Background
University College London (UCL) (ucl.ac.uk) is a leading research-led, multi-disciplinary university, set in the heart of London’s Bloomsbury, with around 11,000 staff and 38,000 students from 150 countries. Founded in 1826 by radicals associated with the Utilitarian Jeremy Bentham, the university remains committed to innovation, accessibility and relevance. In the past, UCL was responsible for bringing several core disciplines into the English higher education (HE) curriculum. It founded the system of academic departments and chairs, and was the first university in England to welcome women on equal terms with men. It has a long tradition of tackling global grand challenges through interdisciplinary scholarship, which now includes hosting a well-established Research centre in the digital humanities (ucl.ac.uk/dh) and a new Regions digital research facility (http://bit.ly/2lvBGoq).

In their 2015/16 Quality assurance agency for higher education (QAA) review (http://bit.ly/1Gz6fT0), UCL chose ‘digital literacies’ as a theme, allowing the university to collate the diverse work that has been done and to demonstrate the value this has had in terms of student engagement, satisfaction and progression.

Strategic priorities
UCL has a 20-year vision: UCL 2034 (ucl.ac.uk/2034) (2014) that commits the university to

‘supporting students to develop their digital capabilities to ensure that they are able to thrive in new working and learning environments’.

A new (2016) Education strategy builds on this vision with more specific objectives for the digital curriculum and the digital environment for learning. One is to expand the current student ChangeMakers (ucl.ac.uk/changemakers) programme so there are more successful staff-student innovation projects and more student change agents in departments. Another is to build on UCL’s highly successful Connected curriculum (http://bit.ly/2IX8Xfk), which engages students in research, scholarship and professional practice from the start of their undergraduate careers. One of its aims is

‘encouraging both staff and students to question critically the nature of evidence and knowledge production across different subject fields in our digitally mediated world’.

The 2012 e-Learning strategy targeted the ‘skills and digital literacies’ of staff as well as students. This has been reinforced by concerns about the university’s National Student Survey (NSS) scores, and the need to put in a good performance in the new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). But there is no overarching digital literacies strategy at UCL: rather there are a series of central initiatives that departments can tap into, and local initiatives tailored to a specific discipline.

Leadership of change
Responsibility for digital literacy rests largely with the Digital education team in the Information services division, though there is close collaboration with other departments such as the Centre for advancing learning and teaching, Library services, Estates, and of course academic departments. The Vice provost (Education and student affairs) chairs the relevant strategy groups.

Following the launch of the UCL 2034 vision there was a realisation that provision and support for technology needed to be better joined up. In 2012 the digital
education team was doubled in size, recognising both a broadening of scope to now cover digital aspects of learning space design and IT training, and an increase in demand for core e-learning services.

A Digital literacy special interest group (SIG) meets twice a year for a half-day conference. It has about 60 members, including representatives from service areas as well as academic staff. This informal and collegial approach has worked well at UCL and has encouraged a diversity of approaches.

Students are encouraged to engage with digital learning and scholarship through the Connected curriculum. Some choose to take on more leading roles, whether as Student academic representatives (StARS), collaborating on departmental projects through the ChangeMakers programme, or working with Student quality reviewers to look at the learning experience overall.

**Actions for digital capability**

There are now four Digital education advisers working at faculty level and with some programme and curriculum teams. These posts have evolved from a more technical function to addressing educational and strategic issues, including digital capabilities in the curriculum. One approach they have developed is the ABC toolkit or workshop (http://ji.sc/UCL-abc-learning-design), a structured way of thinking about the activities and skills required in a programme of study.

As soon as you prompt people with a model, a way of looking at things, they will run with it. Some may criticise the model but it’s getting the thinking going that matters most. It’s very easy to design courses based on content; we are adding to that by asking people to think about things in a new way based on their overall objectives of what and how the students will learn.

UCL library services provide support for finding, evaluating and using information, for referencing software, citation and copyright, and for managing research data. IT training provide classroom and online training, drop-in surgeries and the European Computer Driving Licence programme. A recent success is the introduction of Lynda.com, which has seen a huge uptake amongst students and is now embedded in a number of programmes. Now that there is access to just-in-time online training, the focus of face-to-face training has shifted towards more advanced and specialised issues such as coding, data handling and statistical analysis. A dedicated digital literacy officer has been in post since 2014, allowing the team to support more specialised areas of digital practice with smaller groups of students, who are encouraged to cascade their expertise to others.

UCL’s culture is such that initiatives often flourish if they have been organised from the grassroots. So a regular meet-up between Digital education and the student TechSoc society has led to the development of an application programming interface (API) for UCL data, allowing students to write and share apps based (for example) on timetabling data or cafeteria menus. The Digital education team is working with a small group of students to develop a student blog, focused on apps and technologies that students themselves find useful for learning.

The UCL DigiFest (https://ucldigifest.org/) was a university-wide celebration of ‘all things digital’ held in November 2014, and modelled on the Jisc equivalent. Students and staff worked together to host the event and ran over 40 sessions including film showings, coding demonstrations, a laptop orchestra, workshops on bitcoin, open data, game building and digital activism, showcases and competitions. The event received national interest and was written up as a Jisc Change Agents’ Network (CAN) case study (http://bit.ly/UCL-change-agents-work).

