University of Brighton: Digital literacies in professional development and the curriculum

Background
The University of Brighton (http://ji.sc/meet-brighton) is a modern university on the south coast of England, with 20,700 students studying across five campuses in Brighton, Eastbourne and Hastings. The university defines itself through a commitment to social relevance and the public good, which it realises through sustainable and equitable practices within the university, and a range of partnerships and civic responsibilities in the region and the world beyond.

In 2013, as part of a ‘digital transformation’ initiative, Brighton bid for and won funding through changing the learning landscape (jisc.ac.uk/rd/projects/changing-the-learning-landscape) to develop a digital literacy framework and implementation plan. The digital literacies framework – launched in 2014 – is designed around the four core activities of academic staff: learning and teaching (http://ji.sc/brighton-learning-teaching), research (http://ji.sc/brighton-research), communication and collaboration (http://ji.sc/brighton-communication-collaboration) and administration (http://ji.sc/brighton-administration). As one of the first such frameworks implemented in the UK, it has been presented at the Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association (UCISA) ‘Spotlight on digital capability conference’ and used as a model for other universities and colleges to follow.

Current drivers are to improve National Student Survey (NSS) scores and to implement a successful submission under the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

Leadership of change
The framework project was led by an academic based in the Centre for learning and teaching (CLT) and supported by the Pro vice-chancellor academic affairs. Originally the framework was developed by a steering group that included members of Information services (IS), including library and IT staff, and other professional departments, and the CLT. That group has continued to meet, though less regularly, for example to support the purchase and roll-out of Lynda.com. The key teams work very closely both at senior level and on a day-to-day basis.

The university’s Information services department, including the campus libraries, have a long track record of promoting information literacy, and there has been a strategic effort to explore and explain the complementarity of information and digital literacies. Digital literacy has now ‘permeated’ the university’s vocabulary, as reflected in strategic documents, conversations about course design, and staff development workshops.

Strategic priorities
‘Digital transformation’ was a strategic priority in the 2012-2015 strategic plan and was initiated by the Pro vice-chancellor academic affairs, and had an impact across strategy and policy areas. The university strategy 2016-21: Practical wisdom (brighton.ac.uk/practical-wisdom/index.aspx) includes case studies on flipped learning and learning analytics, all in the service of ‘putting students at the heart’ of the university.

The original focus of the digital literacies framework was the professional development of academic staff (see Newland and Handley 2016). Each school in the pilot had a dedicated academic responsible for digital transformation, who prepared the ground for the framework and implementation plan among colleagues. The project lead now has a permanent responsibility for the digital development of teaching staff. Along with another academic colleague in CLT, she works with blended learning leaders in schools and departments to embed the framework. There is no
equivalent role for students, but initiatives are beginning to be rolled out for example, using Student learning technology ambassadors (SLTAs). Two members of the e-Learning team are also closely involved in staff development for digital literacy, and have embedded the framework into the wider processes and practices of IS.

Actions for digital literacies

Academic schools have responded differently to the digital literacies framework, as the process was a flexible and self-determined one. Each school was offered a parcel of time on their preferred topic from the relevant support teams, with the most popular workshops being on mobile technologies and using social media, two topics that have consistently proved the most popular and useful as conversation starters. Most of the allocated time has now been devolved to course level. This allows staff to identify the digital practices that are relevant in their subject specialism, and their own development needs.

Although originally designed for individual staff, requests for support with the framework now come mostly from curriculum teams that want to embed digital literacies into their work with students. Some of this takes place in ‘pre-term toolkits’ – small scale, intensive workshops that allow a team of up to six teaching staff to examine their modules in detail and share tips for improvement.

Following on from the success of digital identity as a workshop topic with staff, more and more talks to students are being given on the same topic. Usually our role is staff facing but we have collaborated with staff to offer these [workshops] to students, using materials in Lynda.com about digital identity and digital citizenship.

