Jisc Digital Learner Stories

Sky

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

Sky's video


About Sky

Sky is 19 and is on a 2 year NVQ Creative Digital Media Apprenticeship course at Basingstoke College of Technology (BCOT). She previously completed one year of a Media BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma, also at BCOT.

Sky's digital learning

- Sky appreciates the college systems that support her as a learner. These include:
  - staff who provide a 'safe' environment to learn digital skills and who model good online behaviour
  - open access classrooms with computers to practice new skills without pressure
  - laptop loans through the library which allow laptops to be taken out for a week at a time, and renewed
- Sky is excited about the way social media can:
  - be used in the classroom to give a voice to learners who don't normally speak out
  - be used as a learning platform for the more independent learner
  - open the door to communities and networks for exploring personal interests
  - be used creatively
  - open up opportunities
Sky's story

Sky does not conform to the prevailing view of young people as ‘digital natives’. Until she enrolled on a college course, she had only used a smartphone to access the internet and had never downloaded her own apps. Without a computer to learn on at home, she began her course in Level 3 Media by learning to use an Apple Mac for the first time. Some of her peers found this ‘shocking’, while she found the experience ‘terrifying’. But Sky had chosen a course where the lecturers were helpful and answered her questions quickly via social media. The college also had an open door policy on classrooms equipped with Macs, and a laptop loan system through the library. Sky took advantage of both, so she could practice using the software in college and continue to build her familiarity at home. Overall she felt "well-supported in learning the software" she needed for her course.

Sky had used Facebook with friends before joining the Media course, but it was the way that her tutors used social media that really opened her eyes to its potential and set her on the path to becoming a Creative Digital Media Apprentice. Learners were encouraged to create LinkedIn profiles and professional Facebook and Twitter accounts, which tutors used in preference to email for keeping in touch. A closed Facebook group was also created to share course information and resources, and this showed her that Facebook could be used “in a more productive way.”

Although Sky didn't like Twitter when she was first introduced to it, she found that she was better able to join in class discussions when they took place on Twitter. She explains that, “because I was an anxious student, I wouldn't have been the sort of person who stood up and spoke out and joined in debates. By using those tools, I could have those debates and join in the discussions and they helped my confidence.” In her role as a Creative Digital Media Apprentice, Sky now teaches staff how to use social media, and continues to build her know-how and enthusiasm for it. “Twitter opens up opportunities. It is so easy to connect with so many people: it's an open and sharing community. It feels quite supportive. I find that really very exciting.” Digital communication is now a “key element to my job, and researching [for my] course work, and things I'm curious about.”

Sky says that she "was always curious. Possibly too curious, some of my teachers might have said." She is creative and has "always been an independent learner. I don't like just being told something and accepting it; I want to know why and how." This led to some problems in primary and secondary school because "I wouldn't focus on areas which didn't interest me as much." Finding herself at college changed things for the better because, as she says, "once you reach college you can focus around things you are interested in." Access to digital technology has helped Sky to exploit her curiosity, her creativity, and her visual bias in learning. She studies modules on graphic design, photography and video work, and she uses her personal technologies to extend her learning into working and leisure time. She can now follow her own interests and express her creativity online. She says, "I like to be able to go through the creative process. I use technology a lot [to] look for inspiration."

As an apprentice, Sky studies one day a week so "there is a lot we have to do remotely. I do stuff on the bus back from work and the train, using the wifi, when travelling. It fits around my life." For example she uses her phone "to snap a picture of a checklist of things that I need for an assignment” and takes notes “via a Google doc rather than
writing it down on a piece of paper that I am going to lose." The college has recently moved from Moodle to Google Classrooms as the place where assignments and activities are located. Other Google tools are proving useful as well: "Google Hangouts is the main thing we use to communicate within our team. Our Gmail accounts are integrated with that."

Sky knows her journey in education, while 'quite interesting', hasn't been a standard one. "I struggled in a standard, old fashioned classroom," she says, "and digital has been a lot of what helped me get to where I am. Being able to use digital tools, being able to work independently using digital tools, sort of helped me to stay on track."

Now as a Creative Digital Apprentice at BCOT, she is supporting and encouraging teaching staff by offering her digital skills and explaining her digital experiences as a learner. In this environment, being curious and creative are useful traits, and she is a valued member of the digital team. When she thinks about the future, Sky sees her apprenticeship as setting her up for a variety of career paths. "My role and job title are new, it's never existed before - there wasn't ever training as a learning technology apprentice because it didn't exist. What I'm focusing on is developing my digital skills because they will be relevant to any future job and environment. Digital technology will play a part in my future, but it's more about learning the skills because they are quite transferable in whatever direction I choose to go."

Key issues

- **Making time:** Having access to educational resources on the move means that learning can be fitted into busy lives, especially when learners are juggling work alongside their studies.

- **Communication:** Learners enjoy a range of communication tools and use them more effectively when they have a broader repertoire. Image-based chat, video sharing, social media, closed collaboration spaces, text and email all have their role to play.

- **Collaboration:** Working on projects collaboratively online is easier and removes physical and time constraints.

- **Inclusion:** Offering different ways to participate is helpful to learners who are less confident speaking up in large classes. Digital spaces allow more time to reflect and observe. Learners have more choice over the pace and style of interaction.

- **Tutors as digital mentors and models:** Learners really benefit from tutors who model and expect professional behaviour in digital networks. Not only do they learn by example, they can begin to make real connections in their chosen profession. Students say they look to tutors for help in setting up professional accounts and profiles.

- **Independence:** Some learners who have had negative experiences of classroom and cohort learning can flourish with the relative independence of learning online.

- **Enjoyable and fun:** If learners are allowed to use their digital skills to express their ideas, they are more motivated and inspired to learn. Having a range of digital media available means that learning can be better tuned to individual preferences too.
- **Sound institutional systems**: Not all learners have access to their own digital technology or positive experiences of using it for learning. Open classrooms and laptop loans help all learners to experience the benefits of digital learning, and allow less confident learners to practice in their own time.

- **Wrap-around ICT support**: Friendly, non-judgemental support is critical if learners are to feel confident about identifying their needs. Ideally it will be integrated, for example in open classroom settings, so learners can ask for help as the need arises.

- **Opening up**: Twitter, blogs and other public digital spaces encourage learners to look for ideas beyond their cohort or their friendship group. Sky was impressed with the way Twitter allowed her to "connect with so many people. It’s so open, it’s an open and sharing community."

### Sky uses the following technology, apps and websites

- **Twitter**: Sky uses this professionally to follow communities of interest and to network
- **Pinterest**: Sky uses this for inspiration, especially while studying graphics and photography
- **Moodle VLE**: used on Sky’s first Media course
- **Facebook group**: created to share information about the course with learners and tutors
- **LinkedIn**: created professional profiles as part of the Media course
- **Google**: Google + (access to communities of interest), Google Hangouts, Google Drive (Documents), Google Classroom – a Classroom for each unit on the apprenticeship course to collate resources
- **YouTube**: listening to music while working
- **Kahoot**: quiz games used as part of her Media course
- **Smartphone**: first tool that allowed her to access the internet wherever she was and to work while travelling