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## Reclaiming literacies: competing textual practices in a digital higher education

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**Reclaiming Literacies: Competing Textual Practices in a Digital Higher Education**

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5 This essay examines the implications of the ubiquitous use of the term 'digital  
6 literacies' in higher education and its increasing alignment with institutional and  
7 organisational imperatives. It suggests that the term has been stripped of its  
8 provenance and association with disciplinary knowledge production and textual  
9 practice. Instead it is called into service rhetorically in order to promote competency  
10 based agendas both in and outside the academy. The piece also points to a  
11 tendency to position teachers in deficit with regard to their technological capabilities  
12 and pay scant attention to their own disciplinary and scholarly practices in a digital  
13 world. It concludes that there is a case for building on established theoretical and  
14 conceptual frameworks from literacy studies if we wish to integrate advantages of the  
15 digital landscape with thoughtful teaching practice.  
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### 32 **Discourses of the digital**

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35 During the last decade, there has been increased attention to student learning in a  
36 digital era. Learning technologists have been quick to point to the affordances  
37 offered by technology and in so doing utilised terminology and concepts from a  
38 range of research contexts (see Conole 2008; Beetham et al 2009). Against this  
39 backdrop the term digital literacies has begun to take centre stage. This paper  
40 examines the implications of the appropriation of the term 'literacies' in its  
41 association with the digital and, in particular, the tendency for this to come to stand  
42 for general capability in and beyond higher education.  
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54 In contrast to learning technologists, literacies researchers' interest is in particular  
55 enactments of textual practice in and around the digital and the possibilities for  
56 meaning making that these enable and invoke for those involved. The use of the  
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3 term 'textual practice' in this essay signals a particular concern with the significance  
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5 of social and cultural practice in relation all kinds of texts, including those which are  
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7 created digitally. Rather than focusing on technologies and applications - VLEs,  
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9 Facebook, Google apps, Wikipedia, plagiarism detection software, smart phones,  
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11 Twitter, blogs etc. - attention is on the texts that are associated with these digital  
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13 contexts. That is, the concern is not with technology per se but its interaction with  
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15 different kinds of textual practices – ranging widely from a one hundred and forty  
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17 character tweet to a substantive journal article submitted and accessed online. In the  
18  
19 digital HE arena, research which adopts this focus has built upon and developed an  
20  
21 established epistemological stance, taking as a starting point a view of literacies – in  
22  
23 particular academic literacies - as contextual social and cultural practice (Goodfellow  
24  
25 & Lea 2007; Jones & Lea 2008; Williams 2009; Lea & Jones 2011; Mc Kenna  
26  
27 forthcoming). Academic literacies researchers have always been interested in the  
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29 contexts of learning (Lillis & Scott 2007) but a review of publications in this field  
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31 would suggest that they have been somewhat slow to respond to the significance  
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33 and consequences of writing, reading, knowledge and meaning making in the  
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35 changing HE digital landscape. This may in part be why the plural use of the term  
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37 'literacies' has so easily been taken up elsewhere and stripped of much of its  
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39 epistemological provenance. Although it could be argued that the word 'literacy' has  
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41 become associated with many domains in the wider world and that the connotation  
42  
43 of reading and writing is no longer pertinent, it remains the case that these activities  
44  
45 are central to higher education practice and disciplinary knowledge-making,  
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47 whatever the media and textual practices involved. There is then good reason to  
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49 remain true to the association of literacy with textual practice despite the changing  
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51 nature of much of that practice in a digital world.  
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3 Goodfellow (2011) has explored the tension that emerges when the digital is  
4 associated with literacy, arguing that, when used in association with the 'digital',  
5 literacy has come to stand as shorthand for competency or generalised skill. He  
6 suggests that rarely does the association of 'digital' with 'literacies', signal a critical  
7 agenda around teaching and learning in the context of higher education. Additionally,  
8 the literacies of 'digital literacies' in higher education appears to have a rather  
9 tenuous connection to research on academic literacies more generally and often  
10 makes little attempt to build on that body of critical literature ( Lea & Stierer 2000;  
11 Lillis & Scott 2007; Lea 2008; Russell et al 2009). As Goodfellow suggests, this  
12 results in a mismatch between a critical and cultural view of literacy and a  
13 technological focus. As a result the term 'digital literacies' in higher education has  
14 become associated with a range of different agendas and approaches within  
15 university settings. These include both descriptions of actual practice and  
16 prescriptive approaches telling teachers how they should use digital technologies  
17 with their students. Such work is frequently pragmatic, designed to provide both  
18 students and academics with a set of transferable skills and competences they can  
19 use in the university and in their digital worlds more generally. Theorised empirical  
20 research also offers transformative but critical approaches to teaching and learning  
21 in digital contexts. This essay is concerned with this clash of perspectives. A recent  
22 Economic and Social Research Council seminar series - 'Literacy in the Digital  
23 University' - offered spaces for learning technologists and literacies researchers to  
24 speak across the kinds of competing discourses that emerge from these different  
25 contexts and explore the potential for bringing together different agendas concerning  
26 literacy in the digital university <http://literacyinthedigitaluniversity.blogspot.com/> (see  
27 [Goodfellow & Lea, forthcoming](#)).

