DigiMentors: Providing peer support and the student voice

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Abstract

At Leeds College of Music, an initiative was developed in 2017 to employ students as digital mentors (DigiMentors) to work in partnership with the technology-enhanced learning (TEL) team, in order to provide peer support for using conservatoire systems as well as developing digital skills. This initiative was developed as a response to two research studies into student digital literacy and the usability of conservatoire systems. It was found that students relied on peer support for using digital technology, often through social media channels, and lacked confidence in their academic digital literacies. The DigiMentors scheme was developed to ensure that there were representatives amongst the student community who would be able to direct their peers to appropriate help resources and provide basic support. Additionally, these students take part in and consult on digital initiatives as well as contributing to staff development sessions. DigiMentors also collaborate with the Marketing department to produce content for the student-led social media channels (Instagram). This case study evaluates the effectiveness of the scheme from both the perspective of the students who take part in the programme and the impact on the wider student body over the two years it has been running.

Introduction

At Leeds College of Music (LCoM), an initiative was developed in 2017 to employ students as digital mentors (DigiMentors). DigiMentors partner with the technology-enhanced learning (TEL) team to provide peer support for conservatoire systems, alongside developing wider digital literacies. The scheme aimed to ensure that representatives existed amongst the student community who could direct their peers to appropriate help resources and provide foundational support. Furthermore, DigiMentors consult and collaborate on digital initiatives and contribute to staff development. They also collaborate with the Marketing department to lead the conservatoire Instagram.

At the time of writing, the scheme is in its third academic year (2019-20). This case study provides the organisational and historical context that led to the scheme and explains how it was implemented and how it has evolved.

Organisational and historical context

LCoM is a specialist higher education institution (HEI), providing performing arts education under the United Kingdom (UK) conservatoire model, which differs from standard university performing arts degrees as it focuses on practical and professional development in specialist areas (e.g. performance, music production, music business etc.). Individual tuition and small-group study account for 60-80 credits per year of the degree. Traditional lecture/seminar delivery features within contextual and professional studies modules.

Learning and teaching is supported through an integrated online learning environment – a Moodle-based virtual learning environment (VLE), Mahara ePortfolio, Panopto AV platform and a WordPress noticeboard. Students use these systems to access learning resources

and departmental information. All assessments (excluding practical or examinations) are submitted online through file uploads or multimedia ePortfolios. All assessment feedback is provided through the VLE. The TEL team supports the use of these systems through online resources, classroom teaching and drop-in support sessions.

A research study into digital literacy amongst first-year undergraduate students at LCoM evidenced lower confidence in digital capabilities surrounding conservatoire systems and academic practices (Clark, 2015). 'Social' digital literacies – e.g. using social media, search engines and troubleshooting – received higher confidence ratings. These were deemed social by the nature in which they are developed through peer-to-peer support and daily contact with digital technology (Ito *et al.*, 2008). Also, socially educated digital literacies are not necessarily transferable to an academic context (Bennett *et al.*, 2008). It was considered possibly beneficial to exploit the method of peer support that cultivated social digital literacies, so as to facilitate the development of academic digital literacies.

The 'Student Journey' project was conducted in both the 2015-16 and 2016-17 academic years, observing volunteer students' usage of conservatoire systems. The project focused on evaluating the 'end user' experience of these systems through multimodal research. Outcomes informed future user interface and experience development. This project highlighted the challenges some students experience using conservatoire systems as they struggle to transfer their digital skills from the social to the academic realm. Support mechanisms were also evaluated, identifying that students often relied on peer support for their use of digital technology. Sometimes, this led to misunderstandings and the sharing of misinformation.

Informed by these studies, investigation of how peer support could be used to develop digital literacies and enhance the support provision of the TEL unit began. Numerous projects in which partnerships with students were used to develop digital literacy influenced the development of the DigiMentor scheme. These included the Student Digital Ambassadors Programme at City and Islington College (Vandersteen, 2017), DigiPals at Blackburn College, the DigiDesk initiative at Barnet and Southgate College (Jisc, 2015) and Student Digital Ambassadors for Digital Literacy at London School of Economics (Jisc, 2014).

