

## Telling stories, making sense

Transcript of voice over for video on digital literacies made for JISC online conference pre conference activity week session – a conversation with Frances Bell.

Frances and I both care passionately about embedding digital literacies so decided to talk about this and open the discussion to conference delegates. I made the video for this session

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### Rich history<sup>1</sup>

I'm going to talk about telling stories and about digital literacies and open practices and about a few approaches that I think really embed these into the student experience.

*Which lens do you bring to this discussion? Do you take a narrow focus or wider angle?*

I think it's important to acknowledge that there is a rich history that has contributed to, and to a large extent shaped, the quite disjointed way we support student literacies in our educational institutions...

There are a number of descriptions we have used in the past to describe the kinds of capabilities that are now encompassed by the term digital literacies - I've been arguing about terminology in this field for twenty years and the jury is still out

- library skills
- research skills
- ICT skills
- information literacy
- e-literacy
- academic literacies
- professional literacies
- media literacies

One of the reasons for these different views is that within educational institutions there are several different groups that own these various literacies, each bringing their own traditions, theories and approaches.

- IT support teams focusing on tools and institutional systems
- Librarians supporting information and research literacies
- Teachers supporting academic and subject discipline literacies
- Educational developers supporting researchers and staff literacies
- Careers staff supporting employability skills
- Research students offering peer support

### Frameworks and approaches<sup>2</sup>

*Who owns the literacies? Which ones do you support? How do they overlap?  
Which hat or hats do you wear?*

How is it affected by current drivers and agenda's such as?

- Employability
- the need to ensure efficiencies

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.caledonianacademy.net/spaces/LLiDA/index.php?n=Main.LiteratureReview>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.caledonianacademy.net/spaces/LLiDA/index.php?n=Main.CompetenceFrameworks>

- the notion of gradueness
- provision of flexible curricula for diverse student groups
- providing authentic learning experiences

*Within your institution do they connect and if not should they?*

This is a real challenge with so many different frameworks shaping how these groups incorporate literacies and impact on how students experience both their curriculum and support services. The frameworks can be incompatible and compete with each other. They certainly don't result in coherent approaches across an institution. I'm listing just a few examples from many here a more comprehensive listing is available on the [LLiDA wiki](#)

- [seven pillars of information literacy](#)
- [European](#) and [uk charters](#) for media literacy
- [i-curriculum](#)
- [qaa frameworks](#) and benchmarks
- [tomorrows doctors](#)

For students to engage I would argue that support for literacies needs to be embedded, and by that I mean linked to their curricula and their assessment. Embedded in an holistic way.

Developing **Institutional frameworks** can help to overcome the disparate experience that students might get and the process of going through this can highlight gaps and duplication in provision. The new JISC [Developing Digital Literacies programme](#) is focussing on the development of coherent, inclusive and holistic institutional strategies and organisational approaches for developing digital literacies for all staff and students in UK further and higher education. It's good to see staff included in there.

*How confident are you about your own literacies?*

We all cross boundaries between learner and teacher in a world of global open social networking and personally owned technologies. We are increasingly sharing our own content, gathering in collective knowledge and sometimes collaborating to produce new content.

*How does this contrast with our closed institutional systems? Is there more value in teaching students to use our institutional technologies and resources or should we be enabling them to utilise a range of open technologies and content as appropriate for their learning and wider needs. Perhaps it's a question of balance.*

### **Embedding digital literacies**

On a personal level I've been involved in this world for many years now<sup>3</sup> starting with IT training in the NHS moving through to using technologies to support distance learning students with information literacies at the University of Leicester. One of the most interesting experiences was when I worked at Strathclyde on the [DIDET project](#). This involved embedding a range of literacies into an undergraduate product design engineering module and redesigning several modules for the first two years to develop a staged and integrated approach to their digital literacies. One of the most rewarding aspects was that by the end of the project the engineering academics were referring to design literacies – this term became meaningful to them and their students, but included a lot of what we might expect to see as digital literacies:

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<sup>3</sup> Published papers at <http://loumcgill.co.uk/curriculum-vitae/papers-and-presentations/>

- IPR and ownership
- critical evaluation
- communicating through social technologies
- finding, creating and sharing content with US students
- reflective learning.

In other words - Authentic learning experiences.

This experience of embedding digital literacies within subject curricula is, I think the most powerful way of engaging students. They don't see it as an add-on, because it is incorporated into existing learning outcomes, activities and assessments.

### **DS106 – Digital Storytelling open course**

One model to enhance digital literacies that I have recent experience of has been really inspiring to me, on a personal level as well as professionally. I recently took part in an open online course. Some of you may have heard of it or seen it referred to on twitter as ds106 which is about [Digital Storytelling](#). I decided to join as one of the open students because of my involvement in the [JISC UKOER programme](#), and because I home educate my 14 year old son. It seemed to be a great opportunity for us both to learn together. In the end my partner also joined in so we had a family experience of the course.

