Jisc Digital Learner Stories

Victoria

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

Victoria’s video


About Victoria

Victoria is a 20-year-old first-year student at the University of Southampton. She has completed a Foundation Art course and is currently doing a BA in Fashion and Marketing. Victoria receives DSA (Disabled Students’ Allowance) after being assessed for dyslexia and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Victoria’s digital learning

- Victoria only recently began using digital technology for learning. Thanks to her DSA funding she now has her own laptop and printer and she is able to see a dyslexia specialist tutor regularly in the university’s Enabling Services centre. She emphasises two positive features of her digital learning:
  - having her Apple Mac laptop with her wherever she goes, whether she is taking notes in lectures or keeping up with assignments while she travels
  - using the dyslexia-friendly tools that come with the Apple Mac operating system, such as the text-to-speech facility
- Victoria appreciates having online access to the university’s virtual learning environment (VLE), where all her course information, lecture notes and learning resources are held. Having these materials clearly organised can be particularly helpful for learners with dyslexia and ADHD.
- Victoria also makes good use of the library. Clear instructions for using the catalogue, online subscriptions, and support for searching academic books and journals, all help to make the research process more straightforward.
Victoria doesn’t use mind-mapping software but on her course she makes use of Adobe InDesign, which allows her to create mood boards and to gather together design ideas and resources.

Victoria finds digital media valuable for communicating with her tutors, other students on her course and the wider world of fashion. As she is studying a graphical subject, image sharing is particularly useful.

- social media such as WhatsApp keep her in touch with her course colleagues
- email is the preferred way to communicate with her tutors
- there is a Facebook page for her year and an Instagram account for the whole three-year Fashion and Marketing course

Victoria’s key message is that in the short time that she has been using digital tools, she feels more open-minded about trying different techniques to improve the way she learns.

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Victoria's story

Victoria’s first assessment for dyslexia was in year 6 but she had no recommendations for the use of digital tools at that time. Happily, the offer of a place at university triggered a specialist review. At the evaluation session, a dyslexia technology specialist took Victoria through a range of devices and software. They decided that an Apple Mac laptop with a built in text-to-speech facility, a printer, and a LiveScribe digital pen would make a good starting point. Until then Victoria had owned only a mobile phone that she used to share social media with friends, and she reflects that she really “didn’t like technology.”

Victoria is animated when she talks about how her laptop has made basic tasks easier. Having the laptop with her in class, while travelling, in the library and in her hall of residence means she can take notes at any time, record ideas, work on assignments, or check into the VLE. “I use it all the time!” She has discovered the benefits of good wifi coverage across all the university's campuses. Three months into her course, she has begun to explore the laptop's text-to-speech facility for proofreading her writing and is using the calendar to help with time management, as "I'm not the most organised of people."

Victoria benefits from a fast typing speed and has found that typing rather than writing longhand "saves me time. If I was writing my notes, I'd be too slow and not able to keep up with the lecture." She identifies herself as a kinaesthetic learner who gains understanding by writing and re-writing. She doesn't use voice recognition software: “I find writing myself easier because I remember it more. If I just say something, I'll forget it.” But she does use text-to-speech to help her review what she has written. Finding the right digital tools for an individual is important, and now that Victoria has established a relationship with the university’s Enabling Services she will be able to continuously review her use of digital tools and get further support if she needs it.

Before studying at Southampton, Victoria only used social media on her phone and with friends. Now she sees the value of connecting with other students through the course Facebook group, where students help each other to answer questions and get motivated for assignments. Social media play a central role in both Fashion and Marketing, and the course tutor has encouraged them to begin developing a public profile on the relatively safe platform of the course Facebook page by posting photos of themselves and their work, and updates on what they are doing. Students also share resources and updates more informally through WhatsApp. As the course
progresses, Victoria expects to learn more about the impact of social media on the world of fashion and to develop her skills in that area.

At this point in her learning journey, Victoria "prefer[s] being taught things" so it is reassuring for her to find that the VLE is kept up to date with course materials, lecture notes and slides. She can study in her hall of residence, where she can access the library's online resources and has a choice of study areas. She has also discovered that "the library is quite easy to do work in." At the moment she prefers using the quiet areas for independent study but in the future she knows there are bookable rooms for doing group work with plug-and-play facilities and with no distractions.

Victoria describes herself as 'not a power user' of technology but as someone who "only use[s] it for what I need." But even a short way into her course she can see how digital technology is changing the way she learns and works. "I think I'm probably willing to look at different ways of learning and see how I can improve the way I learn. I'm open minded to different techniques. Before I came to uni I didn't like technology. Now that I've learned to use my laptop, I feel different about it."

**Key issues**

- **Inclusion**: For some students a DSA assessment or support from a disability service is the first step to becoming a digitally enabled learner. While specialised disability tools and software are important, routine functions and interfaces can often be adapted to learners' individual needs.

- **Reading and writing**: Victoria finds that she works more quickly and efficiently with digital resources. Being able to reference ideas in different media is fun, and typing on her laptop is much faster for her than writing long-hand.

- **Communication**: Digital tools allow learners to stay in touch with classmates and tutors, to share materials, and to find other people with a common interest. For Victoria, social media is also a bridge between her undergraduate degree and the profession she hopes to enter.

- **Library love**: Having access to all the resources of the library, as well as the physical spaces for study, gives students confidence that they are in the right place to learn. This may be especially true if they have experienced barriers to learning before. Victoria describes the library as a 'beautiful' place to work, as well as an efficient, well-organised and helpful one.

- **Sound institutional systems**: Students are increasingly looking at IT facilities when they choose a university or college. Having open access to up-to-date computers and software is exciting and motivating, and especially important in subjects that require graduates to be proficient in IT systems.

- **Wrap-around ICT support**: The English DSA system and technology assessment have provided Victoria with a starting point for digital study. University systems, including access to the Enabling Services and well signposted library and IT help, reassure her that she can find help when she needs it.
Victoria uses the following technology, apps and websites

- **Twitter**: for social purposes
- **Instagram**: as part of her course, for students to display their work
- **Blackboard VLE**: to keep track of course materials and resources
- **Snapchat**: for social purposes
- **Facebook**: for keeping in touch with others on her course and sharing updates through a tutor-created Facebook group; separately for social purposes
- **WhatsApp**: to keep in touch with others on her course as well as social use
- **Google**: a valuable search facility that Victoria can access any time, now that she has her laptop with her
- **LiveScribe recording pen**: Victoria looks forward to using this as she finds writing things down helps her to learn and understand. The pen saves written notes as a digital file and also records audio.
- **Text read-back tool**: dyslexia friendly software that is built into her Apple Mac laptop