Framing the digitally capable university: Digital literacies as shared scholarly and professional practice

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The proliferation of "literacies" in educational discourse reflect a diverse array of interests, encompassing computer, information, technical, media literacies, and also forms like academic, financial, and health literacies. As digital literacies have become a concern for the higher education curriculum, there has been a tendency to define it as a practical type of operational know-how. This paper sets out a university-wide, holistic and critical approach that breaks from the legacy of institutional framings that narrow digital literacies to a set of skills or competencies.

In developing a Digital Literacies Framework, La Trobe University articulated a shared understanding of digital literacies as the capabilities and attitudes that are needed by staff and students 'in a digitally connected world'. This marks a shift from strategies that primarily deploy institutional curriculum mapping and measurement approaches; rather it argues for an institutional approach that requires collaboration and strategic engagement of students and academic and professional staff in order to meet goals related to building digital capability. The La Trobe Digital Literacies Framework takes a whole of university perspective that integrates policy and practice, providing a rationale for the critical importance of digital literacies in domains of life, work and learning, addressing an implicit 'Why?' question from staff and students. The University Library coordinated the Framework development. It was a scholarly undertaking that gathered evidence and reviewed international best practice. In this endeavour, the La Trobe University Library is a leader in the implementation of a university-wide strategy for digital literacies in Australia.

Introduction

In the current higher education environment, digital literacies underpin staff and student activity in all domains of knowledge and traverse boundaries around disciplinary and professional practice. Effective use of digital technology by university staff is vital to providing a compelling student experience, preparing graduates for the digital future and ensuring that universities can thrive as twenty-first century organisations. If students are to be better prepared to participate in tomorrow's digital workplaces and communities then it is essential that digital literacies are part of learning and research conversations today. At La Trobe University (La Trobe), a project to develop a digital literacies framework for the University was designed to increase conversations about digital issues and to establish a shared understanding of staff (academic and professional) and student digital literacies and their importance.

The development of the Digital Literacies Framework at La Trobe started in 2015 and resulted in the articulation of a shared understanding of digital literacies as the capabilities and attitudes that are needed by staff and students 'in a digitally connected world'. Most importantly, the project involved university staff in ongoing dialogue about key digital issues. The development and engagement process outlined in this paper is an example of the scale of engagement that can be achieved in a relatively short time with institutional support and commitment.

Defining digital literacies

In recent years, there have been a number of national projects that have explored understandings of digital literacies (Kenny et al 2016; Coldwell-Neilson, 2016). These projects draw together the multiplicity of definitions and key distinctions that emerge from the literature on digital literacies. For example, Lankshear & Knobel (2008) observe that while there is a tendency to refer to digital literacies as a practical type of "know-how" (p. 2), they distinguish "conceptual" from "operational" definitions, and refer to a broad understanding by

Bawden (2008) that digital literacy means "mastering ideas, not keystrokes" (p. 2).

The call for a less normative, more situated and critical perspective is a break with the legacy of institutional framings that narrow digital literacies to "know-how", as a set of skills or competencies. Studies of digital literacies in undergraduate students by Gourlay et al. (2014) note that students engage with the digital in complex ways, through digital devices, technologies, texts and work practices, in complex arrangements. A "situated" perspective emphases the "plurality" of digital literacies, and Lankshear & Knobel propose a socio-cultural perspective which views literacy as doing something with a "set of social organized practices" (2008, p. 4).

A practice-oriented and capabilities focus on digital literacies distinguishes social and critical understandings of literacies from "functional" ones. An understanding of digital literacies that extends curriculum to the digital futures of professional practice was scoped as an outcome of the Jisc projects, as "the capabilities required to thrive in and beyond education, in an age when digital forms of information and communication predominate." (Littlejohn, Beetham & McGill, 2012, p. 547).
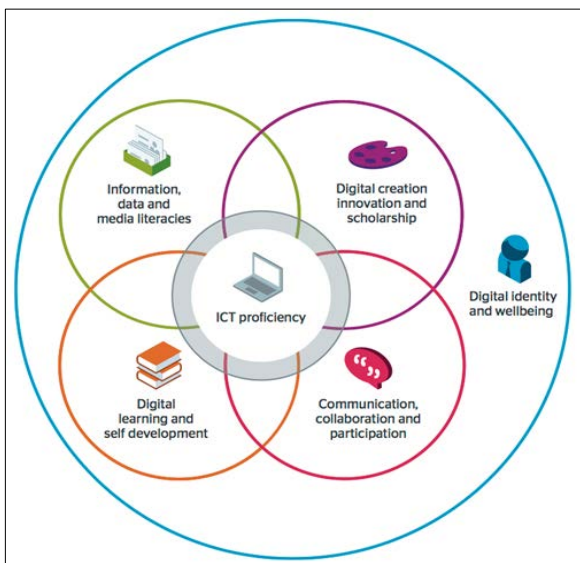

