Beyond IT skills: Developing Digital Practices and Identities

We need to care about students’ digital literacies and capabilities because much of what they do is mediated by digital tools. We need to be able to talk about ‘digitalness’ with people across our institution, the UK and Europe using language that makes sense. This enables us to identify our own strengths and weaknesses, to find support and learn new digital ways of doing, and to recognise and share our expertise with others. This brief introduction illustrates why we need to broaden our thinking beyond ‘IT skills’ to include questions of access, practices, identity, and to reflect on how social, cultural and political contexts intersect with these questions.

Digital Literacies are more than ‘IT skills’

It is easy to consider IT skills as being discrete, isolated skills that are easily transferable from one context or discipline to another, that can perhaps be taught via a generic manual, handbook or workshop. However, operational skills are only a single, albeit important, level. Sharpe and Beetham (2010) and Bennett (2014) suggest a greater complexity, encompassing access, skills, practices and identity. In order to develop skills and meaningful ways of using those skills, a learner must have access to resources such as hardware, software, networks and time. Much of these are outside of the individual’s agency, and are controlled by the institution.

A learner must apply the operational skills they have developed in a meaningful way to achieve a relevant task. For example, I may have the skill to create a slideshow in PowerPoint with exciting slide transitions, but to be use this effectively as a teaching tool, I must understand far more about teaching and learning – and make critical decisions as to what will work and what will not. These digital practices are transferable to other digital tools, in this case for presenting, and so are not restricted to a particular piece of software.

A learner’s reflection on their digital practices within an understanding of the digital landscape is important in developing the identity of a digitally literate person. The key to becoming digitally literate may be to recognise areas of expertise; transferability of digital practices; confidence in learning. Perhaps
the most important point, is that a digitally literate person is critical – she chooses how, when and why to use a digital approach, and may often choose a non-digital approach. Perhaps, digitally literate people no longer separate digital from non-digital; these are no longer defining features of the tools and practices within the learner’s repertoire.

Lastly, digital practices are situated within social, cultural and political contexts. Digital ways of working are part of the society and culture of the workplace or discipline – certain tools, methodologies and types of knowledge have more value within a discipline than another. Similarly, the development of new digital resources and practices, how they are used and promoted, shapes society as well – for example we can look at the impact of data collection via social media. Finally, we need to be aware of political agendas around digital literacy, asking

- What assumptions are made?
- Why are we being steered in certain directions?
- Who do the skills, practices and identities we develop help and what ends do they serve?

References
