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The approach at the University of West London

The University of West London had a particular interest in extending online support for students' independent activity. We sought to support learners in their acquisition of digital and academic literacy abilities in a first year undergraduate core module, where retention and progression had been identified as an area to address. This 20 credit, level 4 Higher Education, module is dedicated to the preparation for study and Personal Development Planning and is compulsory for students on all programmes in the Business School, with approximately 300 students registered during the academic year.

Through scaffolding (Van Der Stuyf, 2002) of the learning experience on a similar module previously with the introduction of a number of single reusable learning objects (<http://www.rlo-cetl.ac.uk/>), we had already seen learning gains and an improved learner experience (Greaves, Roller & Bradley, 2010). This was achieved by identifying where interactive learning materials could effectively support individual concepts of the module at the session level. Through the ALLE project, this concept was extended by embedding interactive learning objects across the whole module learning design for the Business School. In practice this meant coverage of each digital and academic literacy ability being developed e.g. use of the VLE, literature searching, Harvard referencing, etc., thus generically scaffolding student experience and concept acquisition, yet facilitating individual and differential access to support for learning. Figure 1 shows a section of our design template indicating how we linked the learning objects in the journey to the particular concepts being developed.

Figure 1. Section of Module Design Template

Component capabilities development during independent activity: 7 hours	Information Identification Information retrieval/evaluation Reading for academic purpose Critical analysis Research techniques Writing for academic purpose	Information Identification Information retrieval/evaluation Reading for academic purpose Critical analysis Research techniques Writing for academic purpose	Information Identification Information retrieval/evaluation Reading for academic purpose Critical analysis Research techniques Writing for academic purpose
VLE Learning Objects from the Learner Journey and additional Scaffold activity materials	How to follow and understand an argument; Being Critical; Journal Articles – how best to use them Evaluating Journals Writing Introductions; Referencing Books; Referencing Journals; Referencing Websites; Referencing Generally; Academic Register - Using the 'right' language; Writing Conclusions	How to follow and understand an argument; Being Critical; Journal Articles – how best to use them Evaluating Journals Writing Introductions; Referencing Books; Referencing Journals; Referencing Websites; Referencing Generally; Academic Register - Using the 'right' language; Writing Conclusions	How to follow and understand an argument; Being Critical; Journal Articles – how best to use them Evaluating Journals Writing Introductions; Referencing Books; Referencing Journals; Referencing Websites; Referencing Generally; Academic Register - Using the 'right' language; Writing Conclusions

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(our full design template can be viewed here:

http://hermes.tvu.ac.uk/learnerjourney/files/Concept_scaffold_framework_for_Module_Professional_skills_for_Business_and_Finance.doc).

The module design assumes that linked technical abilities underpin cognitive development for learners to: identify the relationship between procedural and declarative knowledge; to undertake the cognitive shift to conditional and functioning knowledge (Biggs, 2003) and an ability to undertake critical enquiry. Students are introduced to digital and academic literacy capabilities and competencies through engagement in enquiry-based, formative learning activities. The learners are working towards producing a completed 1,500 word essay by undertaking small weekly tasks towards this artifact. The developmental activities encourage them towards a deep understanding of the connectedness and complexity of digital and academic literacy in academic thought and the communication of that thought in the written format.

Individual concepts designed as a series of portfolio based, formatively assessed activities that are linked and developmental are introduced over the course of the module. Weekly tutor-led group contact tutorials are used to initially introduce an individual concept that builds on the previous concepts. For instance 'understanding the question' would precede key word searching. A weekly practice task is set for student 'homework'. A tutor moderated Blackboard discussion area established using Salmon's five-step model for Computer Mediated Communication (Salmon, 2000) ensures further support is available. Students are directed to particular sections of the Learner Journey to reinforce and support 'learning' from the contact sessions. Each of the situated literacies (Barton et al, 2000) activities places the student in an individual learning experience. However requirement of presentation of materials for peer and tutor review of their discoveries both as 'a work in progress' in the on-line arena and in hard-copy at the next contact session ensures individual learning is also group supported: equally group learning is supported by the individual. All discussions, both on and off-line made explicit links between the importance of effective use of digital and academic capabilities in the practice activities thus underlining and making clear the transferability of skills for employability.

Our teaching and learning strategy is underpinned by use of a series of dialogues or Conversational Frameworks (Laurillard, 1993) during the contact sessions and asynchronous Blackboard discussions. Process methods selected by students to tackle the task are examined by the group in a tutor mediated setting, flawed and superficial learning strategies are challenged. If the student's strategy is identified as flawed they are required to re-deploy digital and academic literacy skills in a new activity. The repeated developmental activities build links between digital and academic literacy capabilities. Having access to quality interactive materials through the VLE, supporting learning outside of the contact sessions, was seen as fundamental to learner engagement and success.

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The module assessment is designed to promote learner engagement, with weekly formative submissions building a complete summative e-portfolio supported with PebblePad (Greaves, Roller & Bradley, 2010). In designing our teaching approach our assumption was that students should be taught the required 'learning how to learn' skills through a structured approach (Harvey & Knight, 1996). We make explicit through the module design and activities the relevance of an adaptable and flexible approach to using digital and academic literacy to the world of work as a dynamic connected activity system (Cole, 2005). The embedded Learner Journey ensured that the students had focused and directed support for individual concepts, thus supporting a reflexive learning opportunity (Benner, 1984) during the activity, where feedback is immediate. The use of on-line discussion forums further supports the immediate learner feedback, thus allowing for modifications to learner thinking to be supported in a reflective experience (Schon, 1991) that is both personal and timely to the learner. Both the reflexive and the reflective activities support the learner towards their 'tipping point' (Land, 2008). Our module design and use of Blackboard, PebblePad and the Learner Journey was intended to utilise e-learning and enabling technologies in making the learning experience more effective, efficient, attractive and accessible to our learners (Campbell, 2003).

Figure 2 Screen shot of The learner Journey



The learner journey was built into the design of the module as part of a raft of materials being used to scaffold the learners in their independent work. A key part of the module is

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to allow learners to 'play' with on-line materials and make 'mistakes' in a tutor and peer supported off and on-line environment. Through blending informal learning with more formal learning our students traverse digital platforms and make evaluative judgments on what, when and importantly how to use their digital finds, whether a presentational tool such as Prezi or a journal article found in the library electronic journals. As part of the blending of informal and formal learning processes they become more digitally self-aware and understand the importance of their own digital identity.

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