## Literacies research in higher education

Literacies researchers in higher education generally locate their work within the field of academic literacies which, in conceptualising literacies as social and cultural contextual practice, signals its theoretical and methodological roots in applied linguistics, critical language studies and social anthropology. For many years the field has been concerned to foreground explicitly the significance of paying attention to language in higher education and the implications of this for understanding and supporting teaching and learning (Ivanic 1998; Lea & Street 1998; Jones et al 2000; Lea & Stierer 2000; Lillis 2001; Thesen & van Pletzen 2006; Turner 2011). This includes interest in semiotic practice and multimodality across the different contexts of post-compulsory education (Ivanic et al 2009; English 2011) and aligns with a turn to semiosis in new and critical literacy studies more broadly (Kress 2003; Williams, 2009). Common to this work is attention to the contested nature of text production, whatever the nature of the texts and the contexts within which a wide range of practices are instantiated. Work in this field is noted for its empirical orientation and in-depth exploration of participants' understandings and interpretations of their own textual practices. It is not concerned with making judgments about what participants should do but with the practices of teaching and learning and how these might be articulated in a range of ways. This approach has been shown to enhance knowledge about different understandings of practice, which result in disjunctions and misalliances between the different participants involved in learning encounters—most commonly teachers and students.

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3 Literacies researchers have generally avoided associating literacies with particular  
4 channels of communication or specific technologies. This follows Street (1995; 2009)  
5 who cautions against the alignment of particular channels with particular forms of  
6 literacy, for example, computer literacy or visual literacy. He argues that this is bound  
7 to be problematic since it signals a questionable causal relationship, whereas in  
8 reality literacy always involves different uses and practices in different contexts.  
9 From this perspective, the use of the term digital literacies could signal a one to one  
10 relationship between channel and practice, and therefore be closely aligned with  
11 Street's 'autonomous' model of literacy, as opposed to the more contested and  
12 contextual view of literacy suggested by his 'ideological' model, which is discussed  
13 below. However, this concern to foreground the importance of context - within which  
14 channel is merely an aspect - may in part explain the apparent resistance by  
15 researchers in academic literacies to engage fully with the new landscape and single  
16 out for scrutiny practices in and around digital technologies.  
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### 38 **Academic literacies and learning technologies: a contested space**

