

Using students to support staff in developing digital literacies skills for teaching and learning

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Introduction and context

In 2009, the Joint Information Systems Committee (Jisc) 'Learning and Living in the Digital Age' (LLiDA) Report suggested that, in order to change the culture of universities to recognise and 'place greater value' on digital literacies, some initiatives should take place to engage and motivate students. These included: articulating the educational benefits and importance of digital literacies; recognising and rewarding student expertise within the learning community; recording a broad range of achievements to present to a varied audience (Littlejohn, Beetham and McGill, 2009). Accordingly, the University of Southampton, wishing to encourage students to embrace technology more fully in their active learning, saw the potential value of supporting a project designed to raise awareness of skills in digital literacies. We, the project team, consider digital literacy to be: *"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."* (Littlejohn, Beetham and McGill, 2012). At about the same time as the launch of Jisc's 'Developing Digital Literacies programme' (Jisc, 2011), we embarked on our project, led by the author, to raise the profile of digital literacies across the University. The project covered a range of activities, culminating in a Digital Literacies Conference, and one of its most successful outcomes was 'Students as Champions'. During the project, a group of four students, whose remit was to demonstrate their competence by using social media to raise online presence and to support University-led activities, grew to a network of ten or more, all working on a casual basis as the need arose around the University. It was at the first meeting of the Change Agents Network at the University of Winchester, when we discussed our work with other institutions, that it was clear that we could have a greater impact on changing educational practices if we aligned the students' activities towards specific educational projects.

The University of Southampton is a Russell Group, research-intensive university on the south coast of England, UK, ranking in the top one per cent worldwide. It has approximately 24,000 students and a strong focus on the technology and engineering subjects as well as a diverse range of other disciplines such as Art, Business and the Humanities (Reputation and Rankings, 2016). With such a significant focus on research and such a diverse range of disciplines, finding a one-size-fits-all approach was never going to be easy. The original idea of using digital media to support any event or participate in any venture did not promise the impact that we wanted. We decided to adapt the model, changing the name of 'Students as Champions' to 'Innovation and Digital Literacies Champions' or, simply, 'iChamps', which we felt reflected their goals and ambitions. We were clear that the role of such students was to support the development of digital literacies skills for educational activities rather than research, with guidance and input from their academic lead. This clarity allowed us to focus on education and provide a steer as to what digital literacies skills we were aiming to develop.

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During 2013, the Vice President for Education introduced 'The Southampton Opportunity', a programme to bring together co-curricular activities and opportunities for student engagement across the institution. The iChamps were included as a pilot in this offer and were supported by our Excel Placement Scheme. The scheme is an internship programme, partly funded by the Careers Service (30%) and, though we had to resource through the teaching enhancement unit (Institute for Learning Innovation and Development), all the paperwork, inductions and general administration were delivered through this service. The support that the scheme provided was extremely useful, allowing the staff involved in it to concentrate on promoting the development of the students and not worry about payment queries or administrative duties.

We used Agile methods for evaluation (Conforto *et al.*, 2014). Reviewing activities and speaking to academics and students on a regular basis meant that we could be flexible and refine the model to suit the needs of the University as we engaged our students and worked in partnership with academic teams. In November 2013, we introduced the idea of Open Badges and ePortfolios into the model. This two-part combination was a means not only of showcasing the students' work (as we wished to do), but also of providing them with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and to give structure to the projects in which they were involved. The outputs became a valuable resource as an evidence base of activities undertaken by the network. Being part of a wider strategic model (Southampton Opportunity) also meant that we could explore the use of ePortfolios and Badges within the other Opportunity programme areas.

Badges are digital images with metadata, providing validated micro-credentials for specific skills, qualities, interests or achievements through a variety of learning environments (Devedžić and Jovanović, 2015). The Open Badges are used in combination with ePortfolios for a number of reasons: to provide a way of capturing the evidence of the activities of the projects the iChamps are involved in; to provide a space for students to reflect on their work; to provide a structure for academics and students to scaffold their projects. The iChamps work towards gaining their iChamp Badge through a pathway of 'milestone' badges. There are three milestones that the students need to achieve: the Digital Citizen Badge, the Workshop Badge and the Education Enhancer Badge. Each badge enables the students to demonstrate their competence across a range of digital literacies activities, with the Education Enhancer Badge acting as the specific outcomes of the project. The outcomes are agreed by both the academic and the student, with the support of the Education Developer, and the evidence is gathered for all the badges and uploaded into the student's Pathbrite portfolio. Pathbrite is a free ePortfolio tool which all the iChamps are encouraged to use to submit evidence. Once they have their evidence, the students can apply for their badges using a link from Open Badge Factory (Harvey, 2017).

