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The trouble with terminology: rehabilitating and rethinking 'Digital Literacy'

Abstract

This chapter explores the terminology in the field of digital literacy, how it relates to other literacies (e.g. academic literacy, information literacy) used in education. It explores the opportunities and challenges the terminology presents to those working in a evolving and somewhat contested landscape of higher education. It argues that if approached sensitively and thoughtfully then digital literacy could be viewed as a 'bridging term' that could allow related professional support staff to work together collaboratively. The chapter provides a model for improving learning support across an institution by developing a shared framework and holistic approach. Too often support services compete with each other for students attention and are not properly integrated into the discipline in which a student studies. This can lead to duplication of effort and gaps in provision, but more importantly it suggests to students that such support is remedial and not a core part of their discipline. By working collaboratively to develop a framework and definition of the literacy support that students need and supporting academic staff to understand the vital role that they play, digital literacy can be an opportunity to refresh and refocus student learning in higher education.

Introduction

This chapter is based on a paper given at the Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE) Conference in December 2015, which formed part of a symposium on the topic of digital literacy (Bennett *et al*, 2015). Building on discussions at the symposium and the author's experience occupying several different professional identities (librarian, learning technologist, educational developer, teacher and researcher) this chapter reflects on how terminology around digital and information literacies can cause misunderstandings and divisions between those working in higher education. The focus of this chapter is on student learning in higher education, although it draws on the author's experiences of working with staff as well. This is partly in recognition that in order to support students effectively, it is important for both academic and professional services staff to have a nuanced understanding of the terminology in the digital and information literacy fields. Staff also need an awareness of their own knowledge, skills and behaviour with regards to the use of digital technologies and information in its broadest sense. The chapter provides some practical steps that can be taken to bridge the gaps or overlaps in student support within an institution. It will also discuss how to overcome the misunderstandings that might arise between professional services and academic staff. Finally it will suggest ways to build a more holistic approach to supporting student learning in higher education.

The term digital literacy has gained relatively widespread recognition in a short space of time in UK higher education. The chapter will examine why, when there are many other learning literacies,

digital literacy seems to have a particular resonance and currency. I'll also examine the problems that this might cause and why digital is in many ways a distraction for teachers, who really need to focus on developing students' and their own critical abilities to handle information in all its guises effectively. Digital literacy has gained widespread attention, however this chapter will explore why it is a problematic and ill-defined term. It is also sometimes referred to interchangeably as 'digital capabilities' which is the term used by Jisc to describe the six capabilities that staff in post-16 education need for themselves and their learners (Jisc 2017). It is also the term used by UCISA who have undertaken a 'Digital Capabilities' survey across higher education staff since 2014 (UCISA, 2017). The choice of the word 'capabilities' is perhaps partly in recognition of the problems that have been associated with the use of the term 'literacy' in higher education. For some academics literacy is equated to basic skills, rather than higher-level thinking and cultural and communicative practices. However, introducing 'capabilities' into the debate (and also terms such as fluency or competency) may muddy the water further. The misunderstanding and confusion with other 'literacies' but also with terms such as computer literacy or digital skills (which is favoured by the UK Government) can lead to a variety of problems. At best this leads to duplication of effort in some areas of digital literacy support. For example, several learning support services provide students with help around referencing and avoiding plagiarism. However, the misunderstandings may also lead to gaps in provision in significant areas of emerging academic practice, for example providing advice and support for students in the use of digital note-taking tools or apps or managing their online profile and using social media in a critical and thoughtful manner. Both these important areas of digital literacy support often have no obvious natural professional lead. In some institutions the library, the learning technology team, careers or the learning development team might all offer different aspects of support, but they may assume that it is another department's responsibility. The misunderstandings and divisions between support services may even lead to turf wars, 'silo' thinking and reinforce the echo chambers that all professions exist in to some extent. Drawing on my experiences of working at the intersection of several support services means I have seen these challenges being played out in my own and other institutions. I have also noted that without a clear understanding of the language we are using, the misunderstandings will remain, particularly amongst academic staff, for whom the literacies language may be something of a mystery.

What is digital literacy?