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40 As some literacies researchers have begun to turn their attention to the broader  
41 digital landscape and the implications of this for student learning (Goodfellow & Lea  
42 2007; Lea 2007; Mc Kenna forthcoming) there has been a convergence of interests  
43 with learning technologists, who generally use the term digital literacy/literacies to  
44 refer to the development of student skill and competence with the use of  
45 technologies (Aviram et al. 2006). Over the last decade, a number of arguments  
46 have been called into service in the learning technologies field. The first is that  
47 universities need to respond urgently to the present generation of students - digital  
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3 natives, wiki-fledglings, the net generation - and align university practices with  
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5 students' preferences for virtual and online activity, for example, the use of social  
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7 networking, twitter, blogging. A second related argument is that there is a pressing  
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9 need to 'upskill' teachers in developing the appropriate skills and competences for  
10  
11 operating in a digital university. There is also a suggestion that despite their digital  
12  
13 expertise, students still need to be supported in operating in a digital world both in  
14  
15 their studies and in terms of their entry into the economy. It is in relation to these  
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17 arguments that digital literacy is increasingly coming to stand for a whole set of skills  
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19 and competences which may be only tenuously related to literacies (textual practices  
20  
21 around reading and writing) and learning in higher education. This is particularly  
22  
23 evident in in the work of JISC, a UK based - but international in scope - largely  
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25 government-funded organisation, tasked with supporting the innovative use of digital  
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27 technologies in post-compulsory education. JISC holds an important brief in  
28  
29 promoting the use of learning technologies across the curriculum both nationally and  
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31 internationally. This key role gives them a particularly powerful position in  
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33 determining agendas and privileging particular approaches around teaching and  
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35 learning in HE. They regularly call for commissioned work in specific areas of  
36  
37 technology driven activity; and it is an example of such documentation that is under  
38  
39 specific scrutiny here. Detailed attention to a JISC call - for projects which, " support  
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41 the development and implementation of institutional approaches to digital literacies  
42  
43 across the entire workforce and including students" (p.1, JISC 2011a) - illustrates the  
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45 ways in which literacy is both elided with capability and located primarily in terms of  
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47 organisational priorities.  
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55 **Figure 1 HERE**  
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3 Despite the fact that the call is explicitly concerned with digital literacy, there seems  
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5 little attention to literacy as literacies researchers would understand it,  
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7 conceptualised broadly as reading (in its widest, multi-modal, multi-media sense)  
8  
9 and writing, or more specifically textual practice in digital contexts. Indeed the  
10  
11 associated briefing paper explicitly redefines literacy for its own purposes:  
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15 We propose defining digital literacy in as neutral a way as possible, following  
16  
17 the lead of the European Union and the JISC-funded LLiDA1 project.  
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20  
21 *digital literacy defines those capabilities which fit an individual for living,*  
22  
23 *learning and working in a digital society*  
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26 Defining a particular set of capabilities as a 'literacy' means that:  
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28 they are a pre-requisite or foundation for other capabilities;  
29

30 they are critical to an individual's life chances;  
31

32 they are essential to the making and sharing of culturally significant meanings;  
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34 as a result, there is or should be a society-wide entitlement to these capabilities  
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37 at some level (p.2,JISC 2011b).  
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40 Literacy as conceptualised here appears to be disassociated from texts and  
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42 synonymous with 'capability'. Being in 'possession' of these capabilities critically  
43  
44 affects people's life chances. Implicit in the position being proposed here is the  
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46 notion that one can possess a literacy, or possibly a number of literacies, since  
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48 literacies are deemed to be concerned with the acquisition of capabilities carried  
49  
50 through life across a range of contexts. This approach appears to contrast markedly  
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52 with academic literacies researchers' concern with the specific and contextual  
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54 processes of meaning and knowledge making practices, whatever the media  
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56 involved (Lillis & Scott, 2007; Lea & Jones 2011). Although the call does pay  
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3 attention to the making and sharing of meaning, associating meaning with capability  
4 suggests alignment with acquisition. Nevertheless, the document does go some way  
5 to acknowledging that the skills or capabilities, which are packaged up within the  
6 term digital literacy, are concerned with this acquisition of skills in specific, learning,  
7 teaching and research activities,” they take their meaning from the subject areas in  
8 which they are practiced” (p.3, JISC 2011b). Despite this recognition of disciplinary  
9 difference, the whole concept of digital literacy is aligned with an organisational  
10 agenda and what is referred to as “normalising digital capability” (p.5, JISC 2011).