'Open' in 'Open Badges' means that the badges can be displayed across a range of platforms. The iChamps are encouraged to display their badges in their LinkedIn profiles and the other systems that they have been exploring as part of their own research on the use of open badges.

Although the model seems to focus on the students, staff, as they worked in collaboration with students, also experienced self-development benefits, for they improved their own digital skills by applying these practically, and in an authentic environment, as they

incorporated technology to enhance learning and teaching. The approach, as well as supporting our students and staff to act as change agents (Caldwell, 2003), also ensures that there is still pedagogical oversight through the Education Developer and the academic lead, though it is the student who performs the roles of consultant and advocate for changing practice.

As part of the strategic oversight of their work and in the context of the Southampton Opportunity initiative, a 'Student Champions' steering group was set up, in part owing to other students-as-champions models which had been inspired by the iChamp one. The membership of the group comprised representatives from other initiatives as well as academics, professional services staff and student representatives.

The structure of the model

As previously mentioned, the scheme has evolved since 2013. There are between six and sixteen students working at one time. The projects come from academics within the Education Developers networks. Guiding principles for the use of iChamps within any project ensure that these students are equal partners and not seen as just an additional resource for an academic to create websites or online activities. The iChamps can support the development of such activities, but these must never be their sole *raison d'être*: with the mantra of 'developing digital literacies skills', we have been extremely clear about the function and role of the students. In the early years, there was incredible pressure on the students to undertake many social media-related tasks to promote events, even filming and tweeting during them. This practice was unacceptable, for the iChamps are not to replace a member of staff and, if they were, then they should be employed with the terms and conditions of a regular employee. We have maintained quality and our standards with our clear focus on education, on moving towards partnership working and on the use of evidence; the fact that specific tasks are identified through the badges likewise reinforces and upholds those firm principles. This approach has been useful for our students, staff and the University (QAA, 2015).

The usual process is for an academic member of staff, Director of Programmes or Associate Dean for Education to request support to address a need. The initial discussion takes place with the Education Developer for Technology Enhanced Learning to explore ideas for solving an identified issue. Depending on the type of project or request, a student is selected by the academic, within the discipline, to be part of the scheme. If no student is selected, then the vacancy is advertised through the Excel Placement Scheme, a Careers and Employability Service measure to provide both internal and external opportunities for students. They offer to fund thirty per cent of the placement and also to process all the relevant paperwork. Each placement is 144 hours in total and the iChamps scheme usually runs over a whole semester; to have it spread out this way allows time for their studies as well as for support and development of their skills. All the iChamps are paid through this service, with funding through the Digital Literacies Budget within the educational enhancement unit¹. It is

¹ From 2013 to March 2017, there have been several changes in how we have managed the improvement of education: The Centre for Innovation Technology and Education, the Institute for Learning Innovation and Development and the newly-formed Shared Service.

Case Studies

envisaged that this scheme could, in the future, be expanded to provide broader routes for more students to become part of this opportunity through badge pathways: students could work towards aspects of digital literacies through specific, discrete badges, developing a portfolio that would qualify them to apply for a position as an iChamp. The pool to select students would be broader and more students could develop their own skills this way².

Support for the development of the digital literacies skills of students is critical, as there is no requirement for students to be particularly 'techy' or proficient in digital skills to become an iChamp. The primary requirement is to have attributes such as flexibility, agility, open-mindedness and enthusiasm to engage with both academics and the Education Developer. Support sessions are made available to all the iChamps through events via Facebook. These have included workshops on: blogs; developing your online presence; tools for presentations; the importance of networks; privacy and security. We have also encouraged team building, both by visiting the Big Bang Data exhibition at Somerset House, London, and by speaking at conferences. Project management and communication tools such as Slack and Trello are used within the projects as they allow for shared access, keeping the channels of information open. These are tools chosen to demonstrate the application of digital skills to both the staff and students.

We endeavour to provide each iChamp with an iPad so that s/he can explore new apps and create videos and presentations, as well as demonstrate tools with the academic lead. Students sign for their devices and are then able to use them as their own. Establishing this sense of trust, which reflects our partnership ethos, is very successful, as the students use the iPads for their studies and so are extremely familiar with the technology. Our small budget for apps has understandably proved popular with both staff and students!

Communication within the students' network is primarily through Facebook. However, to communicate with the Education Developer, the iChamps have a free choice of medium (Messenger, WhatsApp, Instagram, Slack or emails).

Types of projects

Blogs for academic practice

Our Politics department worked with an iChamp to highlight different kinds of blog and how to approach the task of writing a post for a political blog. The Education Developer worked with the student to create a flow chart of the process of researching and producing a blog post. There was then a workshop session with the academic lead, iChamp and the Education Developer.

eBooks

The iChamp, working with the academic lead, created an interactive eBook for Biological Sciences field trip. The iChamp presented their contributions and work at the International iPads in Higher Education Conference and then again to the faculty.