Figure 1: The six elements of digital capability. Beetham/Jisc 2015

The starting point for developing a digital literacies framework at La Trobe was the Jisc definition of digital literacies - "the capability that enables an individual to live, learn and work in a digital society" - and the Jisc capability model developed by Helen Beetham (Figure 1). The Jisc definition and model takes a pluralist approach to digital literacies; importantly the elements are not compartmentalized but interrelated and represent a wide range of social and cultural digital practices (Goodfellow, 2011). Adopting this robust existing definition of digital

literacies enabled the La Trobe framework development project to focus on engagement, collaboration and strategic purpose.

Developing a digital literacies framework at La Trobe

The proposal for a digital literacies framework at La Trobe was the basis for a successful internal "Digital Learning Strategy innovation grant" by the University Library. The rationale for the digital literacies framework development project was to make visible connections between digital capabilities, attitudes and development. A framework approach reinforces the digital capabilities required in an academic environment and the broad fluency that evolves from developing these capabilities. This connection is important in a sector that demands ongoing digital transformation but where digital fluency is not necessarily second nature for students (Pope & Mutch, 2015) or staff. In addition, at La Trobe we wanted to develop a framework to emphasise digital literacies as a shared responsibility and a whole-of-institution priority. As part of the University digital innovation program the project was visible and the relevance of a digital literacies framework for the university and the University Digital Learning Strategy (La Trobe University, 2015) was affirmed.

a. Overview of process

The first step in developing the framework was to set up a reference group. Members of the reference group were vocal digital literacies champions. The reference group met fortnightly and included representatives from all major stakeholder groups e.g. La Trobe Learning and Teaching, Library, ICT, Colleges, College Education teams, etc. The reference group also included Helen Beetham, an external digital literacies expert and higher education consultant, who was essential to the success of the project.

One of the first tasks of the reference group was to conduct an audit of digital practices at La Trobe. The purpose of the audit was to directly inform the development of the framework and ensure that the framework was aligned with the university learning, teaching and research environment and university strategic directions. The audit tools had been used and refined previously by Helen with over 15 tertiary institutions in the UK (Littlejohn, Beetham & McGill, 2012), with La Trobe the first in Australia. The key stages of the project undertaken by the reference group included:

- Information gathering and reviewing existing evidence
  - Audit
  - Staff Survey
- Communications

- o University news, social media and email channels
- Engagement
  - o Facilitation of focus groups, School meetings and individual meetings
- Drafting of framework documentation
- University-wide consultation on Draft framework
- Formal University endorsement – Education Committee and Academic Board.

b. Key characteristics of project

The institutional audit of the current state of digital practices at La Trobe generated enthusiastic discussion about digital literacies in the La Trobe community. This engagement process was an important characteristic of the project and it provided opportunities for people to talk, reflect and tell stories about digital literacies; either from a personal or professional perspective. At the heart of these conversations were two simple questions:

- Why are digital literacies important to you and/or La Trobe University?
- What does a digitally literate student or member of staff at LTU look like?

Engagement activities in meetings and focus groups addressed these questions and related sub-questions. This also allowed the relationship between staff and student digital literacies to be explored. In the staff survey, the key questions were expanded to explore the dimensions of digital habits, practices, aptitudes and identities in more detail. Because of their well-established liaison contacts and relationship in the Colleges, Library liaison staff played a key role in connecting academics to the project conversations at all campuses.

Engagement was the first important characteristic of the process; the second important characteristic of the project was that it was a strategic approach from the outset and was aligned with the university aspirations for digital learning, teaching and research. It addressed the institutional connection that needs to be made between digital learning, digital literacies and being a digitally capable organisation (Newland & Handley, 2016). While this connection is implicit in La Trobe strategy it had not previously been taken up across the university in an explicit and coordinated way.

c. Staff survey themes

A total of 422 staff responded to the survey that was part of the reference group's information gathering. This included 53% academic and 47% professional respondents. From the survey a number of themes emerged, that complemented other audit data collected and provided the reference group with the issues that needed to be addressed in the framework to promote a shared understanding of digital literacies. For example, themes and typical comments in these themes included:

- o Digital thinking
  - o *The technical know-how required currently is not complex, but staff and students won't embrace digital literacies unless they value them.*
  - o Scholarly communication
  - o *I am in the process of embracing digital technology and social media as it is part of the new norm in terms of learning, education, communication and marketing. These will be essential in the new economy*
- o Students as active digital users
  - o *Students have the invaluable "students' perspective" about how students like to learn online and what motivates/demotivates learning in an online/blended environment.*
- o Issues in curriculum design
- o Scholarly values and ethos
  - o *The technical know-how required currently is not complex, but …no level of teaching me the 'how' will change my confidence and capability. I need to value the 'why' and then the rest is a piece of cake.*
- o Communities of practice - academics - professional staff – students
  - o *We should employ students to assist academics with digital literacy.*
  - o *When I have an idea I need to be able to ask how can I do this, what's the best way to get this information, or what system exists that allows me to do ....*
- o Time to explore
  - o *The benefits are obvious, but how do I justify the time need to improve my digital literacy?*
  - o *Time, time, and more time to get to grips with it.*
- o Recognition and reward
  - o *I want to improve my digital literacy: it aids teaching and external engagement. But if I'm to improve in this area, the workloads need to offer time and space to do this.*
  - o *These are requirements for teaching in the modern world. They are an investment toward a teaching career.*

La Trobe digital literacies framework

It is no longer possible to function effectively as an academic, professional, scholar or educator without being engaged with the digital world. The completed Framework (La Trobe University, 2016) is about the intersection between digital attitudes, digital capabilities, community, technology and professional development of digital literacies. The goal is holistic: digital capability

involves academic, research and professional staff and students. The Framework clearly articulates the attitudes and capabilities that university staff and students need in a "digitally capable organisation" and these are defined at two levels: proficient and expert, and distinguished for staff and students. The digital capabilities are articulated as teaching, collaboration, scholarship, digital identity, information literacy, data literacy, media literacy, and creativity.
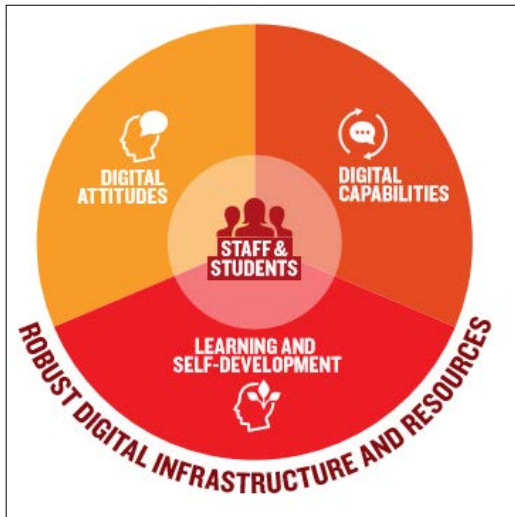

Figure 2: La Trobe University Digital Literacies framework

The Framework marks a shift away from previous notions of digital and information literacy that entailed skills development and technical proficiency. The capabilities articulated for students address "learning and work in a digital world", that is, the development of literacies for an unknown future. Thus, the Framework scopes not only the attitudes and capabilities of staff and students, but also the capacity of the university as an organisation to support this development.

Feedback on the Framework indicates that staff appreciate it as a tool that is well conceived and that can be used to get the digital literacies conversation started. Some staff have commented that it encourages thinking outside the square, rather than the sort of policy that forces a box ticking exercise. While it is generic it does provide indicators of examples of what digital literacies are and where they may apply to students and subjects.For these reasons, many academic staff have welcomed the Framework:

> *This framework to me appears excellent ... We have been encouraging digital literacy student projects in several of our subjects now for the last 3 years and it has been challenging but nevertheless terrific ... This framework will help support/develop our subjects further.*

Conclusion

The cohesive, whole university approach to digital capabilities distinguishes this framework from earlier developments of information and technological literacies. The development of the La Trobe Digital Literacies Framework involved a partnership between academic, research, professional staff and students, under the leadership and stewardship of the university library. The library's well-developed relationships across the university and its ongoing collaborative development of digital research and learning resources enabled a broad view across the learning, teaching and research needs of the university.

The Framework adopts a whole of university perspective and was developed by drawing on the Jisc model, La Trobe data, and international insights and experience. The project drew heavily on resources openly available from Jisc and in turn, the project reference group encouraged openness across Australian universities. The project was shared with other universities when in progress (including Adelaide, Melbourne, Deakin, New South Wales). Sharing work-in-progress with other universities considering an institution-wide approach to digital literacies is an important part of promoting the thinking and collaboration that is needed for a broader community of digital literacies.

The university-wide, holistic and critical approach to understanding digital literacies that was part of the framework development process was intentionally designed to break from the legacy of institutional framings that narrow digital literacies to a set of skills or competencies. The process adopted by La Trobe University to generate conversations and strategies around digital literacies could also be applied to other areas of shared practice, or at other institutions developing a digital literacies framework.

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