

Digitally Mastered

Aspects of Digital Literacy among Taught Postgraduate Students at the University of Oxford

Defining digital literacy

Aviram and Eshet-Alkali (2006) have defined digital literacy as “skills that are considered necessary for effective and mindful learning in the emerging digital environments.” These can be a combination of technical-procedural, cognitive and emotional-social skills.

However, to be meaningful skills need to be seen in the context of the social practices in which they are applied (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). Moreover, they mobilise particular values and priorities, including – in the case of the “new” (digital) literacies – those of collaboration and sharing, which are contrasted with the “old” ones (e.g. individual authorship and ownership) (ibid.). Seen in this way, digital literacies may be indicative of a clash between two cultures: book-based and digital (Aviram and Eshet-Alkali 2006).

Here, we present evidence of digital literacy skills demonstrated by students on taught Master’s programmes at Oxford, and of a dialogue (rather than a clash) between the two cultures as students move between the “real” and digital worlds in managing both their academic and social lives.

Aviram, A. & Eshet-Alkali, Y. (2006). Towards a Theory of Digital Literacy: Three Scenarios for the Next Steps. *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning*, 2006 Issue 1. <http://www.eurodl.org/>

Lankshear, C. & Knobel, M. (2007). Sampling “the new” in New Literacies. In M. Knobel & C. Lankshear (Eds.), *A new literacies sampler* (pp. 1-24). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

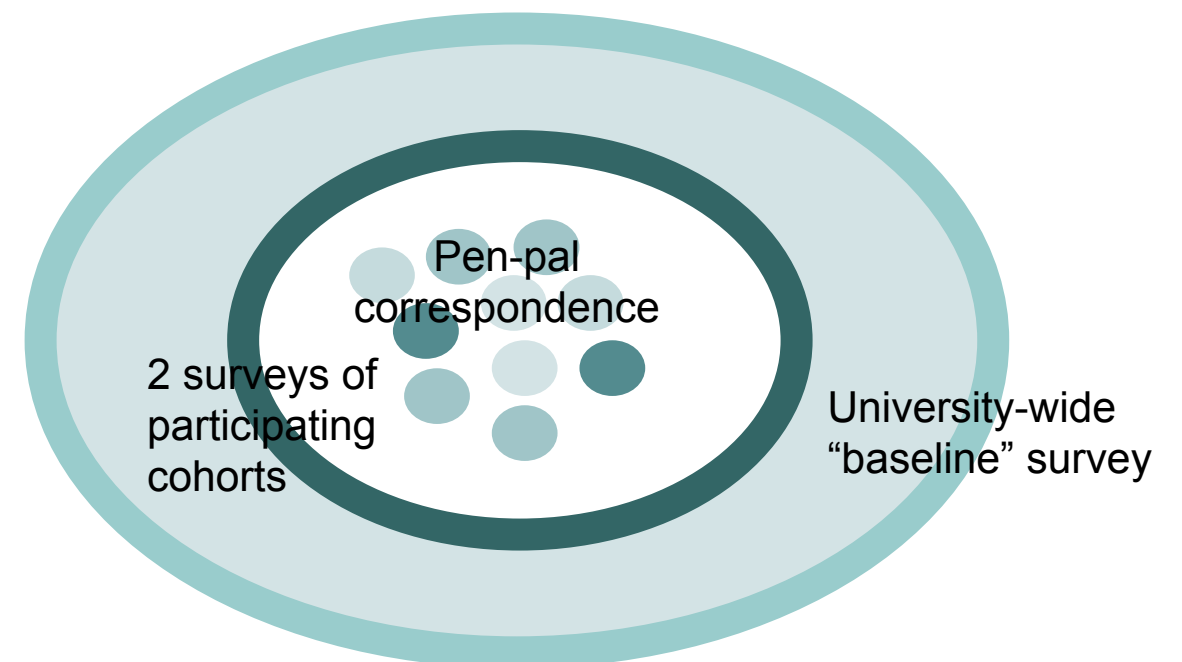


About the Thema project

We followed Master’s students on 7 full-time and 2 part-time programmes in Education, Medical Sciences and Continuing Education during 2007-8. In focusing on their use of digital technologies to support their academic and social lives, we investigated:

- The choices that students make in their study strategies;
- Changes in their use of technology during the course;
- “Significant moments” in their learning;
- Characteristics of the “effective” use of technology in learning.

The project collected qualitative data from 23 students in a “pen-pal” style correspondence by email over 8-9 months, culminating in a face-to-face interview. The data were contextualised within two online surveys of a larger sample of 77 students (including the pen-pals) on the selected programmes at the start and end of this period. We additionally conducted a “baseline” survey to establish the landscape of technology use by students across the whole University in May 2007.



