The Open University: Developing a digital mindset

Background

The Open University (the OU) (open.ac.uk) is the largest higher education (HE) organisation in the UK with over 170,000 students. Its unique method of ‘supported open learning’ involves the design and development of learning materials – often in pioneering digital forms – alongside the provision of tutor and peer support for students who would otherwise miss out on the chance of higher education. Many thousands of non-accredited learners also use OU resources such as BBC broadcasts and OpenLearn (open.edu/openlearn) materials. The OU is open to everyone who aspires to study and is at the forefront of global research and development in open and distance learning.

In its recent submission for the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) higher education review 2015, the OU noted that it ‘has established a reputation for excellence in its digital literacy initiatives at national and international level with strong leadership and many outstanding examples in learning and teaching… The university takes as its working guideline the Jisc definition of digital literacy: “those capabilities which fit an individual for living, learning and working in a digital society”’.

To date the greatest impact from the OUs work in this area has been on its curriculum. Since 2002 the university has had an Information literacy strategy, approved and endorsed at the highest level. A broader Digital and Information Literacy (DIL) Framework (http://ji.sc/OU-DIL-framework) (2012) succeeded this and has been fully integrated into the course design process through the OUs learning design initiative and a range of key online guidance. The Curriculum management guide, Assessment hub and OU Levels Framework. The DIL Framework has also been integrated into academic professional development (open.ac.uk/iet/main/professional-development) for core academic staff. Until recently, though, the university has not taken a strategic approach to developing the digital capabilities of staff across the organisation.

Strategic priorities

A new impetus was given to DIL by the Students First strategy (http://ji.sc/OU-students-first-strategy) (2016), led by the new Vice chancellor, Peter Horrocks. This sets out an objective to ‘Develop a set of minimum competencies for digital literacy and provide programmes for development and support for all staff and students’ in order to remain at the forefront of digital innovation and adapt to a more competitive environment for open education. There is also a strategic goal to ensure OU graduates are competitive in a digital employment market.

After a successful HE review from the QAA – with digital literacy chosen as a special review area – the focus has shifted to the new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (hefce.ac.uk/lt/tef) and the likely inclusion of digital capabilities as part of the assessment. Research is an equally significant area for strategic development. The OU has several centres of digital research excellence, and has pioneered in many areas of ‘digital scholarship’ (http://ji.sc/OU-bloomsbury-collections), but now the Research Excellence Framework (REF) requires all researchers to understand and engage with in the digital context of their discipline.
The university is experimenting with more agile and collaborative ways of developing online content, which requires academics to be flexible, confident and able to quickly adopt new tools. This is in addition to using digital tools to deliver teaching, assessment and learning support.

Working with the Student Association (OUSA), the library and the Institute for educational technology (IET) have looked at a range of evidence about teaching staff practice and found that digital confidence varies considerably. With more than 5,000 Associate lecturers (ALs) working for the OU, there is a staff development challenge in making sure everyone is confident to teach in a fast-changing digital environment.

Among the skills being required across the university are new kinds of data literacy. The scale and logistics of the OU operation means it has access to vast amounts of learner-related data, and it is using that data to develop new learning opportunities as well as to support existing learners more effectively. There is a need for everyone to use and understand this data.

A final piece of the strategic picture is the need to innovate working practices, including flatter structures and more project-based teams.

Leadership of change

Responsibilities for digital capability extend across the OU but leadership comes largely from the library and the Institute for educational technology (IET). From 2017 a new digital skills and capabilities programme will be coordinated by the Library, working with the IET, other OU departments and stakeholders, and experts in the HE sector.

Some people have said ‘why is the library leading?’ We are in a strong position because we have the digital literacy aspect, but also because we talk to everyone. We can bring people together.
Actions for digital capability

The DIL framework has been contextualised differently in different disciplines, providing a repertoire of approaches that new courses can draw upon, and despite their differences a reasonable level of common discourse and understanding. There is support for these conversations and design decisions through the integrated learning design process.

As well as working with digital capability issues in the design process, institutional staff have many opportunities to discuss their practice. On the OU’s campus at Milton Keynes, staff can attend quality enhancement lunchtime seminars or meetings of the special interest groups in e-learning and learning design. There are several online communities where ideas are shared and developed such as Yammer (yammer.com) and Slack channels (slack.com), the original Cloudworks (http://cloudworks.ac.uk) site, and a purpose-built Scholarship Exchange for discussions on the scholarship of learning and teaching.

People who have projects are encouraged to reflect and report back. So we get these stories coming through, which is another mechanism for helping people to think about working in a new way.

The OU is exploring a more collaborative and direct approach to authoring, rather than materials being designed by specialists for ALs and students to use. This more collaborative approach has implications for staff and student skills, as well as for the culture at the OU - which has historically drawn a clear distinction between design and delivery. A parallel project, Minerva, is using Open edX to author modules more rapidly for open delivery.

