Jisc Digital Learner Stories

Pepieter

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

Pepieter's video


About Pepieter

Pepieter is in her early 20's. After completing a Level 3 Media course in a further education college, she is now in year 2 of a Media Production BA at the University of Bournemouth. She has an assessment for dyslexia and dyscalculia and receives a Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA).

Pepieter's digital learning

- Pepieter uses a range of devices and software to support her development as an independent learner. They include:
  - a laptop for all her work
  - an iPad which allows her to write while on the move, take photos for her social media sites, and record her thoughts
  - a dictaphone with linking software, supplied as part of her DSA, which she uses to record lecturers and organise her notes
  - a range of DSA-provided software that ‘levels the playing field’ for dyslexic learners, including mind-mapping software, speech-to-text and text-to-speech applications

- Pepieter is an enthusiastic user of social media and utilizes various types to:
  - get inspiration and generate ideas
  - talk about her projects with like-minded people
  - network with art activists
Pepieter's key message is that educational institutions have a responsibility to provide a safe environment for learners to develop their digital skills and be supported by tutors who model and share good online practice.

Pepieter's story

Before Pepieter started her college course she had a computer at home but Facebook was the only web service she used regularly. She had struggled at school and felt that the education system didn't work for her. That changed when she enrolled at college. Pepieter thinks "that was because of the technology and social media that was available." Having found herself in what she calls a 'safe' environment, Pepieter was able to build her confidence. Her course included an introduction to social media and digital tools, where tutors took the time to show how they could be used safely, professionally, and for learning. Twitter was used for classroom debates and "We used Tumblr quite a bit. We would display our production process via Tumblr... We also used Trello a couple of times to help...to keep track of...project[s] in a visual way. Vines was used as well, when we [were] trying to create short, snappy videos to get our point across in a visual and succinct way." When she got her own laptop in her second year, she says "I was able to Google if I didn't understand things [and] became more independent... Having more devices helped me become a more independent learner."

Now in her second year of a BA course, Pepieter credits her laptop, iPad and dictaphone for enabling her keep up with her course, and her growing expertise with social media for linking her to work experience opportunities. Her dyslexia assessment entitled her to a range of assistive software including mind-mapping, voice recognition and text-to-speech programmes, which she says "has saved me on many levels. My grades have improved because of it." Initially she found it a problem to understand academic language and conform to academic requirements. She took herself to the web to study how concepts on her course were expressed in YouTube videos and blog posts. "Going to blogs or a YouTube video explains the text in my kind of language", she says. She also found blog posts helpful for understanding how to structure an essay.

Pepieter now uses social media "to create a portfolio...and a network of people in my area." She has a professional Twitter account and Facebook page as well as a Tumblr blog, and uses Instagram to share photos "of what I do every day. I try to use a range of social media to apply for work experience, to have documented experience to display to future employers...and to network and keep in contact with my peers." Currently she is using Minds, a network for art activists, Pinterest "to generate different ideas" and the selling network "Etsy as a social media site to contact jewellery designers, to talk about projects and art."

Pepieter recognises visual learning as one of her strengths and uses an app called PocketLife which she says, "rules my life. I can colour code things and see when I'm free and when I'm not and piece together a life schedule." She also appreciates the visual learning available on YouTube, which she uses to research different social media, to learn new digital tools, to watch subject-related documentaries and to improve her violin playing. Pepieter defines herself as an independent learner. "I prefer learning by myself because I don't feel that I have people looking
over my shoulder. I would feel intimidated asking someone to show it to me again... A YouTube video you can watch again and again and it's usually done by people my own age."

Pepieter's reservations about technology are minor ones. She finds the university's VLE 'very clunky' and misses the contact she had with tutors at college through a private Facebook group. She is sympathetic to lecturers at university using email, as she understands that "social media can be scary for lecturers." But she does regret that other students have not all had the opportunity to learn social media skills in the ways that she did. She finds that "sometimes I [am] watching my peers having Facebook chats with each other... and wondering if we are losing face-to-face contact. There is a lot of bitchiness - just because it's behind a screen they feel safe in being unreasonable. Have those students been given the right tools to handle those situations?(...) If they were given those tools then it wouldn't happen."

Pepieter believes that digital technology has given her what she requires for the future. She is certain that using social media has made her more open to new ideas, to different ways of doing things, and to working with a wider range of people. Digital tools help her solve problems, including challenges with learning, and she now feels that she can always find someone to "help ... in a certain situation, ...who can give you new ideas, [and] who can help you overcome an obstacle." It has taken away previous barriers by showing her that "there's another way of learning something; there are other resources if the first resource doesn't work out." Pepieter's conclusion? "I think a future with social media and digital technology will be very interesting ... and will keep me in touch with my learner self. I'm very grateful to be living in this time and age that I am now."

Key issues

- **Making time:** Having access to educational resources while on the move means that learning can be fitted into busy lives. Pepieter has also found that project management apps and sharing services make group work more efficient.

- **Communication:** Digital tools allow learners to stay in touch with classmates and tutors, and to find other people with a common interest, e.g. on social media.

- **Digital safety and wellbeing:** It is important to have the safe, respectful use of digital media modelled by tutors and regularly reinforced. Pepieter feels that learners need a safe digital environment in which they can build confidence.

- **Inclusion:** Ensuring that learners with disabilities and health issues have the digital tools they need not only enables them to meet their potential; it also introduces different approaches that can benefit other students too.

- **Low-cost learning:** Free web sites and apps allow anyone to get learning. Students on a low budget need to be guided to free or low-cost alternatives to some of devices and software they might use on their course.

- **Tutors as digital models and mentors:** While learners are often seen as the digital 'generation', many digital practices are in fact introduced by tutors. This is especially true of professional and academic uses of digital media.
• **Supporting digital difference**: Teaching staff need training and development not just in the use of digital tools for learning generally, but in the range of learning needs that can be supported with digital and assistive technologies.

• **Revision and review**: Learners value the opportunities digital media give them to go over material again, in their own time, or to view it in different formats and to make sense of it in their own way.

## Pepieter uses the following technology, apps and websites

- **Twitter**: a professional account for networking
- **Instagram**: records photos for her social media portfolio
- **VLE**: course resources
- **Facebook group**: communication between staff and students at college
- **YouTube**: visual learning
- **SoundNote**: organise note taken with a dictaphone during lectures
- **Dictaphone**: records lectures and personal study notes
- **iPad**: essay writing, studying while travelling, recording thoughts
- **Tumblr**: blog used in college to display professional work
- **Trello**: organisational tool
- **Minds**: social media site which she uses to connect with other artists
- **Pinterest**: social media site for inspiration
- **Etsy**: used by Pepieter as a social network
- **PocketLife**: app with visual appeal for personal organisation
- **Inspiration** mind mapping software: which she credits with improving her grades
- **Read and Write**: text to speech software with dyslexia friendly spell check and homophone checker
- **Voice recognition software**: now available on most smartphones, tablets and laptops
- **SlideShare**: Pepieter uses this along with YouTube to help her understand course related vocabulary
- **WordPress**: A WordPress blog houses her notes and keeps her organised