The greatest impact has been on professional development of academic staff. A policy to embed digital literacies into professional recognition and development programmes was drafted by the CLT and approved by the Learning and teaching committee, so it is fully integrated into the accreditation. Academic staff now have to reference the framework in the university’s initial PG Certificate programme and when they go through the recognition scheme for the Higher Education Academy (HEA), such as Fellowship of the HEA. This is done on the basis of individual self-assessment against the framework, which has been found to support reflection better than a checklist approach.

With a smaller student-facing team, one solution has been to recruit SLTAs to work in digital roles. This scheme formally recruits and pays students, in this case to support other students and staff in their uses of digital technology. Initially this role was piloted to provide academic staff with support for use of technology in the classroom. This was later expanded to include providing student support sessions, drop-ins and pop-up help desks. The SLTAs have their own digital literacies assessed and progressed, and are able to cascade those skills to others in the classroom and in out-of-class settings.

For me it’s about the consistency. Having an agreed framework and understanding, whatever that is, that you share with the other professional services so you are all taking a similar language. … [And] you definitely need resources to implement it, in terms of people as well as materials.

It’s about seeing that as a continual improvement process. So it differs on a school by school basis, but I think that institutional culture is starting to permeate.

So it is a prompt to further engagement, and for people to know it’s there is really important in engendering change. Although it’s been around for several years now, we are still at the beginning of the process of embedding it. To my mind it’s always been something we would be working with for many years. It’s not a project: it will develop.

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From this year SLTAs are also providing half-hour sessions during induction to help students get their devices registered on the network, orientate themselves to the virtual learning environment (VLE), discover sources of help, and begin using Lynda.com.

Those are our first steps into student digital literacies, and I think the digital literacies framework [for staff] has been a driver for that.

The digital literacies framework has a clear identity and web presence (https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/digitalliteracies). The categories in the framework are used to organise the website, and to give access to resources and sources of support. These include some self-assessment quizzes, originally in Blackboard, later replaced by forms in WordPress that allow staff to receive email feedback. The email feedback also helps CLT to monitor how staff are assessing their skills, and provides a set of contacts they can follow up. The introduction of Lynda.com has provided an opportunity to develop playlists relevant to digital literacies too.

After the initial flurry of engagement and activity following the launch, there have been peaks and troughs in the internal use of the website. There has been an uplift in interest with each new development: for example, when the website was launched, when the various forms of learning technology and IT support were aligned to the framework, with the launch of Lynda.com playlists and again with the creation of new workshops for course teams.

Moving ahead
Longer term, it is hoped to link the framework to recruitment, and through professional development to academic promotion and staff development reviews. More ways for individuals to capture their engagement for these purposes are being developed.

We do want to do more tracking and recording so we can see people developing and progressing.

There are also ambitions to extend the framework to other staff. This is potentially more complex due to different roles and budgets involved in staff development, but Lynda.com is making it easier to provide and structure the relevant resources. There are also plans to work more systematically on student digital literacies.

We would like to develop a student framework, especially now we have Lynda.com. Before then we couldn’t really raise their [student] expectations or put requirements on them to develop digital literacies if we weren’t supporting them to do it. So we are moving that aspect forward.

On the student side there are good reasons for aligning digital literacies with the employability agenda, and also for thinking of it in terms of access and inclusion. The Inclusive Practice team are promoting blended learning to support students with access needs. Some students struggle to access the digital tools and systems that support their learning, and if their digital disadvantage is not addressed early then they will struggle throughout their course.

Finally, there are a number of new Deputy head roles in learning and teaching in the schools, who are reviving the connection between central departments and schools. This connection was initiated at the beginning of the framework project, and they are promoting the value of digital literacies.
Opportunities and challenges for the future

In the last year there have been major changes in senior management throughout the university and a new university strategy. Staff are being asked to cope with a high level of organisational change. The hope is that by clarifying some of the expectations around digital practice, the framework reduces uncertainty even while it encourages innovation.

I think any way of making it easier for staff to know what they are supposed to be doing, that is what’s needed.