Employability and 21st century skills have had considerable attention and investment in recent years. The DIL Framework is now being mapped to the OU’s employability goals and translated into student-facing language, so that students can assess, progress and showcase their digital skills in ways that relate to their aspirations.

Being Digital (http://ji.sc/OU-library-services) is a collection of freely available, bite-size activities to develop student skills in DIL. It was the subject of an earlier case study on the Jisc Digital student blog (http://ji.sc/OU-skills-for-life-online). It has since been joined by Succeeding in a digital world (http://ji.sc/OU-succeeding-digital-world), also available on OpenLearn. These resources have been widely used and well received by students, both in and alongside their chosen courses. The OU’s Digital and Information literacy specialist won CILIP’s Information Literacy Practitioner of the Year (http://ji.sc/OU-information-literacy) award in 2015 for her work on the DIL framework and associated resources.

Moving ahead

A programme of work on digital capabilities will be taken forward from February 2017 to ensure a fully ‘digitally capable’ university. Working with stakeholders, the aim is to produce a framework to benchmark individual capabilities with the emphasis on social skills, participation and citizenship, and digital ‘mindset’, rather than a checklist of technical skills. A range of dedicated resources will be developed for staff, tutors, researchers and students. Each area of work will draw on existing OU expertise and initiatives: for example curriculum design materials will be developed in collaboration. The programme will also help to inform a new data literacy framework and will map digital capabilities to existing resources for employability.

What we’re trying to do is to look at all the initiatives across the university and see how the framework could enable all of them. There are changes of behaviour or of tools or of mindset [needed] And if we get the framework right we can help all sorts of projects to be more successful.
There will be a particular focus on developing ALs, recognising that they are key to supporting and directing students to the relevant opportunities and that they have challenges of their own. ALs will be involved in piloting materials, and student champions will also be recruited to work on specific aspects of the project.

Unlike other capability initiatives, an important aspect of the work will be to identify aspects of the organisation that supports or potentially holds back personal development, including HR processes, the digital infrastructure, contracts and workload modelling, and how professional development for different groups of staff is (or is not) joined up.

Opportunities and challenges for the future
The OU has gone through some significant changes in the last 12 months and the new digital capability initiative arrives at an uncertain time for staff and students. This will be an opportunity, if people see digital practices as helping them adapt to change and as supporting their future aspirations. It will be a challenge if people feel pushed to accept too many changes in what is expected of them.

The OU has the resources, the data, the expertise and the previous experience to make this initiative truly world leading – but it will be challenged to do so quickly. And as the project team knows,

OU students are similarly diverse, and their motivation to engage in higher education may have nothing to do with employment in the digital economy. However, the intention is to build up a relationship with OUSA through joint conferences and events, ensuring that students are involved in the design and development of the framework and associated resources from the start. The AL network will also be critical to success, and the initiative is engaging with the AL Executive to ensure their contribution.

The areas involved in supporting digital capabilities – in particular the library, TEL and IET – are all now part of a newly formed learning and teaching innovation portfolio. This closer relationship and flexible cross-working will allow for the support and development of digital capabilities across The Open University, despite the current challenging internal and external funding environment.

Lessons learned
» Frameworks are powerful in practice when they are open enough to allow curriculum teams and professional services to interpret and contextualise them. Examples from practice, shared through communities of practice, can be more persuasive than detailed requirements: ‘it’s the stories about practice that are most powerful’

» Because the OU takes a rigorous approach to course design, new initiatives such as DIL can be integrated systematically. The downside is that this is not a rapid process. By integrating the digital capabilities with a more agile approach to course development, the OU hopes to have the best of both worlds: a systematic, wholesale adoption that still lets the curriculum keep pace with digital change

» Having digital capabilities work widely endorsed and strategically approved is useful, but it can take a long time. So there is a case for moving forward where there are opportunities, and allowing other areas to catch up
Digital capabilities are a responsibility across the organisation, and many parts of the organisation will already be working to develop them. The key with any new initiative is to draw on that rich expertise and help it to become better articulated, for example through shared events, collaboratively developed materials, and some elements of a common language (which might be a visual language, e.g., badges). Setting out as if you are breaking new ground will only lead to resentment.

It is not a deficit model. That really is not going to work... There have been some interesting conversations about academic professional development frameworks that exist already, around communities of practice in the Faculties that we could use. It will be about defining what people need in general terms, but then using the language and mechanisms people use already.

We didn’t want [the DIL framework] to take that long to come into circulation and be adopted. We felt that if we went through all the committees we would miss the moment, and we wanted to hit the moment—the time when people were talking about it... We wanted to be agile rather than having it signed and sealed and then finding it to be out of date.

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Digital and Information Literacy (DIL) Framework
http://ji.sc/OU-DILframework

Being Digital
open.ac.uk/libraryservices/beingdigital

Succeeding in a digital world
http://ji.sc/OU-succeeding-digital-world

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