"Yes, but what does it mean?" How lecturers need to cross the digital divide.

Sarah Penney

Peter Wolstencroft

The American critic, Howard Rheingold once famously said that soon the digital divide will not be between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' but between the 'know-hows and the 'non-know-hows'. When looking at the latest statistics on digital usage, you can see that he has a point. Almost 99% of adults under 65 own a mobile phone (Statista 2024) whilst 98% have access to the internet and 83% were active on social media (Statista 2024). The all-pervading nature of technology means that whilst digital poverty, where people do not have access to technology, still exists, the overwhelming majority could be classified as 'haves' in Rheingold's quote.

Probing further, a more nuanced picture emerges. Whilst the digital competency, defined as the ability to use the technology, of many of these users is unquestioned, it is important not to assume that this competency extends to all aspects of using digital technology in higher education. JISC describe six pillars that make up a digital capabilities' framework, namely:

- Digital proficiency and productivity (functional skills)
- Information, data and media literacies (critical use)
- Digital creation, problem solving and innovation (creative production)
- Digital communication, collaboration and participation (participation)
- Digital learning and development (development)
- Digital identity and wellbeing (self-actualising)   (JISC, 2024)

As you can see, what is often described as digital competency, which JISC call digital proficiency and productivity, is only one part and we should never mistake expertise in the first pillar for ability in the other five. An example of this would be a user who is given a new digital device. Given that most tech companies focus on an intuitive approach to using their technology, whereby users are guided through the setup and use of the device through a process where the answers are increasingly obvious, they are likely to be able to use it with few problems. However, this is only half the story; understanding any outputs requires the critical use of the device, whilst doing something with any outputs would involve creative production.

Our contention is that it is vital that academics working in UK universities do not conflate the concept of digital competency with the remaining five pillars that make up overall digital literacy. This is an easy mistake to make as digital technology often reverses the normal classroom approach whereby knowledge is concentrated amongst academics. With digital technology, the more informed group is likely to be the students. But just as we teach our students to reflect and challenge what we tell them, so we must do the same with digital technology.

Manchester Metropolitan University, Faculty of Business and Law, has introduced a new approach that is designed to ensure that digital skills are at the heart of the curriculum and that academics understand the elements that make up digital education. The overarching goal is to upskill academics in the area so that they feel confident in challenging students and they are also secure enough in their knowledge so that they can support the digital literacy of students without having to worry about any lack of digital competency. The approach revolves around building a framework of digital

literacy and ensuring that academics are aware of the various elements that make up digital education. The framework splits skills the area into eight sections, collectively known as the 8Cs. These are: digital culture, cognition, construction, communication, confidence, creativity, creativity and civic engagement. Within the framework three elements, knowledge, skills and behaviours have been used and academics can work through the framework, identifying strengths and elements for professional development and hence, better understand the umbrella term 'digital literacy'.

A pilot study is currently taking place which involves academics completing a self-assessment questionnaire and producing a personalised plan to upskill themselves in this area. This requires an investment in time and money but is vital when supporting our students. A key part of this is to raise awareness amongst academics, we aren't looking to create a situation where everyone is an expert in the area but what we are looking to do is create a situation where academics have the confidence to support and challenge students and that they understand that the ability to navigate their way around a smartphone is only one part of what makes up digital education.

References

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