11  
12 Digital literacy is constructed here as something that universities need more of,  
13 something which goes well beyond the bounds of learning and teaching, being a  
14 student or being an academic, in order to embrace engagement in society more  
15 generally. Huge claims are being made for the power of digital literacy and its  
16 association with digital society. In many respects this view of literacy aligns with  
17 Street’s ‘autonomous’ model. Street (1995) argues that an autonomous model of  
18 literacy masks the ways in which literacy functions ideologically in our society,  
19 focusing on an individual’s acquisition of cognitive and technical language skills. He  
20 contrasts this with an ‘ideological’ model, which is concerned with the enactment of  
21 literacy as social practice in a range of different contexts, and highlights issues of  
22 power, authority and identity. This offers a critical and reflexive approach towards  
23 language, semiosis and the practices of knowledge making and representation.  
24 Evans (2005), draws on Street in her discussion of the ‘literacy myth’ and  
25 ‘technology literacy’, in which she argues that the way in which literacy has been  
26 aligned with individual competences conveniently sidesteps the relationship between  
27 literacy and power relations in institutional contexts.  
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3 The literacy of digital literacy, as conceptualised in the documentation examined  
4 above, stands for a whole set of generalised skills. Engagement in textual practice  
5 appears to be sidelined. Yet textual practice is the core work of a university, whether  
6 or not these practices are enacted primarily with digital technologies. This document  
7 also makes a constant slippage between literacy in the singular and literacies in the  
8 plural but with no explanation as to why one is favoured over the other. In academic  
9 literacies research, the plural literacies is used deliberately to signal the contested  
10 nature of literacies and to suggest a diverse range of practices that are not fixed or  
11 transferable but vary significantly from context to context. They often invoke different  
12 meanings for the participants involved, for example, students and teachers. It would  
13 be difficult to align this epistemological orientation with the transferable skills or  
14 capabilities model that is inferred from equipping '*an individual for living, learning*  
15 *and working in a digital society*' (p.5, JISC 2011a). The implication here seems to be  
16 that what is learnt at university will transfer seamlessly to, for example, the  
17 workplace. It could be argued that, an inevitable consequence of concentrating on  
18 the digital is a lack of attention to the complex hybridity of multimodal textual practice  
19 which is shot through any engagement in digital technologies in higher education.  
20 Conversely, there is danger that a focus on literacies in context may potentially  
21 sidestep the technologies and give the impression that it is business as usual, the  
22 world of disciplinary knowledge making is fundamentally unchanged. In reality, it is  
23 the intertwining of texts and practices in a digital world which is so central to learning  
24 and the construction of knowledge practices (Lea & Jones 2011); hence, we should  
25 not be valorising either the digital or textual practice. In part, this follows from the  
26 work of Law, who argues that knowledge always takes on and is embodied in a  
27 material form and, therefore, is part of a "patterned network" involving a process of  
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3 “heterogeneous engineering” in which bits and pieces from the social, the technical,  
4 the textual and the conceptual are fitted together (p.2, Law 1992). Writing nearly  
5 twenty years ago, Law espouses an actor-network approach which acts  
6 simultaneously as a theory of agency, a theory of knowledge, and a theory of  
7 machines. Perhaps most significantly for the position being rehearsed in this paper -  
8 concerning the appropriation and subsequent neutralization of ‘literacies’ in standing  
9 for general capability - he argues that if we want to answer questions about  
10 structure, power and organization we should be exploring social effects, whatever  
11 their material form. Law’s interest in questions of structure, power and organization  
12 aligns well with the social practice perspective of literacies in higher education  
13 research. It contrasts with the normalizing agendas and organizational priorities  
14 encapsulated in the language of the JISC call, in its “digitally literate organization”  
15 operating in a “digitally global education market “ (p.7, 2001a). It is clear that the use  
16 of the term digital literacy sits within a whole range of complex and competing  
17 discourses around teaching and learning, the global marketization of the sector,  
18 professional accountability and audit and an overriding message that the functioning  
19 of the whole organization (the university) is at stake without a total buy in of all staff  
20 to the vision of a ‘digitally literate organisation’. A vision within which subjects and  
21 disciplines appear to pay little visible role.  
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45 **(Figure 2 HERE)**

