

# Don't Just Stay in Your Lane: Developing Digital Literacies Freestyle

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Digital literacies are no longer optional for higher education staff - they are a necessity. However, comprehensive solutions on how to develop digital literacies in the workforce remain elusive. While many institutions implement clear definitions and frameworks in policies at the macro-level, rigid application of these tools is ineffective at a micro-level wherein personalized approach is needed. This paper describes the approach of a pilot professional development program at a regional university library that scopes and evolves to meet the needs of the workforce. The program is guided by design principles focusing on personalization and flexibility. In the future, the program will be evaluated to determine its impact on the workforce's development of digital literacies to provide guidance for other higher education institutions.

**Keywords:** digital literacies, professional learning, higher education, adult learning

## Introduction

Developing the digital literacies of higher education staff is a necessity, but comprehensive solutions at the micro-level can be elusive. Scholarly literature that describes the implementation of digital literacy development initiatives for higher education staff is scant. This paper describes a work-in-progress professional development program occurring at the University of Wollongong (UOW) Library to proactively develop the digital literacy of its workforce. The program addresses the complexity of digital literacy by focusing on organizational and workforce needs, rather than applying a rigid framework for development. The program regularly scopes and adapts to the unique needs of the workforce and is administered primarily through a custom-built website containing online learning resources. The purpose of this paper is to share this approach with the academic community given the lack of scholarly literature in this area.

## Background and context

The current state of the Australian higher education sector demands that staff are digitally literate. Academic and professional staff need to meet the challenges of an increasingly technology-focused industry, and to facilitate the digital literacy development of students (Adams Becker et al., 2017). While higher education organizations hurtle towards technological change, the digital literacy divide, defined as “a lack of knowledge of how to effectively use digital technologies for valued social economic and political practices”, in academia is deepening (McIntyre, 2014, p.92). UOW Library, for example, has integrated advanced technology such as 3D printers into its learning spaces, contributed to the institution's shift into wholly online education and worked to increase the development of digital literacies for both students and staff through various learning initiatives. The Library recognized that reducing the digital literacy divide in its workforce was imperative for meeting the challenges of its institutional context, and chose to proactively act through the implementation of a rich professional development program that focused on cultivating a culture of self-directed learners.

Digital literacy is messy and complex. While the 2017 NMC Horizon Report for Higher Education lists digital literacy as a challenge that is understood and solvable, lack of a single accepted definition and framework prove otherwise (Adams Becker et al., 2017). Definitions of digital literacy used by higher education institutions in Australia vary. La Trobe University (2017), for instance, has adapted the JISC definition of digital literacy to guide their institutional framework. Deakin University (2018), on the other hand has created a custom definition that is implemented in their graduate qualities. At UOW, there is no consensus on a definition. Brown (2017), in his critique of digital literacy frameworks drives the messiness of digital literacies home by pointing to several frameworks of varying purpose. Complicating this issue further is the use of different terms such as digital capability and digital dexterity that on the surface seem equivalent to digital literacy. Consensus on a single term, definition and framework at an organizational level can provide clarity to a complex concept on the macro-level. However, this clarity is ineffective on a micro-level in disciplines, units and teams wherein it



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becomes too prescriptive. As Beetham (2017) writes about digital capability "... [it] is a whole-organisation agenda, but how it gets taken up depends on local factors such as departmental cultures, management styles, and how innovators are supported. It is important to find common ground between diverse stakeholders." (p. 2).

A framework approach had previously been used at UOW Library to introduce the concept of digital literacy to its workforce. Staff participated in a mandatory series of self-paced modules provided by an external vendor that were mapped to Belshaw's (2014) '*Essential Elements of Digital Literacy*' framework. Staff formed small groups of 5-8 individuals and worked through each learning module together as a small community of practice. Each group was led and mentored by a peer who self-reported higher levels of digital literacies. The phase was an effective first step to integrate digital literacy development as a core business in the organization. The value of the program lay in its consolidated model, which clearly defined digital literacies and set a benchmark for staff development. However, anecdotally, staff felt that the program was too prescriptive and that the content in the modules was too far removed from their own work and personal contexts. The rigidity of the program design and implementation did not cater to the diverse skillsets found in the organization. Those with low levels of digital literacies were lifted, but those who had mid- to high-levels found the program rudimentary. A personalized program that met the unique needs of the UOW Library workforce was needed.

## Program design

Due to the messy nature of digital literacies and given that a rigid, framework-focused model had already been implemented, a program was built in-house to meet the unique needs of the library workforce. The program does not use a framework to anchor its content and instead focuses on addressing the Library's workforce and organizational needs through continuous scoping and adaptation. In lieu of an institutional definition of digital literacy, the program used the definition crafted by JISC (2014) to guide its development. The JISC (2014) definition is as follows: "Digital literacies are those capabilities which fit an individual for living, learning and working in a digital society." It is this definition that guides the topics covered in the program. In addition to aiming to aid staff in the development of their digital literacies, the program also seeks to develop the workforce into a community of self-directed learners.

The program is guided by four key design elements – personalization, flexibility, learning agency and self-directed learning. These elements were identified based on workforce and organizational needs. Table 1 demonstrates how the design elements map back to workforce and organizational needs and were put into practice. It should be noted that these elements were key at the time of writing, but are anticipated to evolve as the program unfolds.

