Reflecting on digital scholarship competences

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Introduction

As part of its involvement in the JISC Developing Digital Literacies (DDL) programme,[1] SCONUL surveyed members to identify areas of interest around developing staff digital scholarship competences. The survey was designed and administered by a small group of information professionals (Sara Marsh [University of Bradford], Alison Mackenzie [Edge Hill University] and representatives from the SCONUL Working Group on Information Literacy, Cathie Jackson [Cardiff], and Helen Howard [Leeds]), with direction, contributions and feedback from the SCONUL Executive Board. It was principally aimed at heads of service, university librarians or other members of a senior management team who are responsible for the strategic direction of the service. Fifty-three institutions responded, representing a response rate of around 30%. The findings were used to inform the signposting of key outputs of the DDL programme in order to maximise their value for the SCONUL membership. The signposting ('Mapping resources to competences') has been published elsewhere on the SCONUL website. [2] Here, a discussion is presented of the reflective commentary provided by the participants of the survey, framed within the key survey themes.

Six key literacies

The opening section of the survey identified six key literacies, using a list drawn up by JISC: ICT / computer literacy, information literacy, media literacy, communication and collaboration, digital scholarship and learning skills.[3] Participants were asked for their assessment of the digital capabilities of staff whose core roles were in the areas of student support and academic liaison.

The first area is ICT / computer literacy – the ability to adopt and use digital devices, applications and services in pursuit of goals, especially scholarly and educational goals. A key theme arising from the responses relates to the differing abilities of individuals and groups of staff and the fact that ability may at times rely on the level of staff enthusiasm for adoption and use of technology. Although it may be preferable for all staff to be expert, it was recognised that the variable ability levels implied a need for up-skilling to deal with the wide range of devices and software on offer to staff and users.

The second area is information literacy – the ability to find, interpret, evaluate, manipulate, share and record information, especially scholarly and educational information. It was suggested that, despite the perception that information literacy is an essential part of the work of the academic library, again, there was a variable level of expertise, partly caused by the constantly shifting information landscape. It was suggested that best practice examples may be of benefit to continuous staff skills development.

The third area to be considered was media literacy – the ability to critically read and creatively produce academic and professional communications in a range of media. It appears from our findings that this literacy is likely to have a disciplinary slant, and, again, varies according to the position of the institution and the staff members within it. This area was not given the same level of priority as ICT or information literacies, and thus may suffer from a lack of allocation of time and other resources. It was also suggested that this area, which may be delivered by both library and faculty, may often be the subject of negotiation between them, and that the balance should in some way be more in the favour of library services.

Next was examined communication and collaboration – the ability to participate in digital networks of knowledge, scholarship, research and learning and in working groups supported by digital forms of communication. Again, this appeared to be institution- and discipline-dependent. While various means of communication using social networks and reduction of workloads through the use of Open Educational Resources may be well established in some services, this does not appear to be the case across the board.

Participants were then asked to consider digital scholarship – the ability to participate in emerging

academic, professional and research practices that depend on digital systems. Although it was recognised that this is an area of growing importance, it was noted that it was not well understood. There were various opinions as to whether or not it was relevant to provide services in this area. Because digital scholarship is the domain of both library and learning technology, more examples of good practice from related professions such as e-learning, researcher development and teaching may be of value in raising awareness of this topic.

Finally came learning skills – the ability to study and learn effectively in technology-rich environments, formal and informal. Again, this cross-service topic may not be seen as a priority because it may be well served by learning resources departments, for example, but in institutions with librarians possessing teaching qualifications there is potential for collaboration and development.

This initial analysis, combined with quantitative data reported elsewhere,[4] helped us to focus on identifying ways of enhancing digital scholarship skills in the 'Mapping resources to competences' report.[2]

The digital literacy lens of the Seven Pillars

The survey then moved on to look at the digital literacy lens of the Seven Pillars,[5] which is designed to help benchmark the capabilities and behaviours required to be effective in a digital environment. It was developed to be used across the higher education community (library and academic staff, students, researchers, administrators, etc.), in the first instance as a self-assessment tool. Although it was recognised as being a useful tool for assessing staff and student capabilities, not all participants recognised this and focused more on its value for users than for internal staff development. It was also suggested that the pace of change in technologies would require the lens to be regularly updated. The variable level of skills amongst staff was again raised, indicating that the lens may have continuing value in its use as a baseline to assist in staff development.

Continuing with the lens theme, participants were asked about the support for the development of these digital literacies within library services. This prompted a huge range of evidence, illustrating support for good practice across the board. Regular appraisal-linked training and development opportunities of various types and formats were very visible, alongside peer-support, use of digital champions and provision of external and free or low-cost internal training. There was some evidence of links across services and involvement in curriculum development at a relatively high level. Academic liaison librarians were mentioned as benefitting from their access to electronic materials and then working collaboratively with e-learning teams. More valuable ideas can be read by accessing the comments document in full via the JISC Design Studio.[6]

Institutional perspectives

The survey then asked how services were contributing to the strategic development of their institution's digital literacy. Again, it was found that participants were facing a wide range of opportunities and challenges. While a small number of services were contributing to strategic development at an *ad hoc* level or were struggling with faculty resistant to change, in the main respondents were involved as a matter of policy at a higher strategic level. Library staff were involved in cross-university working groups, and digital literacies were included in academic guidelines and teaching and learning strategies, although this was not universal. The urge to use graduate employability to evaluate educational outcomes has helped create new initiatives around digital and information literacies and has led to cross-party working with careers and e-learning services. However, where digital literacy is not seen as a priority, there is more work to be done to raise the profile of these skills in some institutions.

Summary

Some themes emerged from the analysis of these texts: it was noticed that policy, strategic development and organisational change, networks and collaborations, good practice case studies and continuing professional development frameworks were the key areas to consider when looking at how to bridge gaps in staff development. Useful resources in the JISC DDL programme that match these themes were then identified, and readers are urged to explore the material highlighted in the report.[2] In terms of good practice examples in the fields of staff development and digital literacy, again relevant themes were identified: frameworks and programmes for good-practice delivery of staff development, supported by state-of-the-art tools and case studies of some of these approaches. These, again, are signposted in the 'Mapping resources…' report.[2] The evidence is clear: SCONUL members are aware of the issues relating to continuing staff development in all forms of literacies and are working across sectors

and departments. They are ensuring the voice of the library is heard in the constantly changing strategic education landscape. Although the detail of individual experiences may vary according to the particular context of that organisation, and some may be further down the road than others, it is important to continue these conversations.

REFERENCES

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