Jisc Digital Learner Stories

Jess

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

Jess’ video


About Jess

Jess is in his late 30s and is studying part time for a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) with the Activate Learning group while he works as a lecturer on their Reading campus. He has a BA from the Open University.

Jess' digital learning

• As a part-time learner with a family and a full-time job, Jess is grateful for the role digital technology can play in his learning:
  o he can work flexibly, allowing him to fit his studies in with family time
  o he can study anywhere, including at home and at work
  o rather than having to carry files around with him for both his lecturing job and his PGCE studies, he can access all his resources for study and work on his personal devices
• Having been involved in education for many years, Jess finds the current range of digital tools and resources amazing. He highlights:
  o Collaborate, a webinar platform used by The Open University, which supports conversations around learning materials
  o direct access to library resources including journal articles and academic papers, which allows him to carry out original research without leaving his home
materials that are optimised for access on a range of devices, allowing him to use his iPad, iPhone or laptop as he chooses, and to synchronise his learning across all three

- online textbooks and tutorials that include reflective questions, providing immediate feedback and encouraging a reflective, analytical approach

Jess’ key message is that well-designed online learning materials have made it possible for him to continue learning despite the constraints of work and family

Jess’ story

Jess likes technology. He can track his digital journey from a childhood Commodore 64 computer through to his current life as an adult learner with his iPad and iPhone always to hand. At school and during a brief period at a bricks-and-mortar university he was not encouraged to use this interest in computers to support his learning. “The computers were 'off limits' and people were terrified of something happening to them. There was always a specific time for accessing them and it was always under supervision. There wasn't any flexibility about it.” Now, flexibility is key to Jess’ study practice.

After completing a BA as an adult distance learner, he enrolled on a PGCE course with his employer, the Activate Learning group, finding in both cases that digital technology "made learning a lot easier for me". Without digital access his learning choices would have been much more limited.

For example, at the start of his Open University BA course Jess was using textbooks and paper-based materials but in the second year delivery moved online. He found this new style of learning “fantastic... The variety of materials allowed me to be even more flexible - podcasts for walking to work, short videos for bus and train journeys and texts for sitting on the sofa. All the materials were customised for tablets or PCs, and textbooks were replicated online so I could read them on my phone if I didn't want to lug the books around.” The university, he says, 'were absolutely amazing in making all the resources available in different formats... I was working full time with two small kids and it was tricky to fit much in. They'd send a CD with podcasts, books with primary resources and photos. You could put anything on a device that you could fit in your pocket. You could be waiting for a bus and you could be listening to something... I didn't have to set aside a couple of hours at home in the evening when I was tired. I could dip in anytime.’

The Open University also uses Blackboard Collaborate, which Jess found ‘amazing’. It was the first time he had seen live video used online, and he particularly enjoyed being part of the lecture experience with other learners and "having a peer chat afterwards."

Now studying part-time for a PGCE, Jess continues to enjoy the benefits of digital technology – and now he can apply the experience to his work as a teacher too. On the Activate Learning Reading campus, all lecturers are given a personal iPad for use in the classroom. Jess has found himself trying out the same apps that he uses for his PGCE course. For example he has seen Google Community working well in the first year of the teacher training course as a virtual learning environment and can compare it with the new Activate Learning Online platform now being rolled out. He is also sympathetic to the view that learners can benefit from having their own devices in class, recognising that in his own case “being able to use tools that I'm familiar with is helpful.”
Jess particularly loves using organisational tools on his devices because he struggles with "mounds of paper. I like technology because it organises things for me very clearly. To have a folder system on a computer is beautiful. I'm organised online but my desk is a mess."

Jess had a mixed experience of using Facebook as a medium for study. His course group on the Open University BA "had a little [FB] group so we could message. I was keen but ... it wasn't really for me. It is really designed to be social. Rather than feeling like it was a productive space, we used it to complain about deadlines and resources, and not so much for learning." On his PGCE course he is encouraged to use Twitter, but again he finds that "I don't use it. I know that it's used well by a lot of students to share articles and things like that. I just don't think of going to Twitter to learn." His lack of motivation may be linked to the fact that his PGCE peers work in the same building, and it's easier for them to text or phone or simply meet up with each other than to go online when they need support.

Jess likes a balanced approach to learning with others. Collaborative learning brings motivation and new ideas, while independent study time is when he can really concentrate on his own research. That is when "the independent use of technology starts to flourish for me." And while he likes using the physical library, saying, "the people are so helpful and it's a nice space," having online access to the same research materials is a time-saver. He particularly likes using educational databases to find articles and papers. "I'm using research papers online because... I've found that textbooks might be quite broad, but research papers are much more focussed in what they are trying to say. You can drill down a lot deeper into whatever you're doing. You can read across a wider range of research than you would find in a book."

Jess also considers that the structure of e-learning materials on the Open University BA course encouraged good learning habits. "In the first year, you read your textbook and there would be puzzles in the textbook. When they put that online, you could write a small reflective note. You were more inclined to do the puzzle, and then that made me a better reflector. It made me analyse my own thinking more. I liked that. It really did help me."

Technology is fun for Jess, who is adaptable and quickly picks up new things. He recognises the 'culture shift' that has taken place over his learning lifetime. For example, he no longer 'has to go through so many steps' with technology, or use his skills as a 'good trouble shooter': rather he finds that devices and software have become user friendly, robust and well designed. But as an adult with his own children now, he is clear about the most important benefit. "Because of [technology] I feel I have more time with the kids, I don't have to pack them off because I can be flexible with learning. I can have a work-life balance, and that's important to me as a learner."

Key issues

- **Taking the tablet:** Tablets are widely loved by the learners who use them. They are lightweight, cheaper than laptops, with touch screen functionality and easy-to-use apps. Their inbuilt cameras can be used to record and share learning activities, and they are well suited to photo-based social media. They can also be helpful to learners with dexterity issues.

- **Inclusion:** Online learning can be a cheaper option, especially if the flexibility allows learners to continue working and earning. Older learners may feel that it is also a more 'grown up' option, giving them independence and self-reliance and allowing them to continue meeting their other responsibilities.
Work/life/learning balance: Digital learning, if it is well managed, can allow learners more time to spend with family, friends and personal interests than if they had to attend a physical campus.

Making time: A variety of resource types – accessible on different devices – mean learners can fit different kinds of learning into their day.

Library love: Helpful staff and pleasant physical spaces for study are just as important to learners as the online resources and textbooks they can access at the library.

Communication and collaboration: Experienced digital learners often prefer to use different media to support different interactions. A Facebook group might help students support each other, but a dedicated collaboration environment might be more productive for actual group work. The VLE and Google Groups have different facilities for sharing resources and building community.

Digital reading and writing: Digital text is more portable, flexible and (for contemporary learners) usable than its print equivalent. Most learners rely on being able to access, copy, bookmark, index and search, and endlessly re-use text in digital formats.

Feedback and reflection: The way that digital resources can incorporate quizzes, questions and self-reflective prompts can help learners to become more reflective and to change their learning habits.

Jess uses the following technology, apps and websites

- **Blackboard Collaborate**: Web conferencing tool used by The Open University for lectures and tutorials. They can also be recorded and reviewed later.
- **Activate Learning VLE**: used to store and share resources during the PGCE course
- **Facebook**: a group page set up for collaborating with other Open University students
- **Google**: Community, Classroom and Documents have been used by Activate Learning to encourage collaboration and sharing of resources
- **Video and Podcasts**: to keep up with his course whenever he finds himself with some spare time, no matter where he is
- **iPad, iPhone and laptop**: devices which synchronise information and allow him to be flexible in how he accesses learning