Digital Literacies in Higher Education


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What are Digital Literacies?

According to the Higher Education Academy, digital literacies are 'the capabilities required to thrive, i.e. be an effective and responsible participant, in a digital society' (Higher Education Academy, 2017).

The notion of '**digital literacy' has important implications for both staff and students in higher education**. This is especially so in the post-pandemic context.

Today's graduates will enter a 21st Century workplace that is becoming increasingly network-oriented, project-based and technology intensive.

To prepare students for the world of work, and to leverage the enormous possibilities of blended and online education, teaching staff are themselves expected to possess some level of digital fluency. For example, the ability to implement innovative pedagogical practices such as flipped learning, digital curation, and to use open educational resources appropriately.

But what does this look like in practice?

Digital literacy implies more than simply being able to operate digital technology proficiently

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In the words of Paul Glister who coined the term, **digital literacy is much more about 'mastering ideas than keystrokes'** (Pool, 1997: 6).

The following table illustrates this point further:

Operational Capability	**Digital Literacy**
Operate a smartphone and access the internet	Assess the accuracy and reliability of information online
Communicate across different platforms	Make informed decisions about, and use different tools to create, something new
Maintain an online profile	Manage a digital identity and stay safe and healthy online

It is easy to assume that, having grown up with increased exposure to technology, many of today's students simply *are* digitally literate.

According to recently published research by WonkHE and Adobe, many students felt it was assumed that their level of digital literacy on arrival at university was higher than it actually was.

However, by focussing on the difference between being 'operationally capable' and 'digitally fluent', the table above can help to challenge popular myths around students' digital literacy. These myths include suggestions that there are cadres of 'digital natives' in our classrooms!

Rather, **all students should be actively supported to develop the digital capabilities required of 21st Century graduates.**

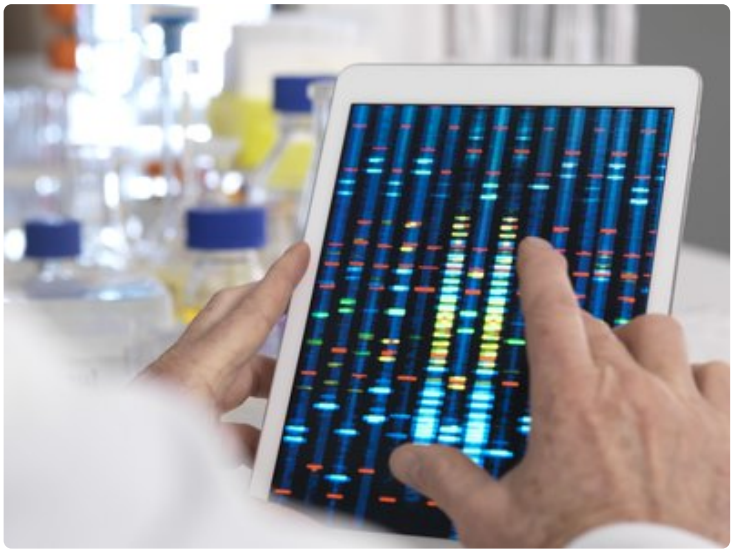
Becoming Digitally Literate

According to key texts from the literature, becoming digitally literate:

- implies possessing the abilities to find, evaluate and manage increasing amounts of information on the internet (ECORYS, 2016) and to assess the

reliability of information;

- suggests capability in using digital tools to communicate (US Educational Testing Service for Higher Education Environments, in Lankshear & Knobel, 2006), and the ability to select the most appropriate communication tools for the task at hand;
- implies the attitudinal, social and emotional skills or dispositions deemed necessary for the internet (Gekara et al., 2017: 12) and a commitment to lifelong digital learning and development (Littlejohn et al., 2012);
- demands problem-solving skills and the abilities to negotiate legal and ethical issues, including security and issues of privacy and copyright (Gekara et al. 2017: 12); and
- involves managing one's digital identity while navigating issues of digital health and well-being.



So, what now?

Clearly the development of digital literacies for staff and students in higher education is a complex, multifaceted and ongoing process. There are no shortcuts or 'quick fixes'. However, to get started, we recommend the following 2 steps:

STEP 1 - Support your students to develop Digital Literacy

Staff -student partnerships are powerful in driving change and in sharing complementary skills. You could therefore consider using the tools below to **engage your students in a conversation** about their own digital literacies.

Enabling a critical conversation that links current learning to future aspirations, and that helps students develop their own fluency in navigating the digital world can only be helpful.

Are there areas in which they feel particularly capable and competent? Where do they feel they would like additional support? How can the curriculum enable students to become digitally literate?

There are **a number of helpful resources** for mapping digital capabilities in higher education:

- The Open University's Digital and information literacy framework describes five 'stages of development' of digital literacy skills, competences and dispositions and maps them against the 'levels' of OU study.
- JISC's digital capabilities framework is accompanied by a discovery tool that allows staff and students to reflect on their digital capabilities and identify key areas for development.

STEP 2 - Reflect on your own Digital Literacy and take action!

As an educator, **do you recognise opportunities for your own digital literacy development**?

Are there staff development opportunities at Strathclyde, or elsewhere, that can support you in this regard?

The Open University Digital and Information Literacy Framework and JISC's Digital Capabilities Framework mentioned in Step 2 can also support you to reflect on your own digital literacy and take positive action.

The Academic Development team at Strathclyde coordinate and deliver a range of development opportunities that includes:

- Briefing and information sessions on blended, online and hybrid learning.
- Digital skills development sessions that cover a range of topics from social media for academics to flipped classrooms and technology-enhanced approaches to assessment and feedback;
- Two modules titled 'Teaching and Learning Online' (TALON);
- Seminars and expert masterclasses that serve as horizon-scanning exercises. In recent years these have addressed concepts such as Virtual Reality in teaching and learning, sticky campuses and assessment tools for STEM subjects;
- Peer support networks covering special digital interests such as game-based learning, social media in teaching, and a system for teaching and assessment using a computer algebra kernel (STACK)

You can access a list of CPD opportunities via the Development and Training Booking System below:

References

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Did you find this CPD session useful? Do you have unanswered questions? As always, please join the conversation by leaving a comment below!