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49 From this perspective the traditional academic work of the university, the articulation  
50 of disciplinary knowledge and particular forms of engagement in texts and practices  
51 in the advancement of knowledge, appears to have been discarded. This is  
52 potentially troubling for those academic teachers and educational developers who  
53 wish to maintain a critical and transformative approach to teaching and learning in  
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3 disciplinary contexts. In aligning every aspect of what happens in a university with  
4 digital technologies, the term literacy in association with digital both comes to stand  
5 for anything and everything - for all forms of activity. It offers a strongly normative  
6 perspective on academic practice. As both teachers and educational developers we  
7 need to be cautious and critical of this valorisation and supposed authentication of  
8 digital literacy to promote and perform institutional agendas. In addition, there is a  
9 real cause for concern that this appropriation of both the terms 'literacy' and  
10 'literations' removes their provenance in terms of their association with the use and  
11 construction of language and texts in higher education (English 2010;Turner 2011).  
12 Further, it is enabling a shift to a skills based agenda which has the propensity to  
13 construct not just students but teachers in deficit. This is discussed further below.  
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### 28 **Representations of theory and practice**

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31 A common approach in the field of learning technologies is to use schemas for  
32 representing underlying conceptual approaches. For example, Conole (2008) offers  
33 a short inventory of learning theories mapping them to the affordances of different  
34 media:  
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41 For example 'behaviourist theories' (such as instructivism) where the focus is  
42 on stimulus-response and observable learning outcomes maps well to  
43 technologies which enable trial and error and adaptive responses – such as e-  
44 assessment tools. In contrast, a range of asynchronous and synchronous  
45 communication tools provide ample opportunities for dialogue, a key element  
46 to pedagogies based on socio-constructivist principles  
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54 (<http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue56/conole/>).

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3 Beetham et al (2009) offer a four page table of “key concepts and theorists of  
4 learning and digital literacies” p.9. Such schematic representations are useful in that  
5 they can simplify theoretical approaches but the danger is that they fall far short of  
6 representing adequately the complexity of conceptual and theoretical work or how  
7 particular sets of ideas might relate to one another. Consequently, they can fail to  
8 engage with the critical nature of debates and represent rigorous, well researched  
9 work in schematic ways which separates it off from its intellectual roots. Different  
10 ‘approaches’ can then be called into service, resulting in something akin to a  
11 commodification of learning theories. For example, although Beetham et al.(2009)  
12 signal a broad swathe of both theoretical and empirical work underpinning their  
13 report on learning literacies in a digital age, they explicitly avoid engaging with  
14 ongoing debates in the literacies field more generally:  
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32 We use the term (underpinning) *practices* □ in the hope of side-stepping some  
33 of the debates about definition and philosophy that beset literacies research,  
34 and in particular the 'paradigm contest' between cognitive and socially situated  
35 accounts of learning. Our focus in the study is on the pragmatic challenges that  
36 face learners and the institutions and educators that seek to support their  
37 development *in practice* as more capable human beings. (p.8, Beetham et al  
38 2009)  
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51 They suggest that the debates they invoke are of little pragmatic relevance.  
52 Literacies researchers would argue that critical engagement in a field, juxtaposing  
53 different perspectives and debates is exactly how the implications of teaching and  
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3 supporting learning do and will continue to emerge (Lea & Stierer 2000; Lea 2004;  
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5 Ivanič et al 2009).  
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8 It is of course necessary to recognise the background and context of the type of  
9  
10 reports and documents being discussed here and the requirement for those who  
11  
12 write them to offer pragmatic solutions. It is also important to signal the critical  
13  
14 dimensions of some of the work funded within this specific programme, see for  
15  
16 example initial work by Gourlay and Oliver (2012), presentations and blog  
17  
18 discussions <http://diglitpga.jiscinvolve.org/wp/>. The intention of this essay is not to  
19  
20 disparage the work of particular individuals. The documents are being offered as  
21  
22 exemplars of a particular form of rhetorical practice and its implications. We need to  
23  
24 remain mindful of the power of discourses and texts to bring specific forms of  
25  
26 understanding and representation into being (Blommaert 2005). The ways in which  
27  
28 things “achieve the status of common sense” (Fairclough 1992, p.87) is evident as  
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30 the digital becomes increasingly associated with broad capability agendas,  
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32 consumerist models of learners and deficit models of teachers. We must pay  
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34 attention to this if we wish to maintain a critical and generative stance towards  
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36 teaching and learning in a fast changing academy and resist attempts to re-cast HE  
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38 institutions as little more than digital spaces, ultimately serving the needs of the  
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40 knowledge economy.  
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### 50 **University teachers in deficit**

