DEBUT

Digital Experience Building in University Teaching

Lessons learnt from **a digital literacy staff development** programme

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"**The future is here**. It's just not widely distributed yet."

William Gibson

What is **DEBUT?**

DEBUT was an HEA Pathfinder funded project which piloted a staff development approach which recognised the individual needs of academics and explored a range of different staff development methodologies.

The project piloted a personalised, contextualised, and intensive approach to developing digital literacy in staff based on the individual context and needs of a group of 25 staff.

Why DEBUT?

Involvement in HEA Benchmarking exercise showed widespread use of the VLE in the institution but few examples of creative practice, or use of other digital tools.

Systems-based staff development on different tools was not resulting in incremental gains in staff confidence in using digital tools. Meanwhile the range of digital tools, and their uses by students was rapidly increasing. Also, the locus of expertise within the institution was very much centred on the Learning Technology Team. This was not sustainable.

To develop our use of learning technologies in a more sustainable way, we needed to explore new approaches which developed the digital confidence levels of staff rather than their skills on particular systems, better enabling them to exploit the continual developments in digital technologies.

Why DEBUT?

The aims of DEBUT were:

To explore how the LTEU and educational developers in the sector, could best deliver and support a digital literacy development programme which enables staff within HE to feel more confident and more able to exploit a range of digital tools in learning and teaching.

To help LTEU and other educational developers gain a better understanding of approaches and methodologies that best aid the development of digital literacy levels in HE staff.

To inform the University and the sector about the benefits and challenges involved in delivering contextualised or situated staff development.
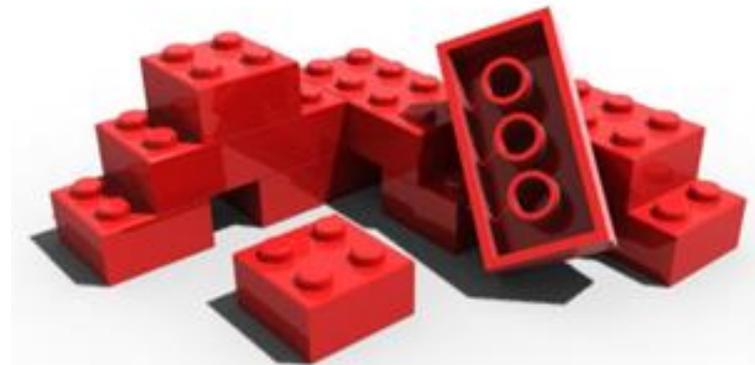
The key elements of DEBUT

Expressions of interest were sought across the University. Twenty-five staff were accepted onto the project. Participants were representative of the academic and demographic profile of the institution, whilst having very different levels of digital literacy. Participants were asked to rank their digital literacy levels at the outset and end of the project.

A wide choice of digital tools (23) were offered to participants from which they needed undertake a minimum of six, to gain a range of digital experiences. Some tools were standard University technologies, some were external web2-type tools and others were technologies new to the institution such as podcasting.

Participants were helped in selecting tools which had meaning for them and suited their context through a demonstration and individual interviews. They were then asked to evaluate each experience.

The tools were supported by a variety of staff development approaches (including workshop, 1:1 and self-directed) and each tool was offered between one and three times over the ten months of the project, depending on its popularity.

A bit about digital literacy

Our interest in the concept of digital literacy comes from the work of Allan Martin and colleagues on the DigEULit project. The project developed the following definition of digital literacy:

"Digital literacy is the awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyse and synthesise digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action, and to reflect upon this process".

Martin suggests that digital literacy is cultural rather than technological and is socially located. There is no 'one size fits all' e-literacy and it is dynamic – the needs of individuals or groups will change as their situation and environment change.

A bit about digital literacy

Martin suggests that for the individual, e-literacy consists of five elements:

awareness of the IT and information environment
confidence in using generic IT and information tools
evaluation of information-handling operations and products;
reflection on one's own e-literacy development
adaptability and willingness to meet e-literacy challenges.

The DEBUT project used these elements to construct the digital literacy scale on which participants could position themselves, from 1 (complete beginner) through to 5 (expert), at the beginning and end of the project.

Lessons learned and findings to share

The key indicator of DEBUT's success was evidence of a marked increase in the digital literacy levels of the participants. All but the most experienced had made progress on their digital journey, very significant progress in a number of cases.

Participants commented on the increase in their ability and confidence not only with the tools they had experienced as part of DEBUT, but with digital tools generally.

