Jisc Digital Learner Stories

Melissa

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

Melissa's video

http://bit.ly/2kQuHXA

About Melissa

Melissa is 25. She completed a BTEC in Sport, Coaching and Fitness at a further education college in 2010. After going on to study a BA in Event Management at the University of Lincoln, she is now a post-graduate student on the MA in Events Management course at the same University. In the final year of her undergraduate course Melissa was a Digital Student Ambassador.

Melissa's digital learning

- Access to wifi and digital tools - almost everywhere she goes - has made a positive difference to Melissa's learning. It allows her to:
  - use a wide range of social media for learning, enhancing her engagement and her future prospects
  - enjoy her hobbies – which also relate to her professional interests
  - be a more independent learner
  - use collaborative tools to work with others at her own time and pace
  - be more efficient in her studies and assignment writing – because she can locate exactly what she needs, when she needs it.

Melissa uses Blackboard, Lincoln’s chosen VLE, and appreciates the ease of access to lecture notes, assignment details and shared files. She recognises, though, that it could be used more interactively.
The University is active in promoting digital capabilities, and Melissa appreciates the advantage this gives her in future interviews and employment.

Melissa's key message is that digital technology has made a real difference by giving her direct access to her academic work, and helping her develop her professional networks.

**Melissa's story**

When Melissa started her FE career in 2008, "technology was just kicking off... it hadn't been adopted into teaching methods at that time." There was limited access to wifi, few computers and the VLE was not widely used. Learners were not encouraged to bring their own devices or use social media. But things had changed by the time Melissa began her BA in 2013. As she says, "I've changed with the technology... and I've noticed a real difference. The more I engaged, the better grades I was coming out with."

Being able to communicate easily with tutors, with others on her course and with professionals in the field of event management has really helped Melissa to feel involved with her course. The subject matter was enhanced by connecting it with the professional practices and ideas she met through social media, especially on Twitter. She started "thinking very consciously about technology and learning... Specifically for what I do, the stuff that gets taught is mostly theory based; understanding business and social trends. But going on Twitter you connect with people [who] are in the know... [what] gets shared around is very practical, and people are out there to help each other."

Along with Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, Melissa has no less than three Twitter accounts that she uses for professional purposes. "I have a personal/professional one where I can talk with industry people and I have loads of lecturers on it... they are all really supportive and helpful." She also hears about industry developments through Twitter, and gets ideas for using digital apps such as Instagram and Snapchat. Melissa is now an advocate for using one app in particular to keep in touch with her course. "WhatsApp is useful for studying. Our programme leader and lecturer are on it. It's good for event planning [and] we can have a laugh as well."

Melissa identifies herself primarily as an independent learner who likes "finding things out by myself." She does enjoy learning with others "as long as people stay on task," and having benefitted so much from her own digital engagement, in her third year she applied to join the university's Digital Ambassador team and give some of her know-how back. "It's balanced - people help me and I help them. ...As an ambassador, it is natural to help others."

Melissa's use of the university library also highlights how her digital access supports her learning. "The Library has stacks of books and computers around the room... The journals are not too far away and there are archives available... [But] as a physical space, I was never able to be productive in the library. That's why I like the digital aspect of things." Access to digital resources--including those archives, which are rapidly becoming available online--has not reduced her appreciation of the role of library staff. "They are so adaptive to student needs. If you need something from another library, they will try hard to get it for you. This fits student needs. All you have to do is ask. I love that about our library. Things are not limited anymore."

Having decided to do a master's degree to increase her career prospects, Melissa is aware that digital tools don't just make learning accessible and 'a lot more fun'. Lincoln is a university that "stresses digital [skills and] profiling"
as a graduate attribute. She is clear that "The use of digital technology tools can set you apart from others. It's about time and training. The more prepared you are at university, and the more you know, the more you stand out at interviews and employment."

Digital tools and skills have made all the difference to Melissa's education. She "started thinking very consciously about technology and learning" when she realised the role it had played, and is now not only enjoying her own studies but giving other students a helping hand. "I always have my ear out for something useful.... It just makes life so much easier. I love it!"

Key issues

- **Inclusion**: Free web sites and apps allow anyone to get learning. Learners can choose the device they use and the style of delivery that suits them best (visual, sound, text, games, self-assessment, repetition).
- **Making time**: Having access to educational resources while on the move means that learning can be fitted into busy lives.
- **Communication**: Melissa makes sophisticated use of digital media with a range of platforms, profiles and identities she can turn to different purposes.
- **Sound institutional systems**: Learners value a dedicated space where they can have access to assignments, chats, and resources easily.
- **Library love**: Extensive and authentic digital resources, expert staff, and the physical spaces of the library for working are all important to digital learners.
- **Independence**: Many learners value the way that digital access gives them more independence. They can find the resources they need, organise their own time on task and focus on the issues they find most interesting.
- **Supporting others**: Digital mentors really benefit other students, but they are also developing their own digital practices and softer skills such as empathy and communication, and the ability to lead and advocate.
- **Skills for work**: Melissa is already engaging with professionals in her chosen field via digital media, and developing digital skills she knows will transfer directly from her course to her professional life.

Melissa uses the following technology, apps and websites

- **Twitter**: to connect with event management professionals and her course tutors, and to track developments in the use of technology in her chosen profession.
- **Instagram**: as an event management and digital marketing tool.
- **Blackboard VLE**: for links to course resources.
- **Snapchat**: as a digital marketing tool (but hampered by poor engagement and impact analysis).
- **Facebook**: for personal use
- **WhatsApp**: for study conversations and contact with tutors
- **LinkedIn**: for career information and to curate a professional identity online
- **Google**: search for the answer to a technical or professional problem - people are often happy to share what they know