The term digital literacy was first used in a book published in 1997 by Paul Gilster (Gilster, 1997). He defined it as:

... the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources when it is presented via computers. The concept of literacy goes beyond simply being able to read; it has always meant the ability to read with meaning, and to understand. It is the fundamental act of cognition. (Gilster, 1997, p.1)

Importantly for Gilster, digital literacy was not a new term for computer literacy, which focuses on technical abilities to operate a computer and use software effectively. Digital literacy recognised the Internet as a medium that needed specific literacies to critique the information that it provides, to separate *truth from fiction* and understand specifically how hypertext and non-linear reading allows new meanings to be constructed. Put simply Gilster, who was clearly ahead of his time, saw it as *literacy in the digital age*.

Despite the appearance of this book, the term gained little currency for at least another decade. For a short period of time (from 2002-2005) the term 'e-literacy' (the convergence of IT, E-learning and Information skills) gained some currency, following the establishments of a conference, hosted by universities in Glasgow and a short lived journal (Joint, 2005). However, it has taken almost 20 years for the terms to gain mainstream recognition and it continues to be used interchangeably with terms such as digital skills and digital capabilities. The term digital skills is currently used by the UK government and forms a key part of the Department for Media, Culture and Sports 'digital strategy' launched in February 2017 (DCMS, 2017). Digital in this sense refers largely to the broadband and network infrastructure, it is about delivering services using digital technology and about ensuring the workforce have the skills and capabilities needed to support the economy. However, those critical abilities to analyse the information that is presented in digital format, to separate truth from fiction, which are after all highly relevant today when we have all been bombarded with allegations of 'fake news', seem to be absent from the current mainstream policies. Additionally equating this to 'skills' implies some lower level functional abilities, rather than the critical thinking and ability to be discerning that literacy implies.

The term 'digital literacy' has been used in the higher education sector for a number of years. In 2010 Beetham and Sharp's model of digital literacy was adopted by Jisc (see Figure 1) who went on to develop first seven and then later six elements of digital literacy (Jisc, 2017).

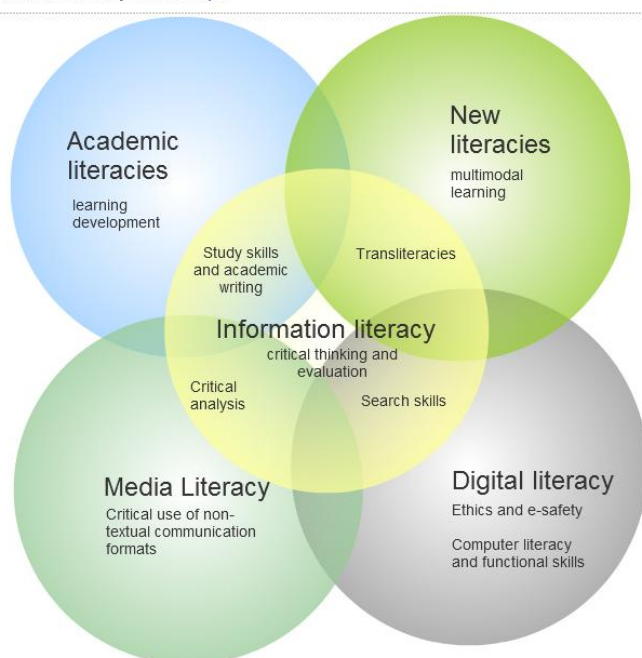


Figure 1: Beetham and Sharp's model of digital literacies 2010.

The term was also used by the Higher Education Academy in 2015 and provided a focus for the institutional Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) reviews that were carried out from 2015-16. The term 'digital literacy' is however a disputed term reflecting a tension between the perception of technology as either neutral or culturally situated (Hinrichsein and Coombs, 2013). The digital environment opens up possibilities and presents new challenges for staff and learners, so arguably there are a whole host of new literacies that both staff and students still need. However, underpinning it all is reading, writing and critical thinking. The need for these has not gone away, and they are not things that technology can do for us.

So why exactly might digital literacy be a problematic term? This is in part related to the range of other literacies that exist in the educational sphere, what can be regarded as the wider literacies landscape (see Figure 2).

