AI and the future of digital skills in the scholarly communications sector: An interview with Andy Holgate

Andy Holgate, Digital Skills Developer, **Lancaster University**

Please can you tell me about your role as a Digital Skills Developer?

The role was created in 2023 to address the changing needs of the library. Officially the role is developing and supporting digital skills development for staff and students across the university, it has quite a wide remit and involves a lot of collaboration both with the wider library and across university departments. Unofficially I describe the role as getting stuff done digitally – now that could be producing, editing videos and podcasts, creating high-quality online teaching resources and tutorials, overseeing space conversions to digital environments such as a drop-in pod/video cast studio, project managing the LinkedIn Learning platform for the university and pretty much anything else that comes along which these days is generative AI.

What do you mean by the term 'Digital Skills'?

To me 'Digital Skills' is anything that involves a computer. Anything that allows colleagues and students to better understand and utilize the technology available to them. Digital Skills get things done. It is bigger than you imagine but it's easily simplified. That's one of the reasons why I love my job so much, the variety keeps it fresh and exciting. One day I'm designing and delivering a workshop and an online resource for library staff introducing generative AI, the next day I'm talking to students about how they can grow their professional skills using learning pathways in **LinkedIn** Learning. In between I could be helping individual colleagues with software issues that they might be having (Yes, Endnote, I'm looking at you) or creating tutorials using Articulate on Academic Integrity, teaching EPQ students how to get the most out of online free resources or producing the latest Systematic Review Conversations video.

Having worked in libraries for thirty years and seen various technologies come and go, I've always been interested in technology and have incorporated it into my librarian life, from the dawn of the modern internet whilst working in public libraries (teaching Netscape Navigator

to the public), through to the introduction of microfiche/microfilm and cd-rom based databases at Lancaster University. No SSO for those. It's always been in my nature I guess but this past year I've acquired more digital skills than I ever imagined helping support my colleagues. I've had to make mistakes which empower me to move forward, (it's a good job that there isn't a swear jar in my home office), working digitally can be hugely frustrating at times but that sense of achievement when you get what you envisioned to come to life on the screen is what it is all about. To my colleague that I created it for, it's simple, it looks great and does what they need, little do they know what I went through to get to that point, and I'm cool with that. To quote Yoda *"No! Try not. Do. Or do not. There is no try."*

How has the increasing importance of AI affected your role?

AI is huge right now; it seems to be all that the sector is focusing on. I won't lie, it seems to have taken over a lot of my role as the University tries to come to terms with what it is, what it does and the ramifications of all that's left in its shadow.

I have had to try and keep up professionally with developments in generative AI so that I can advise library colleagues. This has led me to be involved in wider university working groups, writing guidance, presenting and advising on everything from prompt engineering to ethical usage. I very much fall on the side of wanting to embrace AI and help students to get the most out of it, but many academic colleagues are more cautious. Regardless of whether you are cautious or excited, it feels like some days we are swimming against a tide as more AI developments surface each day.

As AI continues to advance, how do you anticipate the future needs and demands for digital skills evolving?

I think that demand is going to continue to grow, and yes, you could counter argue that 'Gen AI' might make some digital skills redundant but that would be a small blow, not a knockout one. As new technologies come to the fore, we as a sector (and myself) will have to adapt and change our attitudes and our practices to meet the needs of students and academics. For example, I have spent the last fifteen years as a Faculty Librarian, teaching information literacy to Business students – I suspect that in the next year or two the way those searching skills are taught will be vastly different. I don't shy from the disruptive, and this next bit might upset a few readers, but editorials are about making people think. I believe that Boolean will be a thing of the past as Prompt Chaining and Prompt Engineering become the skill set needed to get the most out of academic databases. Librarians will adapt seamlessly, they always do, but some of **SCONUL**'s seven pillars might finally collapse and have to be rebuilt using Minecraft.

There's so much information (and misinformation) related to AI. How can colleagues working in the library and scholarly communications sector keep up to date with AI and improve their digital skills?

There certainly is, I would say keep an open mind, a lot of the positive press is coming from non-academic areas – think blogs, newsletters, YouTube, Instagram etc. Combine this with guidance put out by your institutions, and by the wider sector. Look at conference programs, there are so many focused-on AI at the moment. No one place has all the answers, and you won't learn everything overnight. The thing I have heard the most is that people don't understand AI and fear it. Part of my job is demystifying AI and reassuring these people that

there is nothing to fear, embrace the technology, play with it (if you have access – and that's a whole article in itself!), make mistakes, and see what you can achieve. A great place to look at if you have access to is LinkedIn Learning as there are some fantastic short courses on the platform that explain what it is and what different products can do. At Lancaster as part of our guidance for staff and students, we created a learning pathway called "A beginner's guide to generative AI", that people can dip in and out of. The challenge with that is keeping it up to date.

Your role involves rolling out the LinkedIn learning platform across the university, what benefits and impact has this had?

I would say to a certain extent it has been a success in that we have reached our pre-launch targets of usage and activations, however we will need further data to conclude how successful it has been.

We have managed to embed content in several modules, and we can see that students are engaging with it. One module was completely rebuilt around using a pathway created within LinkedIn Learning and the feedback from that included a student score of 4.5 out of 5 on how they rated the quality of the resource, and for me more importantly, 90% of students said that they would continue to use the platform after the module.

From a staff perspective, it has been embedded in several managerial courses, customer service training and **Google** Analytics training for web editors.

There is huge potential for the platform at Lancaster and the majority of my focus is on growing it as the institution goes through a period of curriculum transformation. It's both exciting and challenging and I can't wait to see where we go next with it, and indeed with Digital Skills at Lancaster.