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53 The argument so far is that a framing of digital literacy as capability and individual  
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55 achievement - separated from textual practice - goes hand in hand with a  
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57 commodification of theories of literacies and learning. This perspective is being  
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3 called into service in order to reduce learning and disciplinary knowledge making to a  
4 matter of organizational imperatives. One of the consequences of this is the  
5 articulation of teachers in deficit. As Bayne and Ross (2007) illustrate, the commonly  
6 rehearsed digital native/ digital immigrant binary creates a discourse requiring  
7 teachers to adapt to their students. They argue that such discourses are highly  
8 problematic. Whilst acknowledging that empirical work has raised questions about  
9 the whole idea of the digital native - see recent work by Bennett and Maton (2008),  
10 Brown & Czerniewicz (2010), Jones et al (2011), Lea & Jones (2011) - they suggest  
11 there is little in the way of published work which “challenges the fundamental  
12 assumptions implicit in this discourse from a theoretical perspective” (p.1, Bayne &  
13 Ross 2007). They problematise the tendency of this dominant discourse to  
14 ‘marginalise the role of the teacher’, arguing that there is a dearth of literature which  
15 looks more theoretically at the ways in which these arguments, around learning  
16 technologies, teachers and students, are set up discursively and what  
17 presuppositions underlie them. In particular, their concern is that this discourse  
18 places teachers in an impossible position. On the one hand as ‘immigrants’ they are  
19 unable to change, to become natives, on the other they must adapt to keep up with  
20 their students, embracing the digital, and all it has to offer if they are to function as  
21 competent professionals. This alignment of competency with engagement with  
22 technology is also mirrored in the role of staff as explicated in the vision of the  
23 digitally literate organisation (Table 2). Bayne and Ross believe that we should  
24 interrogate a discourse which “over-determines our future understanding of the  
25 complex relationships between teacher, learner technology and higher education”  
26 (p.3, Bayne and Ross 2007). In short, we need to understand much more about  
27 academics’ own disciplinary and scholarly practices in a digital world and the  
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3 implications of this in terms of their own and students' textual practices (see  
4  
5 Goodfellow & Lea, forthcoming).  
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### 10 11 **Reclaiming literacies in digital spaces** 12