**Table 1: Elements of program design mapped back to workforce and organizational needs.**

Elements of Program Design	Need	Application
<b>Personalization.</b> The program can adapt to individual staff context and learning preferences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Content that is relevant at the individual level, either in work or personal context.</li> <li>Variety of options to learn (i.e., in a group or alone, online or in face-to-face sessions)</li> <li>Program that isn't prescriptive and can respond to individual needs on an ongoing basis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All learning content is custom built based on staff requests and context.</li> <li>Staff given freedom to choose how they learn, and are offered custom online resources and face-to-face group sessions, and as well as assistance in finding external learning resources (i.e., Lynda.com courses) to suit their learning goal.</li> <li>Content topics are determined on an ad hoc basis.</li> </ul>
<b>Flexibility.</b> Multiple entry points are offered to allow for asynchronous learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Program that can be accessed just-in-time or when individual is ready.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Custom online learning resources available at any time through a website.</li> </ul>
<b>Learner agency.</b> Staff can determine their own learning goals and can co-construct program and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff members given the freedom to choose what they would like to learn</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff set their own learning goals. It does not have to be related to their work.</li> <li>Staff do not have to engage with</li> </ul>

learning content.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff members given the opportunity to provide input in program design and evolution.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>custom learning resources.</li> <li>Staff included in conversations around program design.</li> </ul>
<b>Self-directed learning.</b> Program equips staff with skills for ongoing learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Program equips staff with capabilities to develop digital literacies on their own in the future.</li> <li>Program offers encourages knowledge-sharing amongst workforce to create a decentralised knowledge network.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning content is not instructive.</li> <li>Learning content encourages staff to use external learning resources (i.e., YouTube videos, Lynda.courses).</li> <li>Learning content encourages staff to share their knowledge with others (i.e., through learning resource creation, running sessions, online discussion forums).</li> </ul>

Personalization is at the heart of the program, and is enabled through commitment to flexibility and learner agency. The program does not focus on a prescriptive framework, instead allowing staff to determine their learning goals and path. All custom-built learning content flows on from their goals. Staff are given the freedom to request content topics and provided with a variety of learning methods to achieve their goals, including online learning resources, an online discussion forum for knowledge sharing, face-to-face sessions, and one-on-one consultations with program designers to help them identify goals, seek assistance and build their confidence as self-directed learners. A similar approach at Bond University proved effective in catering to the diverse skillsets (Kinash & Kordyban, 2012). Flexibility in the program is demonstrated by determining content topics for learning resources and face-to-face sessions occurring on an ad hoc basis, often at the suggestion of staff.

The main entry point to the program is a custom website built on WordPress. The website is segmented into the 5 content themes, broken down further into concepts and technologies (see Fig. 1). Each theme contains webpage-based learning resources that aim to facilitate self-directed learning and knowledge sharing amongst staff. The aim of the resources is to define, rather than instruct, and to encourage staff to use external learning support (i.e., official support forums, YouTube videos, online tutorials and courses). The intention of this design is to facilitate self-directed learning, and equip staff with the knowledge and tools to develop their digital literacies after the program formally ceases. Each resource adheres loosely to the following structure:

- Define the topic and its potential utility in work or personal contexts
- Provide a brief list of places to find help (i.e., support forums)
- Provide a learning benchmark in the form of a checklist
- Encourage staff to implement and/or share their new knowledge.

Each learning resource is developed by either a program designer or any staff member who feels confident enough to describe the topic to their peers. The intention of this is to develop a decentralized knowledge network and undo the workforce's perception that only a few "tech-savvy" staff can provide assistance. In addition to the learning resources, staff can also request help or share knowledge through comment sections and a discussion board, stay in the loop with current technology affairs through informal blog posts and view an event schedule of any scheduled external events.

The secondary entry-point to the program are ad hoc face-to-face sessions. These sessions take a variety of forms. To date, they have taken the form of structured 'how-to' sessions covering specific tools like Feedly, informal discussions on broader topics such as social media and open conversations about staff experiences of developing their digital literacies. In a similar fashion to the learning resources, the sessions are led by any staff member who feels confident to do so.



**Figure 1: Content themes used to structure website content.**

Substantial effort was put into generating engagement and commitment from staff through ongoing conversation, rather than mandatory participation in predetermined activities. Staff are invited to provide feedback on an ongoing basis and played an active role in co-constructing the final design. The dissemination of the design preceded the setting of staff performance goals, and all staff were guided to elect at least one digital literacy-oriented goal of their choosing. Recording their goals formally was the only restriction placed on staff in the program. Tying a digital literacy initiative to a formal professional learning initiative proved successful for Newland and Handley (2016) as it added a personal value for academics. The use of performance goals in the context of UOW Library was not intended to force mandatory participation, but rather to show the strategic value to the initiative and thus generating commitment from staff.

## Challenges

The degree of personalization available in the program creates a heavy workload for the program designers currently developing the website and online learning resources. While the intention is to have all staff contributing the development of online learning resources, time is needed for the workforce to develop confidence in this area and a few key staff have been developing a large portion of the learning content.

Further, the program is difficult to evaluate due to its lack of structure, degree of personalization and the fundamental fact that the development of digital literacies is a messy process. It is difficult to clearly see how staff are progressing due to the breadth learning goals. Ongoing qualitative feedback mechanisms have been implemented, including surveys and informal forum groups but this is a time-intensive process.

## Conclusion and next steps

A total of 76 staff are participating in the program. At the time of writing, the program is approaching the end of its first quarter in a year-long timeline. Over 25 learning resources and blog posts have been shared on the website. The orchestration provided by the program designers will be pared back at the program's mid-point as it is hoped that more staff will begin developing their own resources and running their own sessions proactively as a result of this initiative.

Evaluation methods to gauge how the program's effectiveness in assisting staff to develop their digital literacies are have been identified and will be implemented throughout the program. Conclusions drawn from the evaluation process will be shared with the academic community to assist other higher education institutions seeking to develop the digital literacies of their workforce.

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