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Bennett, Elizabeth

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The case for a curriculum development approach to developing students' digital literacies.

Abstract

Supporting the development of students' digital literacies, those skills needed for living and working in 21st century, has been recognised as a global issue for higher education (Lee 2014). In the UK context, there has been a spot light on the topic from a range of influential stakeholders and sector wide bodies (House of Lords 2015; NUS n.d; QAA 2015) and has resulted in institutions grappling with their response to the issue (UCISA 2015). In this paper I identify an approach to addressing students' digital literacies through the use of curriculum design. I draw on the notion of ownership and apply it in three different ways to make the case for this approach.

PAPER

Supporting the development of students' digital literacies, those skills needed for living and working in 21st century, has been recognised as a global issue for higher education (Lee 2014). In the UK context, there has been a spot light on the topic from a range of influential stakeholders and sector wide bodies (House of Lords 2015; NUS n.d; QAA 2015) and has resulted in institutions grappling with their response to the issue (UCISA 2015). A curriculum design approach to adoption of technology within the higher education has been promoted by Salmon and Wright (2014) in which cross functional teams of academics, librarians and learning technologists work together to redesign a learning activity. Salmon and Wright (2014) do not explicitly link their approach to digital literacies instead they make the case for curriculum design as an effective tool to challenge academic staff resistance to adopting technology. They also argue that curriculum design supports a collegiate approach to the design of teaching and learning which addresses staff development needs in a more effective way than through other forms of staff development. The argument that I present here, extends Salmon and Wright's rationale for the use of curriculum design to examine how this curriculum design approach can support students' digital literacy. I use the notion of ownership to support my argument and identify three different ways that ownership relates to this issue.

The first aspect of ownership relates to how curriculum design can support an institutional agenda towards developing digital literacies. It has been well documented that some academic staff resist adoption of new practices. This is in part due to conflicting pressures

on their time (USISA 2014). In addition lecturers may find that new practices are dissonant with more familiar practices and then this may lead to feeling threatened and to being resistant making changes (Satchwell, Barton and Hamilton 2013, p.43). Even when lecturers have themselves initiated change some report this process as emotionally challenging (Bennett 2014). As Bayne has noted “working online as teachers and learners, we are working in ‘destabilized’ classrooms, engaging in spaces and practices which are disquieting, disorienting, strange, anxiety-inducing, uncanny” (2010, p.6). Institutions often attempt to address the issue of promoting students’ digital literacies through ‘top down’ approaches and these can be very powerful in modifying behaviours and achieving change (Thornton 2014). However a ‘top down’ approach can result in strategic compliance “a form of artful pragmatism which reconciles professional and managerial interests” (Gleeson and Shain 1999, p.482) or avoidance. The benefit of a curriculum design approach is that it places lecturers in control of the process and thus helps to overcome resistance to the agenda. As Hardaker and Singh (2011, p.230) argue “lecturers need to perceive that they are able to influence the eLearning initiatives within the institutions... and without this innovation is likely to result in rejection or ‘false’ compliance to top down directives

The second aspect of ownership which a curriculum design approach helps to achieve is that of ownership within the curriculum. The aim of the workshop is to redesign an aspect of the curriculum to achieve outcomes that the academic team consider to be relevant to their particular discipline. For example we facilitated workshops which were concerned with developing a flipped classroom approach within a nursing programme and use of voting pads within a MEng programme. The redesign that result from the workshop were owned by academics and were situated in their discipline context. This approach goes beyond notions of digital literacies as ‘skills’ to ensure that they are embedded into practices, a notion widely supported by the literature (Satchwell et al 2013, p.44). In addition placing a focus on technology to support an academic purpose helps to motivate academic staff towards adoption (Bennett 2014). Thus addressing digital literacy through curriculum design gives academics greater control and ownership because the focus is on the academic content and how it is being taught and thus positions digital literacy as an aspect of the broader curriculum.

The third element of ownership relates to how digital literacies are owned across roles and services within the institution. Digital literacies are multifaceted in that they include a range of domains: information literacy, technological literacy, media awareness and application and evaluation of knowledge (Beetham 2015). They are often addressed by a number of different roles within the institution including librarian, learning technologist and the discipline expert. Thus there is a danger that these digital literacy skills are not felt to be the responsibility of

anyone and, as Margayan et al. (2011, p.437) found, lecturers tended to think that technology might be appropriate for other subjects rather than theirs. They might be called 'orphan capabilities' with no one feeling responsible for how they are articulated or developed. The curriculum design workshop helps to address this issue by involving academics, learning technologist and subject librarian as workshop participants. Thus it enables dialogue between these people about how these 'orphan capabilities' can be adopted within in the curriculum.

To conclude, this paper has set out the case for focussing on a curriculum design approach to developing higher education students' digital literacies. It has argued that this approach addresses three common barriers or issues related to uptake: resistance to 'top down' initiatives from academics, the need to view digital literacies as academic practices rather than disembodied skills, and the danger that digital literacies are 'orphans' within the complex structures of higher education institutions. The paper has argued that a curriculum development approach can address these because it supports lecturer agency, locates the development within academic programmes and by working in cross functional teams. This approach is not new to academic development: it has been applied across a range of institutions in the UK, Scandinavia, South Africa and Australia in particular (Salmon and Wright 2014), however the case has not been made previously for an explicit link to students' digital literacies. Thus this paper adds to the digital literacy discussions and is relevant to the HE sector both within the UK and globally.

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