Digital literacy expertise by stealth – knowing stuff and doing stuff

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Until comparatively recently, my work as an academic subject liaison librarian allowed me to hone my teaching skills through the development and delivery of information skills teaching. Whilst we didn't realise it at the time, 'cutting our teeth' teaching information skills and information literacy was, of course, a comfort zone for librarians to ply their trade as teachers. It was, after all, librarianship in practice . . . how to effectively search for information in an ever increasing electronic environment. This, of course, was when e-resources were the exception rather than the norm, the concept of online learning was still an emerging pedagogy, Facebook and Twitter had not yet been invented, and most cash transactions were still carried out in person at the bank or post office counter. But then, in what seems like very little time, the information which we were educating our students to navigate had become subsumed in a much broader, more complex digital landscape in which we now find ourselves.

My first involvement with digital literacy came a few years ago as a result of a project I lead to look at ways of developing the digital literacy skills of academic staff within the university. I arranged focus groups with academic staff from each of the six schools within the university with the aim of identifying which elements of digital literacy they considered to be the most meaningful and their preferred mechanism(s) for training in those areas. In those focus groups quite a lot of time was spent discussing what the term 'digital literacy' (or 'literacies') actually means. It was clear there was no particular mutual understanding of the term. Fast forward to the past year or so, and digital literacy has gained a currency and is part of the language of academia; there are institutional policies and strategies for it, it is written into course/module specifications, there is substantial support for developing it from Jisc, and in 2015-16 the Higher Education Review Group of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education had digital literacy as one of two possible themes when undertaking quality assurance reviews in 2015-16. However it is defined and whatever the nuances of what it encompasses are, it is definitely 'a thing', usually based on what's required to live, learn and thrive in a digital society.

My perception is that to a large extent digital literacy has become (or perhaps remains) a shorthand for "being good with computers" or "knowing about lots of different apps and what they can do". Undoubtedly, IT skills and capabilities underpin digital literacy and knowing about the latest apps/digital tools is exciting and stimulating. Who doesn't want to be seen as being at the cutting edge of technological developments? In discussions I've had with colleagues both in the university

and beyond about digital literacy, the default position is generally focused on what digital tools are available, what they can used for and what competencies are required to utilise them (this is merely an observation, not a criticism). The 'literacy' part of digital literacy sometimes seems to be underplayed. However, in the era of fake news and alternative facts, the literacy aspect of digital literacy is becoming increasingly important and this ties in with digital citizenship as outlined by [Leo Appleton](#) in a previous editorial in *UKSG eNews*. Digital literacy is perhaps evolving into becoming as much about the *literacy* as about the *digital* and there is a role for us in this.

That email from the African prince offering to park a mountain of cash in our back account has become a bit of a standing joke. However, scam emails are becoming increasingly sophisticated, ripping off company logos and the like to fool the user. To put that in an academic context, I recently received an email from a publisher seeking submissions for their 'peer reviewed', open access journal which on the journal website trumpeted the impact of its Index Copernicus value (a spurious metric at best). The ISSN looked genuine (it wasn't) and the publication company appeared to be based in Germany (it wasn't). I searched on Google Scholar and retrieved articles from the journal. It was a classic, clever example of a so-called predatory publisher. With the next Research Excellence Framework on the horizon in higher education, an academic could potentially be tempted to seek funding to submit a paper to this journal but working with the digitally literate librarian can avoid this pitfall.

In addition to the focus groups with academic staff for the project mentioned above, I also arranged two focus groups with students and one of the key messages that emerged from that was that students clearly wanted academic staff to model good digital literacy practice. Some institutions have utilised students as digital champions but that was not a popular idea with our students. The route to developing the digitally literate student is through the digitally literate academic. And to that end I surmise that perhaps we should invest as much time working with the academic staff as we do with students to develop their digital skills. For example at Teesside we have an electronic reading lists system which links with the VLE and we train staff to create and manage their own lists. Whilst that is useful as an end in itself, the software also affords the opportunity of getting an indication of student engagement with the items on a reading list.

In terms of supporting students to be digitally literate there is a massive amount of work to be done – thankfully not all of it falling to library staff! However it has presented some interesting opportunities for collaborative working with other professionals across the institution. For example, in conjunction with our careers section we have co-delivered sessions for our graduate interns on managing their digital identity. Our e-learning technologists have helped me facilitate webinars, including one for transnational students based in Malaysia. In partnership with our graduate research school we have run sessions on keeping up to date and using social media to promote the work that researchers are doing.

It is interesting to reflect on the changing face of the information skills session, partly driven by digital literacy. Instead of "click here, then click here" didactic sessions, technology opens up the possibility of using a flipped classroom (or more accurately a flipped PC lab!) approach whereby the mechanics of using a database have already been covered beforehand in, for example, an online tutorial and the lab session is more focused on dealing with specific problems the students have had developing a search strategy or discussing the quality of the results of their searches.

Thanks to our grounding in information literacy we are clearly stakeholders in digital literacy. We have an awareness of both the digital aspects and the literacy aspects. In my experience librarians are often early adopters of new digital tools and keen to innovate and try something new. So perhaps regardless of the merits and demerits of digital literacy as a concept, when digital literacy is on the agenda we need to ensure that our voice is heard. We may find that we are pushing against an open door anyway and that out input is welcomed; because librarians know stuff and do stuff!