A JISC digital literacies workshop – with a twist

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On 4 November 2011 three academic libraries in Wales hosted a JISC digital literacies workshop with a difference: instead of being a traditional face-to-face event, it was run as a multipoint videoconference. Studio-based videoconferencing is regularly adopted by library and information services staff in Wales for meetings but it is not so often used for staff development events. Despite the challenges involved, it proved very worthwhile for the librarians and many other staff who attended.

Swansea University is the host institution for the JISC Regional Support Centre (RSC) Wales (one of twelve[1] located around the UK) and the RSC's e-learning advisers have a long-standing interest in information literacy and digital literacies for staff and students. So when JISC launched a digital literacies workshop series in England over the summer, it seemed a good idea to organise one in Wales too. The JISC website definition of digital literacy was the starting point: 'By digital literacy we mean those capabilities which fit an individual for living, learning and working in a digital society: for example, the skills to use digital tools to undertake academic research, writing and critical thinking; as part of personal development planning; and as a way of showcasing achievements.'[2]

At JISC RSC Wales, staff recognised the need for such skills amongst students and staff, and in putting on the event we hoped to tap into a number of current drivers: two major JISC digital literacies projects (PADDLE[3] and Digidol[4]) are running in Wales, introducing new thinking to the further

education and higher education sectors; 'scholarly and academic literacies' have emerged as a theme in the newly revised HEFCW *Strategy to enhance learning and teaching through technology*,[5] and the Welsh Government has advanced its *Digital Wales*[6] and *For our future*[7] agendas, aimed at boosting the economy and social inclusion. In addition to these drivers is the increasing focus in UK higher education generally on learner experience and employability, so we felt there was a strong need for an event that would relate to all these priorities.

We consulted members of WHELF[8] (Welsh Higher Education Libraries Forum) and the ColegauCymru / Colleges Wales[9] Learning Resources Managers network, who were enthusiastic about the idea of a dedicated event for Wales, but we knew we could not rely on one single venue if we were to attract a nationwide mix of institutions. The answer: videoconference! Fortunately we were able to find three good-sized studios in strategic locations: Swansea University Information Systems and Services in the south, Hugh Owen Library at Aberystwyth University in Mid-Wales and Deeside College's Learning Zone in the north.

The agenda for the day was ambitious and required participants to work hard! To start with they were asked to refine their own ideas on what digital literacy meant to them, then we broadened out the discussion to focus on learner needs, and explored a model of learner development that would provide a structure for meeting learner needs at different levels of study. Rather than focusing on basic ICT skills we examined deeper issues of identity in a digital world, and the possibility that technology is opening up 'new ways of knowing' that could change the way we go about curriculum design. Lastly we considered actions needed by different groups of staff to progress the digital literacies agenda. Reflecting on the roles of librarians, teachers and other staff, it became clear that developing digital literacies is a long-term challenge that involves the whole organisation. Two things were particularly encouraging: the ease with which staff from diverse sectors (higher and further education, adult and community learning, work-based learning and NHS) found common ground; and the way the many librarians in the group were able to bring experience of information literacy and academic liaison to bear on this new challenge of developing digital literacies. This suggests that we have a good foundation on which to develop cross-sectoral work on digital literacies in which librarians can have a strong role.

To find out more about the content of the workshop you can visit the JISC website http://bit.ly/jiscdiglit, which has a link to a wealth of materials and templates from the whole workshop series, all available for reuse under a Creative Commons licence. Evaluation of our event in Wales has been overwhelmingly positive and has highlighted some lessons for next time, particularly concerning provision for hearing-impaired participants in a videoconference. At the time of writing, RSC Wales staff aim to get together with JISC Digital Literacies Programme staff to reflect on the event and consider how we can build on it for the future.

Planning was key to the success of the day: RSC staff worked closely with JISC colleagues to ensure that the material for the workshop would work well in a videoconference setting. For example, some content was shortened to allow more time for handovers between studios. The basic programme was well suited to a videoconference since it was rich in group activities and discussion: participants were not simply watching a screen for a great length of time. The manageable group sizes in each studio also helped to facilitate discussion and allowed people to network easily during breaks. We made a point of having at least one 'plenary' presentation from each studio during the day, so every studio was playing an active part. The inclusion of three short and snappy inputs from the three locations enriched the event. We were very fortunate to have JISC presenters – Helen Beetham and Greg Benfield – who were prepared to be flexible in their delivery and to work with RSC Wales staff at each location to ensure that everything (or nearly everything!) went to plan.

Critical success factors for this type of event can be summed up in two words: preparation and *flexibility*. They include the following:

- maintaining close contact with all contributors and local organisers to ensure that everyone understands their role
- ensuring that all studios have a part to play, and plenty of activities, so no one is left feeling they are a passive observer
- keeping all the elements short so the pace does not flag
- videoconferencing studios can feel a bit claustrophobic, so make sure there are ample breaks and a chance to get out of the building at lunchtime
- avoiding having a 'main venue' and 'satellite venues' by having presenters and facilitators at each location

- having a practice run with technical support beforehand, and agreeing how to deal with any technical issues
- having some technical support is in place at critical points through the day. We were fortunate in having help from the Welsh Video Network (based at Swansea University) to help with a few technical issues (the Blue C supercomputer chose the day of our event to undertake some network-hungry activity, resulting in a reduction in image quality at the start, but this was soon resolved).

The benefits included:

- buy-in from a wide range of institutions and organisations
- reduced cost to institutions in time and travel
- enabling staff from each institution to attend by providing local opportunities, thus increasing opportunities for organisational learning.

All in all it was a very worthwhile event, combining many of the advantages of technology with the social benefits of meeting in groups face-to-face. The real test, however, will be whether the participating staff are able to follow it up with action in their own institutions. Some work is needed if we are to see a digital literacies community of practice with the strength and influence of the information literacy movement, which has emerged over the past decade in the library world. Librarians, it seems, are keen to play their part but they need collaborators in other roles, not least among senior management. You can take part in discussions and learn more by joining the JISC Digital Literacies Programme's JISCmail list https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/jisc-diglit-public, and you can also follow developments on Twitter via the hashtag #jiscdiglit. We hope the JISC Digital Literacies workshop series will be the first step in stimulating future dialogue.

NOTES

1 http://www.jiscrsc.ac.uk/
2 http://www.jisc.ac.uk/diglitworkshops
3 http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning/developingdigitalliteracies/paddlellandrillo.aspx
4 http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning/developingdigitalliteracies/DigiDol.aspx
5 http://www.hefc.ac.uk/documents/publications/circulars_2011/W11%2032HE%20

Enhancing%20Learning%20and%20Teaching%20through%20Technology.pdf

6 http://wales.gov.uk/splash?orig=/topics/businessandeconomy/digitalwales

7 http://wales.gov.uk/splash?orig=/topics/educationandskills/publications/guidance/forourfuture/

8 http://www.whelf.ac.uk

9 http://www.collegeswales.ac.uk/