The course was developed by Jim Groom and Martha Burtis at the [University of Mary Washington](#) in the US – a liberal arts University in Fredericksburg, Virginia. It's a continually evolving course and its ongoing development is supported by the model being taken on by other institutions – even to the extent of retaining the course name ds106. A version is currently being run by Michael Branson Smith at [York College City University of New York](#) – Communications Technology 101. I've registered on that one too. It is really challenging to describe the course because it becomes such a personal experience. Each recent iteration has a narrative that helps to engage students and focus activities around.

The course participants include registered students taking the course at the UMW for credit and the open students from around the world. There were two things that struck me as interesting right from the start –

- Some participants had done the previous version of the course and were still participating.... just like I do now... It was a 5 week intense experience that I refuse to let go – although it has officially ended, my family and I are still working on several things. DS106 is 4 Life and it is addictive. We often having late night conversations about new assignments and how we might do them.
- I couldn't tell who were the tutors/staff and who were the students – the boundaries are very blurry. Everyone does assignments, anyone can create new assignments, we add tutorials in a range of formats if we introduce new software and we comment on and review each other's work, we describe and reflect on our processes. The process is more important than the end product.

*So how is this one digital storytelling course one of the best examples of incorporating digital literacies that I have ever seen?*

### **Tools and technologies**

The term digital literacies implies the use of tools and the course did involve learning and experimenting with different technologies. This was very well supported and a few things struck me about their approach

- open and free tools were highlighted but if students had preferred (already purchased) tools they could use them
- students and staff used the same tools and tried out new ones suggested by others

- everyone was encouraged to make a tutorial if they used a new technique or new tool. This is really effective in making the course sustainable and manageable. One tool – [MPEG streamclip](#) -changed during the course and made one of the assignments easier (animated gifs) which was quickly shared with the wide ds106 community. Here's one made by my son.
- the whole course was centred on and encouraged the use of open social networking tools such as blogging and twitter, which supported the development of a community
- the use of radio and internet TV added a sense of presence and gave some coherence to the course structure.

### **Digital Identity**

Much more important than the tools for me was the value of exploring our own and others digital identities. This is an animated gif that I made as part of the course. It is Norma Desmond from the film Sunset Boulevard. I made this because one of my online identities is Norma Desmond. I am [Norma on flickr](#). This has become such a major identity that people do call me norma and I love it when that happens. Even when I met my online flickr pals at a face to face meet they called me norma.

Managing digital identities is an important literacy. I think that offering students an opportunity to explore their online identities at a time when they are open to learning, reflecting on their experience and perhaps looking to the future is really important. Getting feedback from other students is critical here too – how people respond to your persona (whether very like your offline self or completely different) can help people consider the impact of using different media to present and represent themselves. Some of the assignments could be very revealing in a personal sense (see for example [exquisite corpse](#)). What is also interesting about this assignment is that it was added during the course by a student – so students get to pick from a range or make a new one – another very interesting idea that supports sustainability but more importantly allows choice and creativity from students. Here is the page of [design assignments](#).

### **Digital storytelling**

This is another really important aspect of digital literacies – how do you use the various media available to tell your story? – it might be a real story, a work report, student essay, a work of fiction or poetry – it might be totally visual, or just audio, or a mash-up. I really love this as a way to embed digital literacies. Some final student reflections revealed sophisticated understanding of how this would be useful in their future life and careers.

### **Sustainability**

As a sustainable model I do think it has several key elements that we know impact on sustainability:

- the sense of community is incredibly strong with an ever expanding set of people who will then go on to support others taking the course.
- the course is a validated accredited module, indicating institutional buy-in. The institution has seen a huge increase of traffic and international attention through the blog post/comments.

This course was about digital literacies in the broadest sense.. The course actually covered a range of literacies

- collaborative team work in the radio shows
- working to deadlines and learning to release stuff even if not perfect
- critical literacies
- film language
- art and design literacies
- peer feedback and support

- creating and sharing open learning content (by encouraging CC licences)
- providing constructive criticism
- reflective learning
- developing a portfolio.

It provided an opportunity for students to work with people of all ages and from different cultures. Producing a radio show with my family not only allowed me to explore aspects of storytelling, script writing, sound recording, editing and publishing with my son but made us all laugh together every evening over a week.

You really should hear [Jim Groom talk](#) about it, but I would simply say – have a go – join in the next version and see it in action... I hope to see some parts of the model taken up in the UK despite significant differences in copyright restrictions in this country.

I think approaches like these opens learning and teaching practice in new ways. I also think that it works very well to support digital literacies. I expect to see the term open literacies being used alot more in the future..