Digital literacy: it's not just about IT skills

Students seem to equate being “tech-savvy” with advanced skills in computer science, but what counts is curiosity and the ability to find and evaluate what's useful:

Teresa (Education) wrote: “I generally do not have much confidence in my technology abilities.” Even so, “I bought webcams for my mum and my sister and set them up with Skype.” “I am actually doing my questionnaire data collection [for my dissertation] online, using Survey Monkey. [...] I will also use it for some data analysis, as well as SPSS. [...] As my participants are in Japan and I am in the UK, I will use Skype for telephone interviews. [...] there is a possibility that some of my correspondence will be through Facebook.”

In contrast, Madeleine (Medical Sciences), who had a degree in Computer Science, didn't spend a lot of time looking for new tools herself: “if there's something I know that would be really, really useful then I might talk to people or... and more like, more specific people for a specific thing.”

Obtaining and evaluating information in a digital world

“Digital technologies give great power to students, as they provide quick and easy access to a huge wealth of information which would otherwise be unavailable or difficult to obtain. This applies both in terms of course material posted by lecturers through services like WebLearn, and in terms of access to remote electronic information sources (e.g. e-journals).”
– Nat (Medical Sciences)

“I kind of trust Wikipedia when the article is not a stub, and as regards Google, it depends on the results I am given of course. If the websites look too personal and not trustworthy and scientific enough, I try to find a better source or at least another source which supports the facts provided by the non-reviewed resource.” – Madeleine (Medical Sciences)



Peer collaboration online

“The people in my course created a Facebook group where we discuss logistical stuff like availability of books or clarification of certain concepts or sometimes even, outlines of formats, etc. [...] It's an easy way to stay in touch with each other and get immediate help.” – Indra (Education)

Ameena and Chun-Tao became “research buddies” to support each other as they worked on their dissertations: “We meet once a week, discuss on Skype and exchange e-mails. We talk to each other about our dissertations and get the other person's views. We fix for each other goals and things to achieve weekly. We have also set a schedule for the dissertation research.” – Ameena (Education)

Looking in a different way at problems...

Edward (Applied Landscape Archaeology) described how a digital tool can change the study of landscapes: “You can build up a layered landscape using MapInfo and take out what you don't want, like all the building and the roads, and you can put back the streams in the right places if you know they've been diverted, or if you know the streams were probably flowing 2,000, 4,000 years ago and they're not flowing now. So using all the clues available you can build, rebuild the landscape of the period you're looking at.”

...and at oneself

Technology allowed Ellen (Education) to look at her material in new ways, leading to a profound change in her self-perception: “Coming from a liberal arts background everything for me is always about words, and it was just the way that I thought. And then once I started using Excel [...] all of a sudden I went from being a Word person to being an Excel person, and it was like this weird almost paradigm shift of ‘I'm no longer just bound to being a liberal arts student, I'm a researcher now, I can think scientifically’.”

Organising one's learning: digital vs. paper tools

“For a rather ‘messy’ person like me, I find online calendars extremely useful. It is almost like a ‘personal assistant’ to me! [...] I have also started on a log book and a blog to document my thoughts and progress on my dissertation.”

– Chun-Tao (Education)

However, others found a paper-based medium more conducive to their learning:

“It’s just better to have it in my hands compared to always needing to start the computer or always needing to check online on the calendar. And it’s just it’s kind of different. The same with reading a book, I can’t read a paper or a book in the same way online as I can if I can just underline things and write up things in the margin.” – Madeleine (Medical Sciences)



Online social relationships and personal integrity

Students displayed a wide range of approaches to social software and had conscious strategies for conducting their online relationships:

“I have found some long-lost friends on Facebook and very grateful to it!” – Chun-Tao (Education)

“If I meet someone at a bop and I think they are someone I’d like to talk to or spend more time with, I try to find them on Facebook through our mutual friends and then I know they are there and I have a casual way to start contacting them.” – Anne (Education)

“I stay in close contact with a few people and not at all with the hundred or whatever other people who are on my contact list.” – Hashini (International Human Rights Law)

“I remember once when one of my classmates told me that, she said I don’t need fake friends.”
“If they are your real friends you would have their email address, you would have them on MSN, you would have their mobile numbers. [...] I don’t know why they want to leave messages on the Funwall on Facebook that you want other people to see your message.” – Liling (Education)

Recognising that not everyone wishes to participate in social networks, students maintain dual channels of communication: “Social activities are planned through Facebook, and I think it’s a convenient way. But I know there are a few people who are not on Facebook and that might be the reason why we used email [as well].” – Madeleine (Medical Sciences)

Managing one's presence in cyberspace

“I think that from the moment one person is present on the internet by giving his/her real name, by having blogs or using wikis for example, he/she is aware of evolving in a public space.” – Ameena (Education)

“As long as you control your privacy levels and keep in mind that your profile is online, there should be no problem. [...] Facebook can be intrusive if the person does not make full use of the privacy options available.” – Indra (Education)

“I simply unplug my ethernet cord, keeping me from the internet all together. Additionally, I simply sign out of Skype, Gchat, etc. when I do not want these distractions.” – Natalie (Medical Sciences)