Many participants also immediately integrated the use of their chosen tools into their practice.

Bar chart legend:
- Digital literacy level May 07
- Digital literacy level April 08

X-axis: DEBUT Participants (AB, KB, DB, EB, LB, JB, PC, MC, MD, JE, JP, AG, NG, RH, KH, NK, RP, HS, SW, RWo)
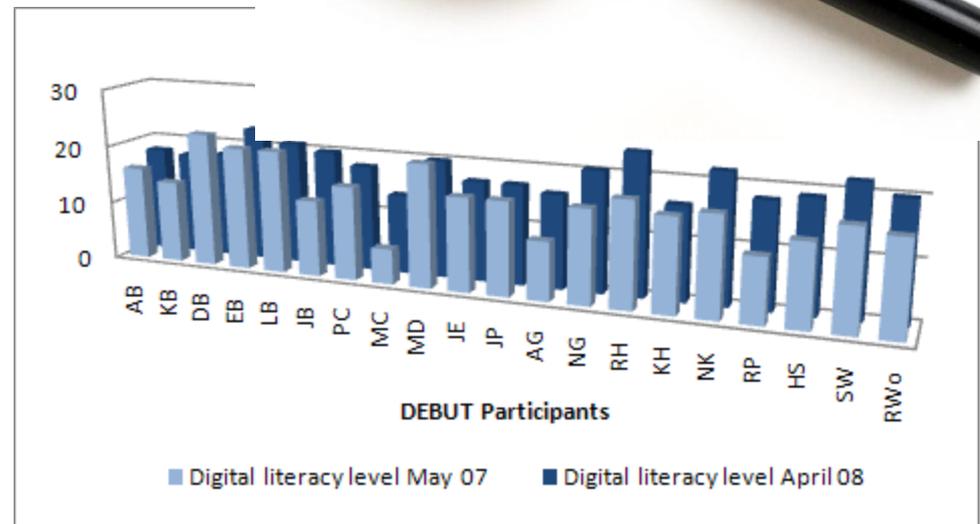
Lessons **learned** and findings to **share**

Key **success** factors quoted by participants were:

The **awareness** raising events at the outset of the programme
Contextualised staff development

The opportunity to explore a **range** of digital tools

Exploring these tools **intensely** within a short time frame

The **support** provided

The opportunity to **share** practice

The most favoured staff development approach was **group** sessions where **homework** was given and a **follow-up** session enabling the opportunity to learn from others was provided.

Lessons learned and findings to share

Some comments from the DEBUTANTS:

"It has widened my understanding broadly of the possibilities that could be used for personal, professional or educational development".

"I now feel much more confident ... if I just fiddle around then something will come up and at the end I can just get rid of it and unfiddle it. Before I was so petrified about ... I don't know ... it not working out".

"It has made it very clear in my mind what I can see myself using or what I can see the value of".

"It has been interesting to integrate the different digital tools. I have used pictures from Flickr and updated the reference lists used at the end of the [Powerpoint] presentations using Refworks."

"You wouldn't believe how much my IT skills have developed. Now I feel I can press buttons on my computer and it won't break".

Lessons **learned** and findings to **share**

Key issues:

Mixed ability groups could be an issue

Relationships built on **expertise** and **trust**

Time available to spend on staff development

Easy **access** to appropriate technologies

The findings from DEBUT present a **challenge**: in developing digital literacy skills staff clearly value a **contextualised** and **personalised** approach, with **follow-up** sessions and **support** through people contact. The issue for institutions is how this can be delivered in a manageable and **sustainable** way.

Moving forward

The positive outcomes from the project have led to the University committing to DEBUT being embedded as a annual programme which takes account of the lessons learned in year one of the programme. Cohort two began in June 2008.

The aims for the next year of DEBUT are to work with a new cohort of participants to further evaluate and enhance the approach.

Taking lessons learnt from the initial pilot we are:

Asking participants to explicitly think how they can link DEBUT to their current work.

Providing more group activities with follow-ups to enable sharing of practice.

Building in more activities to allow for differentiation.

Moving **forward**

We will also be working with year one participants to enable a longitudinal study of the impact on the student experience resulting from the first year of DEBUT.

We see DEBUT as a key element in the drive to build institutional e-capacity, to foster a community of digitally confident staff who can exploit technologies for themselves and, alongside the LTEU, support colleagues.

Any **questions** about DEBUT?

For further information please contact:

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