Simultaneously, the conservatoire marketing department was exploring student-led social media, with the aim of increasing authenticity and promoting the student voice. Social media have changed how education institutions reach and communicate with prospective students (Sandlin and Peña, 2014). It was decided this should be incorporated into the DigiMentor role.

What is a DigiMentor?

A specification was drawn up, describing the qualities, skills and competencies a prospective DigiMentor should have, including good IT skills, excellent communication skills and an understanding of conservatoire systems and social media. This specification also detailed the responsibilities and duties associated with the post. Duties DigiMentors perform are divided into two categories – paid activities and portfolio activities.

Paid activities

- Pop-up events that take place in common areas of the conservatoire campus; promoting a commonly required area of support or a particular topic proposed by the DigiMentors from their experience of their peers' needs;
- Scheduled drop-in sessions where students can receive support for the conservatoire systems, particularly when used for assignments;
- Training, briefing and development events;
- Creation of eLearning content;
- Supporting staff training.

Unpaid portfolio activities

- Contributions to student-led social media on the LCoM Instagram account (@Leeds Music);
- Peer support via social media;
- Consulting on TEL projects and developments;
- Promoting student engagement initiatives;
- Professional development opportunities and training.

Portfolio activities undertaken throughout the academic year are evidenced through an ePortfolio. DigiMentors populate a template page with their own content, using appropriate media to demonstrate the activities they've contributed to, also providing video or written reflection on the scheme and the impact it has had on them. Portfolios are submitted at the end of the academic year to be evaluated by the management team, assessing each DigiMentor's contribution. The DigiMentors are rewarded with certificates of achievement and vouchers based on their evidenced contributions.

Implementation

Recruitment

It was decided that ten students should be employed in the DigiMentor role during the first year. This extended to twelve in the following years. The scheme is advertised on internal systems, social media and a stall at the Freshers' Fair. Remuneration is promoted, beside the wider value of work experience and development of transferable skills.

Applicants are invited to an interview comprising questions and competency tests drawn from the skills and competencies required for the post. This intentionally replicates standard interview practices to provide a realistic recruitment experience and ensures that the most appropriate candidates are employed.

Even representation across the different subject areas (pathways) within the DigiMentor team is considered to ensure that the student body is fairly represented and that students have relatable DigiMentors whom they are confident to ask for support. During the first academic year, the ten students appointed represented the five largest subject pathways and had an even gender balance. Subsequent recruitment has incorporated representation across most of the ten pathways and an equal gender balance.

Training

A training day is provided at the start of employment, setting expectations and providing practical guidance. Training is split between the two elements of the role – peer support/TEL activities and social media. During the TEL training, positive communication methods and customer service ethos are covered, followed by an exploration of the conservatoire systems and relevant staff contacts for support. Digital literacy is explored through evidence relating to the student body's perception of digital literacies gathered through Clark's (2015) study and current research. Training for the social media aspect of the role provides an overview of the audiences the conservatoire Instagram channel is aimed at and the exploration of marketing techniques.

Briefings and professional development

Monthly briefings provide an opportunity for formalised communication from the management team and face-to-face discussion of ideas and initiatives with continued emphasis on two-way and collaborative communication. Incorporation of further professional development is an area of invested attention, following feedback from the first two years of DigiMentors. This includes photography masterclasses, conferences and events surrounding the use of technology in education.

Management

The DigiMentor management team comprises three staff members, the TEL team and the public relations (PR) and content manager. They work closely to provide a minimally hierarchical experience for the DigiMentors. Beyond initial training, the management style is largely supervisory and guiding, supporting the DigiMentors' ownership over their working practice. Everyday management is conducted asynchronously through Microsoft Teams, a workplace-orientated communication platform. Communication is intentionally relaxed, with the aim of reducing formal barriers that exist between staff and students. Active work on balancing informal and formal management is continuous, with recognition that effective leadership and staff attitudes are integral to the success of the partnership and scheme (Kezar, 2003).