13  
14 The tendency to ignore literacies theory and method also makes it possible to  
15  
16 conveniently side step debates around power, authority, identity and meaning  
17  
18 making. Many of the discourses of the digital in today's higher education do not  
19  
20 appear to speak directly into debates around knowledge making practices and how  
21  
22 certain ways of meaning are valued, with implications for student and academic  
23  
24 identity. Mann's (2008) thoughtful exposition on study, power and the university  
25  
26 argues persuasively for paying attention to the central nature of discursive practice  
27  
28 reminding us that:  
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31  
32  
33       Universities do not just produce 'employees', they also produce, legitimate  
34  
35 and reproduce knowledge through research, scholarship, publication and the  
36  
37 accreditation and awarding of degrees. (p.123, Mann 2008)  
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40  
41 Within this context, power differentials are played out by different actors, teachers,  
42  
43 students, managers and learning technologists. The right to assert what counts, what  
44  
45 Mann refers to as " the basis of legitimate epistemological and methodological  
46  
47 conventions" (p.123), is central to university practice, and to the power of disciplines  
48  
49 and professions to lay claim to bodies of knowledge and to make judgments and  
50  
51 undertake assessment on the basis of these. Academics' own pedagogic and  
52  
53 knowledge making practices underpin their approaches to supporting student  
54  
55 learning (Tuck 2012). Starting from these practices forces us to foreground issues of  
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3 epistemology - disciplinary and subject-based knowledge making in a digital age.  
4  
5 Recognition of people's actual practices gives agency back to both teachers and  
6  
7 students as active participants in a digital world, without either reifying technologies  
8  
9 or decontextualizing practice. Attention to a specific focus on meaning making puts  
10  
11 literacy practices centrally on the agenda. Digital technologies offer possibilities for  
12  
13 harnessing and working with texts that are intellectually meaningful to academic  
14  
15 teachers. This contrasts starkly with the requirement to 'upskill' and become digitally  
16  
17 or organisationally literate; it also offers potential opportunities for unifying teachers  
18  
19 and students in the pursuit of knowledge production.  
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#### 26 *A case of assessment*

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29 In a study of undergraduates' literacy practices in a digital age, Lea & Jones (2011)  
30  
31 highlight student engagement in complex, hybrid, textual practice. They conclude  
32  
33 that that any redefinition of literacy in the university needs to pay attention to the  
34  
35 mutability of texts, how students make sense of the range of genres they encounter  
36  
37 and how digital knowledge making practices are implicated in their assignments.  
38  
39 Their findings resonate strongly with Williams (2009) research on the role of popular  
40  
41 culture in students' online literacy practices. He identifies a shift in students'  
42  
43 perceptions of authorship, ownership and audience and suggests that changing  
44  
45 rhetorical practices and conceptions of literacy around meaning making have tended  
46  
47 to be neglected by universities and their teachers. Lea & Jones (2011) argue that  
48  
49 when it comes to assessment, " for the most part departments and tutors remain  
50  
51 largely concerned with the final text, the submitted assignment" p.391. Commonly,  
52  
53 assignment rubrics are designed for conventional essayist production and may fail to  
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3 engage fully with the complexity of the rhetorical task required in drawing on,  
4  
5 integrating and making sense of a range of textual resources. If we think about  
6  
7 assessment metaphorically as a 'sandwich', attention is concentrated on the outer  
8  
9 layers - the assignment rubric and the finished assignment - and less upon the most  
10  
11 interesting and generative part - the processes of meaning making -the 'filling'. When  
12  
13 academics relied entirely on hard copy, print-based texts these were encapsulated  
14  
15 for students in reading lists and enshrined in a references section or bibliography at  
16  
17 the end of the assignment. Making visible the actual processes of engagement in  
18  
19 meaning making during the reading of these texts was arguably more difficult. With  
20  
21 digital texts playing a key role for both tutors and students, a shift in focus from the  
22  
23 finished product towards explorations of practice and how academics themselves  
24  
25 engage in knowledge production in a digital world could enable teachers to exploit  
26  
27 the 'filling of the sandwich' as a valuable disciplinary resource. Rather than being  
28  
29 concerned about inadvertent plagiarism, students could pay explicit attention to the  
30  
31 different resources they have read and used, what choices they have made about  
32  
33 texts, the value of different resources and why and how they have used them in  
34  
35 preference to others. This might enable the processes and practices of knowledge  
36  
37 production to be made more visible within the assignment and offer a more authentic  
38  
39 representation of practice than is suggested by citation and reference lists. The  
40  
41 precise ways of doing this depends very much on context, discipline and subject  
42  
43 area. It offers the potential to align student practice with academics' own digital  
44  
45 knowledge making practices and represent the complex rhetorical activity which is  
46  
47 involved in completing an assignment or - in the case of academics - their own  
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49 published work. Such an approach provides just one brief example of how it could be  
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51 possible to take full account of the digital context in relation to assessment. It offers a  
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3 range of possibilities for working on the blurred digital space between reading and  
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5 writing.  
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### 8 9 **Directions**