Information Literacy Landscape



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The term information literacy was coined over 40 years ago (Zurkowski, 1974) and academic librarians use this term to signify the teaching they do (either through formal or informal learning) to develop high-level information handling skills in students. In addition to finding, evaluating and managing information, information literacy involves developing critical thinking skills in students to use information in all its forms. Some of these literacies might be what other professionals in HE call 'academic literacies' and the term has clear overlaps with terms such as media literacy, digital literacy and the field of 'new literacies'. Terminology is extremely important and is very much tied up with professional identities, particularly in the learning support field. This plethora of literacies with overlapping terms and concepts, which can be used quite differently by learning developers, educational developers, librarians and learning technologists can also cause confusion for academic staff. It has also meant rather than focusing on how best to support students,

discussions over which literacy is the container term, which literacy is the most important, has at times hijacked any sensible debate over how to provide practical support within an institution.

There needs to be a way of communicating the value of developing critical abilities in our learners to foster collaboration between higher education professionals and better support students. One suggestion is that given it's currency, the term digital literacy might move us closer together towards a common understanding of the abilities that underpin learning. However, it's not clear that digital literacy is the right term either; the word 'digital' immediately suggests that non-digital information or skills are less valid. It also has a tendency to alienate those professional services staff who are reluctant users of technology, or those who believe it to be a distraction to students. In a recent blog post Watling (2017) eloquently highlights how language matters, citing Neil Postman's book from 1993 *Technology*. Describing the belief that pedagogy matters more than technology in higher education, Watling actually comes down in favour of the term digital pedagogy. However, in this next section by examining the way digital literacy relates to information literacy, I hope it might bring us closer to focusing on what really matters; which is student learning.

How does digital literacy relates to information literacy?

The term 'digital literacy' can be problematic for those who have been teaching and researching what librarians call 'information literacy' and learning developers describe as 'academic literacies'. As previously mentioned, the term information literacy was coined in the 1970s by Paul Zurkowski. It was not intended as a library-centric model, but a call to all professions to help people understand the value of information and how to mould it for their needs, which largely went unheeded (Zurkowski, 1974). More recently information literacy has been described as "knowing when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner." (CILIP, 2013). Librarians increasingly recognise that information literacy is a key part of their role, particularly in formal education. Researchers and practitioners have worked to develop frameworks and models of information literacy and made efforts to embed it in the curriculum of mainstream education. However, recognition of this term outside the library profession has been slow and acknowledging librarians as educators, is not widespread, particularly in sectors outside formal education. The author and technologist Seth Godin (2011) argues that the librarian is a 'data hound, a guide, a sherpa and a teacher' not a keeper of books. However, it is fair to say that librarians are only recently developing their role as teachers and many approaches to information literacy still take a functional, skills-based approach.

The use of the word 'literacy' signifies not the teaching of skills or competencies, but practices, attitudes and behaviours that are context-specific. While there may be some generic 'literacies' that we all need in order to live, learn and work in society, arguably these are contextual and should be taught in an embedded way in the curriculum to be meaningful. Lea and Street (1998) writing about academic literacies, advocated moving away from the skills based, deficit model when supporting

student academic writing practices. This resonates with an increasing recognition of the need to view information literacy as a framework for learning, for example in recent work by the US Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) who used threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2003) to reformulate their Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education in 2015 (<http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>). Research by Secker and Coonan (2013) on A New Curriculum of Information Literacy (ANCIL) developed a learner-centred model and viewed information literacy as a part of a wider curriculum of critical abilities, attitudes and behaviours that underpin learning. However, how does digital literacy relate to academic and information literacies? Nowhere in the ten strands of ANCIL is there a technology or 'digital literacy' strand, as this research recognised the term 'information' to encompass digital and print abilities. However, the term information literacy outside the library profession is assumed to be a narrow concept associated with how students find published information, such as books and journals in a library setting. This means that much of the teaching that librarians do is not aligned with other literacies and may sit outside or alongside the curriculum.