Evaluation

This evaluation, considering the impact on the DigiMentors themselves and the impact on the wider student body, is informed by a number of sources:

- Survey data, where the members of each cohort of DigiMentors (2017-18 and 2018-19) were asked to reflect on their experience; they rated their agreement to statements related to digital literacy, communication, confidence, engagement with LCoM and employability – with free text available to provide any additional feedback.
- ePortfolios submitted by the DigiMentors, analysed for themes and representations of their experience.
- Data from the internal student survey to ascertain awareness of the scheme amongst the student body.
- Staff observations for contextualisation of the data provided through the other methods.

Impact on DigiMentors

Skills and employability

A main objective of the scheme is to facilitate activities that develop transferable skills for future employment. Whilst the curriculum is designed to prepare graduates for work within the creative arts, there is recognition that some graduates begin careers in a variety of other areas, known as a 'portfolio career' (Musicians' Union, 2012). Consideration of this was integral to the planning of the role, alongside the opportunity for those with less prior work experience to build their capabilities and contribute towards their curricula vitae. Participants' aspirations are broadly split into two groups – those who wanted experience using social media for careers as self-employed musicians/producers or for marketing roles and those who wanted to move into education and appreciated the experience of the peer support element of the role. Leading the conservatoire Instagram proved valuable; many reflected on how they implemented their experience in their professional social media. Others moved into education, identifying the DigiMentor experience as a direct contribution.

All DigiMentors identified their development in customer service and communication throughout their ePortfolios, an area embedded in the scheme's ethos. These skills are essential for any future career and participants recognised this, particularly noting the need to adapt communication to suit an individual's needs or circumstance. For example: *"I find it easier now … to explain things in a clearer and linear manner whilst being able to read body language and tone of voice … and understand when [the customer feels] confused"*.

Teamwork and collaboration

An integral objective is to emphasise partnership and collaboration between the DigiMentors themselves and DigiMentors with staff. Importance is placed on reducing institutional cultural differences (Kezar, 2003) between staff and students to create an equal partnership. The aim is to give DigiMentors ownership over their involvement. They are actively encouraged to bring their own creativity and ideas through contributions to TEL research, initiatives and opportunities, and work carried out autonomously or in groups.

DigiMentors identified the importance of teamwork and collaboration within their ePortfolios, highlighting the value of being a team player, learning from colleagues and providing peer support to each other. One participant identified the creative and safe environment with a *"great group of people"*; another noted that everyone brought different skills to the table that complemented each other. It was also identified that teamwork could be challenging when other members were perceived as not pulling their weight, particularly in the unpaid activities – for example, when working in pairs on social media. As a response to this, the Instagram takeovers are now solo activities, which has removed this tension.

One participant found that the distribution of ideas and projects reduced autonomy and felt that individuals should be enabled to pursue independent projects. This feedback has also been ingested into the management of the current team, with reduced compulsory group work and a greater awareness of an 'incubatory' approach to DigiMentors' independent ideas.

Confidence

A prevailing theme from the evaluated data is the effect that the programme had upon individual DigiMentors' confidence. In the survey, all participants agreed that the scheme improved their confidence, with eight out of eleven agreeing strongly. Reflections within submitted ePortfolios demonstrate this. Some found increased confidence in their own digital literacies and use of the conservatoire systems, with associated positive direct impact on their own academic and professional practice. The nature of the pop-up events also increased confidence when approaching unfamiliar people and speaking with staff. One participant noted how it *"helped me to improve my confidence, speaking to new people and approaching people if they look confused, not just standing back and letting someone else take over"*. Furthermore, DigiMentors identified how the scheme pushed them out of their comfort zones, one describing how *"having to talk to my peers, and others which I had never met before, to offer my help and advice, it was quite daunting. Now … I feel comfortable outside of my comfort zone, using the skills I have learnt".*

Inclusion/engagement with LCoM

Approximately fifty per cent of the DigiMentors were already engaged with conservatoire activities – e.g. as course representatives, student union officers or as casual members of staff. For those who were previously not engaged in such activities, the role provided an opportunity for them to increase engagement with the conservatoire. The survey asked if participants agreed with the statement 'The digital mentor scheme improved my engagement with LCoM' and all agreed with this statement (64% strongly and 36% moderately). One participant stated: *"I often talk about my experience as a DigiMentor and I do believe it enhanced my experience at LCoM. Not only did it build my confidence, it allowed me a new way to engage."*

