Jisc Digital Learner Stories

Ray

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

Ray’s video


About Ray

Ray is 44 and a former history teacher. He lives in Australia and studies online with Oxford University’s Department for Continuing Education. After completing a number of modules with OUDCE, including a mandatory Study Skills module, he is now enrolled on the Certificate of Higher Education. Ray is quadriplegic and has limited use of his hands. He uses a stylus to navigate on his devices.

Ray’s digital learning

- Ray is an advocate of online learning. It allows him to:
  - find courses that suit his interests, regardless of course location or time zone
  - interact and participate in discussions
  - use a range of online resources that allow for a variety of ways of learning
- The choice of digital devices is important to Ray. His iPad and iPhone make it:
  - easy for him to work independently with a stylus
  - straightforward to work across tasks and devices: each device supports access to the internet, note taking, video and audio, and engagement with social media
  - the same devices function as learning tools and for entertainment, which Ray finds useful
- Ray’s key message is that digital technologies break down barriers and allow him to access learning independently.
Ray's story

Ray has always been interested in computers and the internet and is confident "with the basic technology and using a device." When he was teaching history, technology was not much used in classrooms, but he remembers that "as a teacher you have to give lots of variations - visual and audio. There are lots of different ways of learning. There are lots of different ways to teach." Now, as a learner himself, he is able to benefit from even more variety, and choose online learning as the option that works for him.

As a learner, Ray says, "I like people's different ideas, but I am more of an independent learner... I'll search anywhere when I'm given a new subject. I like YouTube, e-books, documentaries. I am all types of learner, visual and everything, not just one way." Online learning suits Ray as "a repetitive learner...I keep doing things and keep going over things. It helps me understand."

With his teacher's eye, Ray is acutely aware that not all online information is reliable: "When you have books, you know it's reliable. [Online] you have to make sure you're viewing a proper site." While studying with OUDCE, Ray has access to the Oxford library and its digital books. This enables him to study, research and prepare essays, knowing his resources are credible and trustworthy. Digital books enable him to work independently too. "I use Notes on the iPad by copying and pasting and putting it in there. If the textbooks are on an e-book, I can copy and paste. If they are in a physical book, I have to wreck the book. My mum has to rip out the pages and prepare them for me digitally." He also says that he is "good at organising my notes digitally" if they are in a format that allows for this.

Ray is quadriplegic, with limited use of his hands, so his choice of digital tools is critical to his learning success. Ray used to do everything on the phone, but he is now enthusiastic about his iPad and identifies it as the most important digital resource he has. "I was a bit reluctant to get one but once I did, there was no looking back. The iPad, that's it, that's what I need... I don't use a laptop now because the iPad completely replaces it." A Nokia phone provided him with a platform to learn more about how he could use technology. "I wrote a screenplay, typing [it] out in notes... It was laborious because I had to transfer it and then format it on the computer. That helped me with technology. It was fun. I wasn't speaking, I punched it out letter by letter."

Another digital resource for Ray is the 'Common Room', an OUDCE online area that he describes as "a Facebook type area where you can keep in touch with people who have done courses before, and while you’re on the course. After you have finished a course, you can use it as well." Tutors also use the Common Room to connect with learners. Ray has done a few courses with online lectures and chat, but the time difference can make it difficult for him to attend. "Sometimes the lecturer would adjust the times and sometimes there was a recorded transcript." However, all Ray's courses allow him to ask the tutor questions, which he says other students will often answer too, giving him many of the benefits of being in a live lecture.

Like other learners in this series of stories, Ray frequently uses YouTube for informal learning. He agrees that having YouTube on his iPad makes it easy to access a range of videos; from entertainment to documentaries. He is also "a big Twitter fan. I read comments and send comments. Sometimes I follow historical facts of the day on Twitter. I may learn something from that." His awareness of the need to know whether online information is reliable extends to his use of Twitter for education. He comments in the short linked podcast that he could see it
as a tool for education in the future if there was more regulation, but at the moment, "You can't really be sure what to trust."

In the future, Ray is looking forward to using virtual reality technology for learning and for entertainment. His brief experience of using a VR headset enabled him to ‘look around’, and a glimpse at a VR computer game ‘was really amazing’. For now, though, he is happy that his iPad, stylus and internet connection give him such uncomplicated access to online education. He has found a range of resources that suits his learning needs, and communication tools that take down the barriers of physical space and time.

Key issues

- **Inclusion**: Digital technologies allow access to learning with fewer barriers for those with physical or sensory restrictions. Learners can choose the device they use, the interface, and the media. Course materials and modes of assessment need to be accessible for all.

- **Communication**: Digital tools allow learners to stay in touch with classmates and tutors, and to find other people with a common interest around the world.

- **Independence**: Ray particularly values being able to study at the time, place and pace he chooses, and the freedom to select the topics that interest him the most.

- **Taking the tablet**: Having a lightweight tablet that does everything he needs has changed Ray’s relationship with technology and with learning. It is easily portable, interfaces well with other devices, and can be used for everything from listening to podcasts to watching videos and writing plays. Most tablets have built-in accessibility features.

- **Digital safety and wellbeing**: Learners need to understand that online information may be unreliable, and to know how to identify more reliable sources such as trusted news feeds, educational web sites and blogs.

Ray uses the following technology, apps and websites

- **Twitter**: mainly social but following some subject related tweets and current events

- **Oxford University’s Department for Continuing Education**: access to a virtual learning area where there is access to course materials and communication with other learners, past and present

- **Google**: a good place to start searches for new subjects

- **YouTube**: entertainment and documentaries which are easy to access on his iPad and iPhone

- **iPad and iPhone with a mouth stylus**: which enables him to easily navigate the screens