² Owing to the reorganisation of the Institute for Learning Innovation and Development, this adaptation and expansion of the model has been put on hold and will be revisited to align with newly-developed education strategy.

Resources for Chemistry students

The Chemistry department has two student iChamps who have been working with a range of partners. Their first project was the creation of support materials, designed with the academic lead, for the 'Lab Dog' online tools as well as for workshops with students. Their second task was to support the implementation of the interactive app, Nearpod. This process involved getting to know the app and meeting with each academic on the programme, with example activities dependent on the type of chemistry involved.

Twittiamo - Twitter and social media for Language Teaching

Twitter was selected as a medium for encouraging the engagement of language students with Italian and the development of their skills by using a range of social media and apps. The Modern Languages iChamp was involved in supporting the students in this engagement, including workshops and presenting, together with the academic lead, at a conference.

Feedback from staff and students

The most frequent comment has been about the scheme's capacity to create confidence. For example, an iChamp was away during the summer break and had the opportunity of speaking in front of about 400 students. The iChamp made contact after the event to say that to have done this would not have been possible without the development and support of the iChamps scheme, less for technical skills than for encouraging confidence to speak in front of people:

"I have just closed an international conference in front of 100's of people, and they thanked me for my inspirational words. I couldn't have done it without your support. Thank you."

Other students have commented on the sense of community that they feel when working with other iChamps:

"I could not have had a better experience as an iChamp. From being able to direct my project to the sense of community with other iChamps, it has been such a valuable experience."

Another felt inspired by the energy of the team (other iChamps):

"I was struck by the enthusiasm [of the Education Developer] and the team and loved the innovative vibe of the job."

Staff sentiment has been equally supportive. Notably, academics feel supported when working with an iChamp, acknowledging that their confidence is boosted by even the knowledge that the student has promised to be with them when trying out a new tool or app:

"I think the strength of the iChamp initiative is the student perspective on the use of learning technology in and out the classroom. This type of insight is invaluable in choosing between the numerous ways you can try to engage with students. Unfortunately, there is often a barrier between faculty members and the student body. Part of that is professionalism and is good, the rest should be broken down as much as possible, and this is one way of doing it effectively." (Medical academic)

Staff have also commented on the impact of the activities that the students have undertaken, citing better results after the intervention of the iChamps and feeling themselves more in touch and engaged with their students.

Observations and plans

The drive and establishment of the iChamps and the development of digital literacies skills have been very much a 'bottom-up' exercise. The benefit of having a strategic direction for the development of digital skills could be that we have a greater impact when working on specific aspects of the student experience. Interest in their activities and the model has drawn attention nationally and internationally: we have discussed the model and its set up with a range of universities in the UK as well as in Europe and the USA.

Funding for this scheme was started through an enhancement fund and continued via the educational enhancement unit. It has always been a 'project', but now, in its fourth year, it has established itself as an opportunity at the University and so could thus form part of the Southampton offer. The students who took part in the scheme have benefited hugely from the enhancement of their skills: they have come to know how the University operates, while working alongside academics that they admire; they have found new friends and have created the foundation for life-long learning. It is essential that we pay them for their time: payments have been made to ensure equality of opportunity, for, if a student has to work to support herself or himself at university and we don't pay, then some students may be unfairly excluded from this scheme.

Scaling up the iChamps using the current model would not be viable; nor should it be the goal. This model supports between six and sixteen iChamps at any one time, depending on the projects available. Developing digital skills with the goal of becoming an iChamp is a model that we are considering. The portfolio and Open Badge pathways may allow students the chance to put together their portfolios from opportunities around the University and beyond, to become more reflective and aware of their digital skills. The aim would be to map the skills to one of the many student roles, such as the Ambassador Scheme or Buddy Scheme. Earning badges as a pathway to becoming an iChamp might offer more students the chance to participate.

One possible opportunity could also be to widen the team with which the iChamps interact. Increasing the number of support staff to work with the iChamps might be a way of boosting their capacity and it might be worthwhile considering the role of the library in supporting the digital literacies skills of the students.

The deployment of discipline-specific iChamps to work as partners with academics on specific projects has been one of its strengths. It is easy for the coordinators of projects to bring in the brightest students from outside the discipline areas, but enthusiasm does not trump context. It is harder to get students up to speed if they do not understand the discipline and academic staff are less likely to engage with them.

Working with the students on this scheme has been an extraordinarily rewarding. The students are bright, witty and supportive as well as excellent critical friends. They are empowered to utilise the web and become productive digital citizens without feeling an

overbearing focus on their work. Education comes first, but digital literacies skills are core competencies and practical experience of using them in context is vital.

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