Impact on the conservatoire

TEL support and the student voice

The DigiMentors' online and in-person presence has increased the availability of support for the VLE and associated systems. Attendance records from VLE drop-in sessions hosted by DigiMentors has shown an increase in utilisation of the service. ePortfolio evidence provided by the DigiMentors displays a number of online and in-person peer support instances outside scheduled drop-in sessions – and often outside regular office hours. DigiMentors recognised the varying levels of digital literacy among their peers and how the service needs to reflect that. For example:

"Perhaps above all else, it has opened my eyes to how many people of our age group lack the level of digital literacy I might have expected. This gap in knowledge allows a programme such as that of the DigiMentor scheme to thrive"

The management team provides an open space for DigiMentors to contribute ideas and suggestions for the role. Open dialogue between DigiMentors and the TEL team enabled development of services, developing their formal and informal feedback – for example:

- reviewing support documentation to ensure student-friendly language;
- identifying issues their peers are having with certain technologies and adjusting support appropriately.

A more unexpected impact of the scheme is the utilisation of DigiMentors by staff beyond the DigiMentor management team. Staff often approach the DigiMentor management team with opportunities to work alongside DigiMentors on specific projects or initiatives they are undertaking. Though these effects of the scheme are yet to be formally researched, this is a further example of the wider impact of the scheme as a channel for the student voice.

Social Media

A core objective of public-facing social media channels in higher education is to engage prospective students. DigiMentors lead the LCoM Instagram channel through weekly takeovers, sharing what their week is like. This provides a more authentic view of student life at LCoM, which is shown to be beneficial in fostering a positive relationship with prospective students (Sandlin and Peña, 2014). The diversity of DigiMentors' specialisms demonstrates the breadth of opportunities at the conservatoire.

An analysis of Instagram engagement from November 2017 to January 2018 (the first semester where DigiMentors led the Instagram channel) displayed:

- 13% increase in followers;
- 17% increase in average likes per post;
- increased use of video content with 10169 views across twenty-two videos.

This increased engagement has continued, demonstrating that the marketing objective of the role has been successful and that the authenticity of student voice on social media has been a positive improvement at LCoM.

Lessons learnt

Areas for improvement became apparent during the first two years of the scheme. These areas have been actively addressed during subsequent years, with continued focus on refining and improving the scheme.

Awareness of the scheme within the wider student body

During the first year of the scheme, there was a lack of awareness, highlighted in the 2018 internal student survey distributed to all students at levels 3, 4 and 5. Only thirty-nine per cent of students said they would consider asking a DigiMentor if they needed support with conservatoire systems. Consideration led to a rectification plan during the following academic year:

- Earlier recruitment so the scheme is visible from the start of the academic year;
- Scheduling of more pop-up events;
- Having DigiMentors present at TEL induction talks;
- DigiMentors' promotion of more messages and initiatives on the student-only social media channels.

This resulted in an increase in the proportion of students who would consider asking a DigiMentor for support with systems to forty-nine per cent in the 2019 internal student survey. It is hoped that this number will increase again in the 2019-20 academic year as the DigiMentor scheme becomes further embedded within the LCoM community and culture.

Varied levels of engagement

Levels of engagement by individual DigiMentors have varied. This is an inherent characteristic of providing ownership over the role, as DigiMentors choose when and how often they work. This resulted in some challenges when asking some DigiMentors to contribute to group activities or work, highlighted in submitted ePortfolios. DigiMentors who have been more engaged receive a larger reward for their extended contribution to the role; fourteen out of twenty-two DigiMentors have received the maximum reward. The benefits of engagement (both in a monetary and broader development sense) has, with the aim of balancing engagement, been made clear to DigiMentors during training sessions and briefings. Greater emphasis has been placed on the incorporation of DigiMentor-led initiatives. This aims to provide an avenue for increased engagement, as the DigiMentors would feel actively invested and that they were contributing to matters of importance for them.

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