UCL has been involved in CAN since its inception, and in 2015 founded the London Digital Student Meet-up (http://ji.sc/UCL-london-digital-student-meet-up) in collaboration with the London School of Economics (LSE). This provides a forum for staff and students from universities around the capital to form partnerships, discuss project ideas, and explore the experience of being a ‘digital student’. Initially the meetings attracted around 50 participants, mainly students, who went back to their own institutions with ideas and inspiration for spreading digital know-how.
The 2012 restructuring created the role of ‘innovation officer’, a learning technologist with a specific remit to focus on small trials and novel practices. One outcome is #LearnHack (http://bit.ly/2mcum54), which has become a collaboration between TechSoc, Digital education and UCL Innovation and enterprise (ucl.ac.uk/enterprise). Three #Learnhacks have so far been organised, and it is fast become a regular calendar fixture. Each event runs over a weekend and features a series of challenges and activities encouraging participants to rethink UCL’s education through technology. The result is lots of collaborative learning, across fields that are often a long way from participants’ usual subjects of teaching or study.

With so much activity going on it is perhaps no surprise that three bids from UCL to the Jisc Summer of student innovation (http://bit.ly/jisc_sosi) have been successful. Houndly (http://bit.ly/2mITwpQ) provides an aggregated feed of UCL events app, Konnect (jisc.ac.uk/rd/projects/konnect) allows students to connect with content and quizzes during lectures using their mobile phones, and the most recent, KnowitWall (knowitwall.com) showcases research as a form of public engagement. Each of these has been informally mentored by the Digital education team to help understand competitors, hone their pitch, and have a better awareness of the higher education market.

Moving ahead

The Digital education team are now turning their attention to how the digital infrastructure supports staff and students to develop their practice. This means designing a ‘next generation digital learning environment’ (http://bit.ly/2ICA5Oo) that lives up to the aspirations of the Connected curriculum: something that looks and works like an academic social network rather than a content store, with collaboration, investigation and knowledge sharing built in.

With its attractive central London location, UCL will remain primarily a campus-based university for the foreseeable future. Hence it is investing significantly to ensure that the campus meets the digital needs of students and staff. The ‘enriched campus’ will support access to learning from multiple locations and integrate physical with virtual spaces. But this comes with challenges. Space to expand is limited and many buildings were not designed as modern learning environments. The density of buildings makes even reliable wifi a challenge, as many networks compete within a limited frequency spectrum.

Space is a huge challenge at UCL, and taught sessions can often be relocated or take place in rooms that aren’t quite right for the activities being undertaken. This can cause staff to be nervous about innovating as they don’t get a reliable and consistent teaching environment in which they can build confidence to try something new.

Challenges around physical space are being addressed partly through a programme to install more student computers and an extensive free laptop loan service, which allows students to borrow a laptop for an hour or two or for a whole day.

Students can sit and work where they like and take laptops off campus if they want to - to home, to the British Library or British Museum, or even just one of the many coffee shops on Tottenham Court Road. Laptops and lockers are expensive to buy initially, but they provide a lot of technology in a very small space, and for us space is at a huge premium.

In some ways the teaching space issues are making the university turn to the Digital education team for solutions.

UCL’s Digital education team intervene anywhere that technology and students interact. A comfortable place to sit with a computer and reliable wifi is as crucial to the student experience as having a sophisticated e-learning platform or impressive interactive resources. So we consider the physical and online infrastructure holistically.
Opportunities and challenges for the future

UCL now has an Education strategy with e-learning embedded within it, closely articulated with the long-term 2034 vision. Achieving parity between teaching and research will take time, but there is a new vigour for it and the university has really mobilised around the Connected curriculum ideas. There are now real opportunities to build the case for digital capabilities around a scholarly agenda, seeing digital practices as a bridge between scholarships of teaching, research, and public engagement.

The university’s recent merger with the Institute of Education (ucl.ac.uk/ioe) provides valuable cross-fertilisation of ideas between teaching departments and internationally recognised researchers in the field of education.

Lessons learned

» Live events such as digital festivals, hackathons, seminars and showcases have real impact. Acquiring new skills may mean putting in some quiet time at the screen face, but the motivation to develop comes from engaging with other people in spaces defined by innovation, excitement, and open sharing

» The physical and virtual environment are critical for giving staff and learners confidence in their digital practices. It helps if the people responsible for digital capabilities are closely involved with space design and with IT planning

» If the available virtual learning environments do not fit the ethos of your institution, develop something that does!

» UCL has succeeded by having a strategic approach that generates excitement and engagement around some shared themes, while allowing departments and services to interpret ‘digital literacy’ in their own terms and for their own students

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For more information

on all related resources please see the Building digital capability project page.
http://ji.sc/building-digicap

Invest in comfortable shoes. Achieving change in a large organisation requires you to explore it and understand the different staff and student experiences within it. So walk around, see what’s going on, talk to people and provide opportunities for them to connect with each other.