The new strategy proposes a blended curriculum approach to meet student needs for flexible, adaptive learning. This is a new opportunity to build on the learning and teaching area of the framework, however, it challenges teaching staff not only to provide relevant digital resources but also to rethink their face-to-face sessions.

It’s that bigger redesign of the curriculum. You have to be much more confident to deal with what comes up in a genuinely interactive session.

It’s not just creating or recommending online resources, it’s that fear lecturers have that resources may not quite say exactly what they want to say or in the same way they want to say it. There is a lot of interesting stuff about how people expect students to engage with resources - whether as passive consumers or in a more critical way. We are only just starting to tap into the challenges of that... to move into being professional educators in this new space.

There has been some success with embedding the framework into academic practice, but there are still risks that it may be seen as a separate issue rather than as an integral part of teaching. Moves to offer stand-alone technology-enhanced learning (TEL) modules on some courses are being met with a qualified welcome: it is important to prepare students for studying with technology, but also to use those skills and embed those practices across their learning.

There is a danger of seeing it as a stand-alone rather than in every module. It shouldn’t be an option... something you can choose to experiment with or develop if you want to. So definitely there is work to be done to break that down. To see it just as teaching, not as a special kind of teaching.

A final opportunity - or challenge - is presented by the growing interest in the role of data. This is an issue that comes up regularly in staff development, for example, learning analytics was not a popular topic in the original framework - drawn up in 2012 - but the growing interest in it institutionally means that it is retained in the new framework. The challenge is not only to develop the relevant technical and analytic skills but also to promote informed debate about the wider issues.

We are obviously keen for people to use systems. We talk about everything leaving a trace. But we may not always be completely clear about the traces we are creating by the things we recommend people to use. That I think is one of the next challenges, as we do more and more learning analytics and use more and more technology that is externally based.
Lessons learned
A collaboratively built, evidence-based framework can have multiple impacts on a university such as Brighton. The main impacts have been:

» Embedding digital literacies into professional development and accreditation, and from there into appraisal and review

» Developing a shared vocabulary and understanding across disciplines, teams and settings

» Building individual confidence

» Encouraging digital literacies to be embedded into the curriculum in a systematic way

» Having a foundation on which to build further discussions eg employability, flipped learning, accessibility, and the use of data

It’s perhaps not so much seeing the effects of the framework in the course, it’s more that engaging with the framework sits with a general openness to incorporating technology into teaching practice.

It’s part of a cultural change thing. I’m thinking now of ... someone... who really was not digitally confident, she did begin to engage with the framework, and ended up being very confident and encouraging others in her school to engage. Many people see other people doing things and then want to do them too.

A key member of the digital literacies steering group has worked in this area for over twenty years, beginning in ‘computer literacy’, which at the time was expected to last no more than five years ‘because then incoming students would just have it’

Digital literacy projects depend on professional development being strategically valued, and properly resourced. The university culture is not to monitor engagement so much as to encourage it. That means:

People viewing their own professional development as important... just as important as their research.

Development work needs to find its level. At the course and programme level there were digital enthusiasts on the ground who were ‘desperate’ to adopt the framework and take up the development opportunities that came with it, while the responses at school level were more patchy

Projects around digital literacy can lose visibility without this being very problematic. In fact, the more digital practices are embedded, and digital policies integrated, the less of a separate identity the issue needs to have

We have seen traffic on the digital literacies website decline – but that’s fine, we want it to be part of what we do. We want it to be embedded within our NSS work, employability, hooking up the literacies with practical examples so we don’t have to name it explicitly all the time.

I think it’s always with us because innovation is always with us. It’s to do with confidence. You’ll always get some people more confident in engaging with new technology than others. And there is always going to be some requirement because although the technology will change, and people will continue to need support to engage confidently with innovation.
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Digital Literacies Framework
(https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/digitalliteracies)


Any unattributed quotes in the text were provided and have been approved by the contacts above.

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