

Digital literacy and History teaching

What is digital literacy?

Digital literacy (or literacies) is not just connected to study at university, but is essential to all areas of an individual's online persona: an individual's confidence and competence with email, word-processing and presentation programmes (e.g. MS Word and PowerPoint); the different ways individuals and groups interact with Social Media (e.g. Facebook and Twitter); and awareness of the different 'digital footprints' created by (public and visible) use of the Internet. At university there are many different types of digital environments. Libraries include digitised resources such as e-books and e-journals. Lecturers use institutional Virtual Learning Environments (or VLEs, explained here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtual_learning_environment), such as Blackboard (<http://www.blackboard.com/>) and Moodle (<https://moodle.org/>), to support their teaching and student learning. Digital literacy thus encompasses the ability of students (and lecturers) to make use of these tools effectively.

Digital literacy, critical thinking and the Internet

Most of the tools just mentioned are deployed on the Internet, so it is obviously important that students are competent in their use of different online platforms. But there is also a vast range of information on the Internet, much of which is not subject to quality control, and an important aspect of digital literacy is therefore being able to tell the difference between knowledge, information and personal opinion. Search engines like Google can help to filter information, especially when students make use of advanced search capabilities (http://www.google.com/advanced_search) and 'Boolean' search protocols (explained here: http://www.ukop.co.uk/help_boolean_search.aspx). However, the development and use of critical thinking skills (http://www.netvibes.com/woodjamie#Criticality_and_Analysis) is vital to interpreting the results of searches and to interpreting the information found on the Internet.

A few basic questions for students to consider every time they access material on the Internet are:

- **Authority:** Who is the author / responsible for the web site? What are their credentials? Who do they work for? Is the site sponsored by an organisation?
- **Content:** Is there evidence that the content has gone through any form of quality control? Does it include any references? Is it well-written? What is the purpose of the site? Is there any evidence that the information is impartial or biased?
- **Currency:** when was the information on the page originally written? When was it last updated? Does it seem out-of-date?

The Internet Detective (<http://www.vtstutorials.ac.uk/detective/>)

This site, developed by Intute (<http://www.intute.ac.uk>), contains a free online tutorial which provides opportunities to practice effective Internet searching. Intute also hosts the Virtual Training Suite (<http://www.vtstutorials.ac.uk/>), a series of free interactive tutorials to help students to develop Internet research skills in over 60 different disciplines.

Digital literacy in History

Although less than two pages were devoted to a section called 'Historical Research on the Internet' in a recent book (Anthony Brundage, *Going to the Sources: A Guide to Historical Research and Writing*, fifth edition; Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, pp. 55-56), there can be little doubt that digital literacy is a vital aspect of the modern study of History. Digital literacy has been incorporated directly into many module learning objectives and assessment criteria (e.g. at the University of Mary

Washington: Incorporating Digital Literacy into History Methods Courses: <http://mcclurken.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/incorporating-digital-literacy-into.html>).

Publications are increasingly recognising the importance of online environments to teaching and learning in history, and hence of supporting and developing students' digital literacy to prepare them for these experiences (T. Mills Kelly, *Teaching History in the Digital Age*; Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/dh.12146032.0001.001>; Terry Haydn, ed., *Using new technologies to enhance teaching and learning in History*; London: Routledge, 2012: http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=UUSBOfAOmv8C&dq=history+teaching+digital+literacy&source=gbs_navlinks_s).

The resources that we'll be creating as part of this project are intended to encourage active and creative approaches to developing students' digital literacies, so we encourage you to check out the links on this webpage and elsewhere on the Making Digital History website if you want to investigate some of the pedagogies that we have developed and encountered during the course of our work.

Teaching digital literacy in History can be fun!

The lecturer on a large first year undergraduate history module at the University of Leicester developed a new online course in order to increase student engagement with key research skills. Traditionally, this was delivered through a lecture on online research skills and followed up when the students worked through worksheets to practice their skills in a large computer suite. In order to increase engagement – and the development of skills in the longer term – the lecturer adopted an approach derived from online gaming. The course was based around problems or puzzles, which required students to actively search for resources and develop methodologies in order to solve them. Different categories of puzzles were developed to cover different research skills (finding resources, differentiating between them, analysing them, and using them). The activity was semi-automated: puzzle solutions could be entered and checked 24/7 and marks added to the student's personal total. This changed their position on a leaderboard (rewarded by end-of-module prizes) and led to the delivery of a new puzzle via email. Collaboration was encouraged by requiring students to swap duplicate puzzles via email, to discuss puzzles in the discussion board in the virtual learning environment. In the final stage students worked in groups of 20 to solve puzzles and, in a wiki, to reflect on and write up the resources and methods they discovered for future reference. These two aspects were designed to develop deep critical understanding of key issues surrounding students' research skills.

- For more information on this project, including details of assessment, see: Alex Moseley, 2010, 'The Great History Conundrum: Solving the Problem with Research Skills', The Higher Education Academy: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/subjects/history/tlc09_moseley_historyconundrum_20090401);
- For another interesting trial project at the University of Calgary see: Jerremie Clyde and Glenn R. Wilkinson, 2012, 'More Than a Game...Teaching in the Gamic Mode: Disciplinary Knowledge, Digital Literacy, and Collaboration', *The History Teacher* 46.1, 45-66: www.societyforhistoryeducation.org/pdfs/ClydeandWilkinson.pdf

More information and resources on digital literacy and History teaching

- Digital literacy in schools: 'Digital Literacy Literature Review' (Digital Futures in Teacher Education project): <http://www.slideshare.net/DEFToer3/digital-literacy-literature-review>

Sue Watling and Jamie Wood, University of Lincoln

<http://makingdigitalhistory.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/>

- A history of digital literacy: 'JISC Digital Literacies programme: A history of Digital Literacy in UK & EU' (JISC): <http://digital-fingerprint.co.uk/2012/05/jisc-digital-literacies-programme-a-history-of-digital-literacy-in-uk-eu-jiscdigit/>
- Defining and thinking about digital literacy in higher education: '20 ways of thinking about digital literacy in higher education' (The Guardian): <http://www.guardian.co.uk/higher-education-network/blog/2012/may/15/digital-literacy-in-universities>