Despite the apparent currency of the term digital literacy it has largely defied a concrete definition and Hinrichsen and Coombs (2013) argue, defining the term requires taking an ideological position that recognises that technology, like information, is not neutral. They also argue that a functional skills based approach of IT literacy, leads to digital literacy being taught outside the curriculum, rather than taught as part of academic practices and that 'broader literacy practices are not going to emerge spontaneously as a result of technology proliferation' (Hinrichsen and Coombs, 2013, p.4). It also risks alienating academic staff who may not perceive themselves to be fully digitally literate. However, perhaps the interest in 'digital literacy' presents an opportunity for information and academic literacy experts to reframe their activities. At some institutions digital and information literacies are presented as interlinked abilities that underpin learning. The 'digital' in digital literacy can be helpful as many teachers recognise that technology and the availability of online resources has changed students' relationship with information. No longer is information scarce, but the wealth of information means students need critical abilities, to be discerning about what they find online and how they use digital tools to share information for their studies and about themselves.

Whether we call it 'media and information literacy' (UNESCO, 2015), 'metaliteracy' (Jacobson and Mackey, 2013) or digital literacy, terminology matters because it helps academics, librarians, learning developers and learning technologists develop a shared understanding of their aims. However, in many institutions there is still work to be done to map these abilities onto a common framework and to develop an approach for embedding this in the curriculum. By recognising the overlaps and unique aspects of each literacy, those supporting digital, academic and information literacies can work together with academic staff. Moreover, it should then be possible to develop a shared framework that has a measurable impact on student learning, but which avoids prescribing

the tools and technologies that students should be able to use. This approach can also challenge the myth of the 'digital native' that persists amongst many discipline teachers, despite much evidence to the contrary (more on that story later!). Assumptions about how students develop their digital, academic and information literacies need to be challenged if we want to empower students to consider the information they trust, the digital tools and technologies they use, and the ethical issues when using and creating knowledge. The solid foundation in information literacy teaching positions librarians as key players as institutions develop digital literacy programmes, but there is much to learn from critical and academic literacy models and from embedding these beyond the library across an institution.

Academic practice and digital literacy

Working in educational development, teaching academic staff in higher education, has been particularly illuminating in exploring the misunderstandings over terminology. Teacher identity is closely aligned with an individual's discipline and for many new to teaching, the content or curriculum is their primary focus. Very few new teachers think about the skills, behaviours and practices they are trying to support and encourage in their students; they focus on the knowledge they are trying to impart. Therefore a common issue over the last 15 years is when staff make readings and resources available in the virtual learning environment to ensure students have access to the required knowledge. And yet conversely, the same staff later will regard this as 'spoon feeding' students who then are not learning how to use the library and undertake research if (for example) a link is not provided. This is often followed up with a complaint that students are 'lazy' and unwilling to visit the library. Here, technology is to blame; it's the 'fault' of Moodle or Blackboard that students don't do further reading. What in fact is happening here is an issue related to information or digital literacy and teachers, who often learnt to do research in a pre-digital age, forgetting the process they went through to learn about 'authority'.

The digital native debate

One of the most interesting topics to debate with new teachers is Prensky's much over-used concept of the 'digital native'. What is remarkable is that this research has little or no empirical evidence to support it, and even Prensky has revised his original notion of a simple generational divide between the younger technically fluent 'digital native' who has grown up with technology and older, less proficient 'digital immigrants'. However, the concept is a useful way of engaging teachers with the academic literature in the field of technology, educational development and the assumptions that they might make about young people's skills levels. Many teachers slip easily into the rhetoric that all young people are adept at using technology and have a far greater understanding of how to use technology than their teachers. They confuse technical proficiency with devices such as tablets and smartphones with critical abilities to find, evaluate, analyse and create new knowledge. Prensky cannot be blamed entirely here, for he did modify his digital native / digital immigrant hypothesis; however it has retained remarkable resilience as a concept. One of the most enlightening discussions with new academic staff is over the digital native debate. It reveals more about their own insecurities and inadequacies over how to use digital technology,

rather than what their students might be doing. It is important to challenge the view that there is a homogenous generation proficient in using technology, as this belies the huge variety of skills and preferences that exist. The 'Residents and Visitors' (White and Le Cornu, 2011) typology is viewed by many as a more helpful way of viewing people's interactions in online spaces. This research has been used to develop an activity with learners where they are asked to place their engagement with different online tools on two axes: the personal and institutional, and the resident and visitor. Spaces where one is resident are not just those where you spend a lot of time, but online spaces where people feel comfortable and will leave many traces of themselves, whereas spaces you use as a visitor you tend to visit to get the information you need and then leave. The maps that students (and staff) draw can be enlightening, showing there is no simple generational divide and that we all have personal preferences for the online spaces we inhabit. But they have also indicated that many students are resident in social media, rather than the institutional tools we provide for them such as the virtual learning environment or their institutional email account. However what these activities also reveal is questions over who best might be teaching digital literacies to students, and in many cases it is clear the expertise does not lie with academic colleagues.

