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 Ben’s story by visiting the Jisc Digital Student blog: https://digitalstudent.jiscinvolve.org/wp/

About Ben

Ben, who is 27 years old, is a degree apprentice at Aston University where he is studying for a BSc in Digital and Technology Solutions. He works full time at Capgemini, an IT consultancy and outsourcing company, which has collaborated with Aston University to create this degree pathway.

Ben's digital learning

- Ben is a distance learner with a full-time job and he could not participate on his degree scheme without using digital technology. It allows him to:
  - access online resources and recorded lectures when he travels the world for work
  - keep up to date with assignments
  - communicate with colleagues and tutors through social media, video calls or instant messaging

- Ben depends on the university to provide robust systems of delivery and support for distance learners. He commends the university and the lecturers on his course for:
  - the design of the course, which he thinks is well suited to his needs
  - the lecturers' digital skills, use of the VLE and willingness to communicate in a variety of media
  - a robust video conferencing system that records lectures, as well as a university lecture capture system and a VLE that is regularly updated by lecturing staff
  - focusing in ways that digital technology can be used to support distance learners

- Having access to digital media allows Ben to follow his preference for visual forms of communication. He uses:
  - video sites for visual representations of complex IT theories and systems
  - a mind-mapping app on his digital devices
Ben uses a desktop PC, a laptop, and has even "done work on my phone, believe it or not." His personal devices are key to accessing his course of study, but it is the quality and range of resources provided by the University that underpins his success. "My learning experience," he states, "is led by the digital technology in use by my university." Ben is a particular fan of the VLE: "The front page to my university life is the Blackboard VLE. Without it, I wouldn't have a leg to stand on. ...it's a brilliant bit of software - it works." He finds that the VLE synchronises well with other digital services he uses, and that he only needs internet access to have all his resources at his fingertips.

What personal apps and social media does Ben rely on? Social media such as WhatsApp and communication tools such as Google Hangout and Skype keep him in touch with other learners. Tutors on Ben's course are often willing to be available this way too, though the formal routes are through tutorials on Collaborate that can be booked when they are needed, and an ongoing discussion forum on the VLE.

Ben uses Google Keep, an online note taking application that came already installed on his smartphone. He finds mind mapping a valuable study technique and discovered "this wonderful mobile app which was designed for something else and updated for mind mapping - Draw Express …which was brilliant." In addition, he identifies Slack, a cloud-based collaboration tool, as a versatile solution for some of his university projects. It can pull together information from third-party tools such as Google Drive and Dropbox, and supports video and messaging as well as channels for team planning and conversations.

Working in and studying IT systems dovetails with Ben's preference to learn from visual representations. "Programming is very visual...programming processes can be visualised," he explains, "I get an image around a new topic." For visual learners, looking for specific information as an image and following this to a video is quicker than "trawling through blogs, notes and forums. It's nicer to watch then read lots of text."

It's not surprising that Ben is an avid user of YouTube. "YouTube has been brilliant. If I haven't understood the lecture, then generally someone can explain it to me. ...It's amazing how brilliant it is that people are willing to share for free. And a lot of the time you [can] find your favourites for describing what you need to know." Ben has also discovered UDemy, "an online learning and teaching marketplace...It's like YouTube but they enhance the video content and they wrap a short course around it. I'm doing a course on big data and I hadn't understood it. By the time I finished the uDemy course and did the exercises and videos, I was the master."
For Ben, studying as a work-based learner, digital technologies are “fundamental to my learning experience... I literally wouldn't be able to complete the course without the technology. I was really worried that I wouldn't perform due to my past experiences... But the materials are going in, I'm soaking it up, it's being delivered in a way that I can use it: I think it's the future.” He believes that his company deserves credit for working with Aston University to create the innovative apprenticeship pathway to a degree, and that the university has "nailed it - I don't think it could get much better."

Key issues

- **Making time**: Having access to educational resources on the move or away from campus allows learning to be fitted into a busy life. Recorded lectures are particularly valued by Ben.

- **Communication**: Learners are increasingly sophisticated in their use of multiple channels of digital communication. For example, Ben uses the VLE and closed social media forums for contacting lecturers, image-based messaging (WhatsApp) and Google Hangout with course colleagues, and dedicated collaboration channels for project work. He also runs a personal blog.

- **Enjoyment and fun**: Having a range of digital opportunities means learning can be better tuned to the ways different students like to learn and the different issues they find interesting and inspiring.

- **Making and coding**: Whatever subject they are studying, more and more learners have skills in making and coding. Ben uses these skills to help him to learn by remixing content from lecturers and creating templates for common tasks.

- **Mixing formal and informal learning**: Ben’s use of YouTube and Udemy is typical of many switched-on digital learners. If he finds an aspect of his course difficult to understand, he turns to online learning to help, and where he is ahead he can push himself further.

- **Sound institutional systems**: Some learners make more demands on institutional IT than others. Ben is particularly full of praise for the way his university supports coding, web hosting and sharing technical problems and solutions.

Ben uses the following technology, apps and websites

- **Blackboard VLE**: for access to course resources
- **Blackboard Collaborate**: for live and recorded lectures specifically for his course
- **Lecture capture recordings**: for campus-taught courses
- **WhatsApp**: to share image-based content
- **LinkedIn**: for professional networking
- **YouTube**: for video content
- **Mendeley**: to share references
- **Skype**: keeping in touch with peers and tutors
- **Google Hangout**: keeping in touch with peers and tutors
- **Google Keep**: an online area to put notes, videos and photos that synchronises across personal devices
- **Draw Express**: mind mapping app
- **Slack**: collaborative project management
- **UDemy**: offers a range of online courses taught by experts for no or low cost