of people in her neighbourhood who were also learning French. She now meets up with them face-to-face, about once a month.
A drawback of using so many different apps and services is having to keep track of all her registrations and profiles. She is aware of the need to keep her personal details private, but it isn’t always possible to benefit from a free service without receiving unwanted messages as well. "Sometimes you have to subscribe to a website and then you get spam, so I don’t like that. I am aware of to whom I am giving my data. I don’t like sharing my personal information unless I know who I’m sharing it with."

So Adriana appreciates the privacy and security she feels when she uses the Derby Learning Services’ VLE, DerbyLearn. This gives access to all her course materials and tasks, and lets her communicate with her tutor and other learners securely. She gets an email when someone posts on the chat forum, so she can stay up to date with conversations and get quick answers to a problem, but she can also wait and catch up when she has time.

The convenience of mobile access is something Adriana feels has allowed her to maintain her learning and fit it into a busy schedule. "Every single day I am learning both languages. … I am learning new vocabulary in an old fashioned way with exercise books. But then I am also using the other sources; tablet, Kindle or YouTube every single day. “ With language learning, this kind of continuous practice is the key to making progress. Without her digital tools, Adriana might have been one of those people who feel it is just ‘not for them’.

Key issues

- **Inclusion**: Mobile-optimised learning materials open up access to learners with cheap, entry-level devices. Free online resources are a huge benefit to learners who might otherwise have to buy their own textbooks or CDs.

- **Making time**: Having access to language resources on her personal devices allows Adriana to practice any time she has five minutes to spare.

- **Communication**: For a language learner like Adriana, communication is learning. She uses a wide range of opportunities to practice her language skills – chat, Facebook, and even face-to-face meetings with other language learners she has met online.

- **Mixing formal and informal learning**: Confident digital learners use social media to reach out to other learners and practice what they know. In Adriana’s case, online connections through Facebook have led to real-world contacts.

- **Digital safety and wellbeing**: Learners need to understand how web sites might collect and make use of their personal data. Educators should be clear about the positive benefits, but in the context of ensuring learners understand and protect themselves against the risks.

- **Enjoyment and fun**: With more digital options, learners can find learning opportunities – and other learners – that match their personal interests and motivations. Adriana mixes language broadcasts, online quizzes, audio dictionaries, Google searches and formal grammar practice. Learning is better, as she says, when it is "more fun" and when people “simply enjoy what they are learning.”

- **Rapid feedback**: Some learners really enjoy taking online tests. It helps them to feel secure in their understanding, and they benefit from rapid feedback. There is also less ‘fear of failure’ when a test is administered and marked automatically.
Sound institutional systems: Learners who spend less time on campus or in a live classroom depend more on the virtual learning environment. Features such as chat forums are particularly valuable, for example so learners can ask questions of their tutors and all share in the answers.

Adriana uses the following technology, apps and websites:

- **Facebook**: connecting to people in her area who want to learn French
- **Google**: to search for any aspect of learning that needs improvement
- **DerbyLearn** (Derby Adult Learning Services' virtual learning environment): provides links to class resources and a forum for learners to communicate and support each other
- **YouTube**: to find movies and entertainment in the language being studied, with subtitles and at the right level for her understanding
- **Language online games**: for self-assessment
- **Online dictionaries**: for definitions and pronunciation help