Practical steps to building a more holistic approach to student learning

This section presents several practical steps that can be taken to bridge the gaps or overlaps in student support within an institution. There are also some suggestions about how to overcome the misunderstandings that might arise between various professional services staff and faculty / academic staff when discussing digital and information literacy. The ideal solution is to build a more holistic approach to supporting student learning in higher education, where academic staff and those across professional services, are in alignment. These approaches are presented in sequential order, however your institution may decide to try some of these approaches rather than follow this approach prescriptively. The aim is to help you better equip your students with the abilities they need while in higher education, and beyond in the workplace and in their daily lives.

Stage 1: Developing graduate attributes

Create a cross institutional definition of the critical abilities your institution aspires to develop in its students. You may call these graduate attributes, they may be your institutions' Unique Selling Point (USP) and they may already exist, however it's worth undertaking a process to review what these are. What do the students arrive at your institution able to do and how do you move them to the point where they are equipped with these distinct abilities? At this point you do not need to focus on what you call these abilities, but think about what students who graduate from your institution should be able to do. How will they think? How will they approach problems? How will they deal with situations where there is not a reading list or model answer? How does your institution ensure they are lifelong learners?

Stage 2: Creating an institutional framework

If such a thing does not exist already, it might be appropriate to create an institutional framework or model of student literacies or graduate attributes either across your institution or specific to each school or department. You may wish to customise one of the existing models or frameworks that exist or look at another institution that has developed such a framework. Examples are listed in the further reading, but the Jisc model of digital capabilities is worth considering. Ensure that all terminology is clearly defined in a way that all staff can understand and relate to and involve staff from across the institution in developing or customising the framework so it is relevant to the different disciplines.

Stage 3: Undertaking a review or audit

Carry out a review or an audit of the digital literacy provision happening across the institution. This is an important step to understanding where there might be any gaps in provision or overlaps and duplication. Which departments are responsible for developing student abilities and moving them towards becoming lifelong learners? Is this embedded in the curriculum? Is it taught alongside the curriculum? Are all students in all departments or schools getting the same opportunities? One approach might be to use an existing framework to map the activity to, however, if you already have developed an institutional framework you can use this to audit your current provision.

Stage 4: Identifying overlaps and gaps

Following your review it may not be clear where there is duplication of effort, or where there might be any gaps in provision. Ensure that expectations are clear about which departments are responsible for leading in specific areas of digital and information literacy support but consider planning joint sessions wherever possible that focus on the tasks students need to be undertaken in a holistic way, e.g. approaching an assignment from the point of view of the process, i.e. doing the research, searching for literature, writing it and citing and referencing.

Stage 5: Sustainability

In order to make it sustainable, embed the framework into the course approval or re-validation process, so that staff have to demonstrate how the courses they teach are supporting student learning. Also ensure that the framework is revised and adapted and a living document, rather than a one-off piece of work that becomes irrelevant. A programme of staff development is also key to ensure that this new approach is supported and sustainable. Staff may need to be up-skilled to provide more effective support to their students, but also so they know where to signpost students who need help. It is important to ensure that new staff joining the institution are clear about the graduate attributes and abilities that students leaving the institution need to have. Finally the

culture of the institution needs to help ensure that professional services staff continue to work in partnership with academics on curriculum design.

Conclusion

This chapter highlights how terminology in the two fields of digital and information literacies can lead to challenges in the practicalities of providing both learning support services to students and effective staff development. The goal is to ensure that both professional services staff and academic staff work collaboratively to provide support for students holistically. The steps outlined in this chapter provide one model for an institutional approach to improving learning support. What is key is to place students' needs at the centre of any approach, rather than developing services that simply mirror the structure of the institution. Working closely with academic departments and discipline specialists is important to ensure that digital and information literacies are embedded into the curriculum, not bolted on as an after thought. However, staff development also needs to be a key feature of digital and information literacy support, to make it sustainable and to support cultural change across the institution.

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