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11 This paper has foregrounded the value of building on and developing established  
12 theoretical frameworks from literacy studies and their potential for providing critical  
13 perspectives on teaching and learning in a digital higher education, rather than  
14 descriptive or competency based agendas. It offers a space for the consideration of  
15  
16 both contested and competing enactments of textual practice in digital contexts, with  
17  
18 a focus on issues of meaning making and what both students and academics  
19  
20 actually do in terms of knowledge construction. This approach is a far cry from the  
21  
22 characterisation of the university in the digital age as meeting the needs of the  
23  
24 knowledge economy and calling into service a 'digitally up-skilled' academic  
25  
26 workforce, divorced from intellectual enquiry and epistemological concerns. Readers  
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28 of this essay are likely to be located globally across a range of very different  
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30 institutions. I hope the arguments made here will resonate in their own settings.  
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38 Whatever our teaching context, as educators in a digital world we are making sense  
39  
40 of and building upon the myriad ways in which disciplinary and professional textual  
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42 practices are evolving in the fluid digital environments we now inhabit. Seeking to  
43  
44 articulate our own changing knowledge-making practices from our own disciplinary  
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46 positions is the only way we will truly be able to contribute to understanding literacies  
47  
48 and supporting learners in this digital age.  
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Figure 1: JISC Call for Projects in Developing Digital Literacies

*Digital literacy defines those capabilities which fit an individual for living, learning and working in a digital society'*

We are particularly concerned with those capabilities that are required and/or developed in the context of further and higher education, namely:

- ICT/computer literacy – information literacy – media literacy – communication and collaboration – digital scholarship
- learning skills and life-planning (p.5)

The programme is designed specifically to support the *integration* of digital capability into the core activities of educational institutions. (p.5)

- Funded projects will work to normalise digital capability in mainstream practice, whether through specialist roles (e.g. in learning support, libraries and learning resources, careers services and e-learning teams) or through the development of mainstream academic, research and administrative staff. (p.5)
- Bidders are expected to identify their own vision for digital literacies, and how digital literacy development will contribute to current organisational challenges and priorities. (p.6)

(JISC 2011a)

Figure 2: Developing Digital Literacies: Briefing Paper in support of JISC Grant Funding 4/11

A *digitally literate organisation* is resilient in the face of rapid change in both the technology and the educational landscape. Ways in which the organisation is developing resilience include: upskilling for open content with expertise in repositories, content management, licensing for open release, and open access publication; developing preservation and sustainability strategies that encompass the whole of the organisation's own digital assets; developing expertise in managing estates in which real and virtual spaces co-exist, and in greening the campus through sustainable use of ICT; developing the skills to deliver learning in a wide range of locations including workplaces and franchise institutions around the world; rewarding and recognising staff who deliver innovation in core processes; building leadership skills to thrive in a digital global education market; having the expertise to choose, adopt, adapt, implement and make interoperable a wide variety of digital systems including open source and cloud solutions; supporting members to choose digital solutions that support their different roles and preferences, while producing coherent policies and a coherent digital infrastructure. The digitally literate organisation takes a strategic approach to staff development which encompasses all roles. It treats the digital know-how of its members, staff and students alike, as a critical resource to be routinely audited, progressed, used in a range of multi-role teams, recognised and rewarded. All staff roles and responsibilities appropriately exploit technology enhanced working practices to benefit both the organisation and the individual. (p.7 JISC 2011a)