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# UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN ACADEMIC PRACTICE THROUGH A LENS OF OPENNESS

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## Abstract

Outlines the experience of teaching a new module: EDM122: Digital Literacies and Open Practice which is part of the MA in Academic Practice at City, University of London aimed at teaching staff. The module was shaped by concepts such as the Digital Scholar [1] and the idea of 'Residents and Visitors.' [2] It combines the author's research interests in copyright literacy and online learning [3,4] and explores how these relate to concepts such as open praxis [5].

It first provides an overview of the course, how it was designed, assessed and includes feedback from the first cohort. An important component of the course has been a blog and public webinar series with a series of guest speakers (see <https://blogs.city.ac.uk/dilop/webinars/>). External delegates were able to participate in the webinars and the course has attracted interest from outside of City.

The paper also shares interim findings from a recent study into the attitudes of staff towards digital literacies and open practice and the implications for their own teaching. It considers how to support staff to become more digitally literate and more confident in sharing their practices openly. The author's teaching and research has been shaped by the international community of open educators. The paper concludes with a short reflection on the relationship between copyright, openness and technology enhanced academic practice.

Keywords: Digital literacy, technology, open practice, OER.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines the experience of teaching a new module: EDM122: Digital Literacies and Open Practice which is part of the MA in Academic Practice at City University of London aimed at teaching staff. EDM122 is a 15 credit module for those completing the 'technology enabled' route through the Postgraduate Certificate and Diploma and compliments the core module EDM116: Technology Enabled Academic Practice. The decision to create the new module was partly influenced by a guest lecturer experience on a similar course at the University of Manchester [6], but it was also shaped by concepts such as the Digital Scholar [1] and the idea of 'Residents and Visitors' [2]. It also combines the author's interests in copyright literacy and online learning [3,4] and the relationship to what Cronin [5] calls 'open praxis'.

The paper first provides an overview of the course including how it was designed, assessed and feedback from two cohorts. An important component of the course has been a blog and public webinar series with a series of guest speakers (see <https://blogs.city.ac.uk/dilop/webinars/>). External delegates were able to participate in the webinars and the course has attracted interest beyond City University and also outside the UK. External engagement has been more difficult to measure but blog statistics are presented.

The paper explores how to support staff to become more digitally literate and considers the following questions:

- How do staff understand terms such as digital literacy and open practice in relation to their own and their students' abilities?
- Where do issues such as open education policies, copyright literacy and digital literacies fit into institutional strategies and policies and how does this relate to academic development?

It concludes with a short reflection on the lessons learnt from the experience of teaching this module and the interim findings from six semi-structured interviews with academic staff who recently

completed the module. It discusses what impact technology might be having on staff in higher education in terms of their own digital literacies and their attitudes towards sharing their teaching and research materials openly.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Technology-enabled academic practices continue to proliferate in higher education although research suggests that while virtual learning environments such as Moodle are widespread, there is little evidence of 'transformational change in pedagogic practice' [7]. My specialist interest lies in the relationship between online learning and copyright. While working in my previous role as a copyright advisor, I tried to help staff see that copyright was not a barrier to technology-enabled learning [8,4].

Subsequently I undertook research into levels of copyright literacy, which is defined as the 'knowledge, skills and behaviours to enable the ethical creation of copyright works' [3 p.12] Even amongst librarians and copyright specialists, who frequently provide training and guidance to academic staff, research suggests that copyright remains a source of concern to educators particularly when they seek to make material available online [3]. Understanding copyright could be argued to be a key part of digital and information literacy, but it rarely features in academic development activities. Writing about the concept of 'digital scholarship' Weller [1] recognises the impact that technology has both on teaching and research. Meanwhile White and Le Cornu [2] explored a spectrum of technology mediated practices where sometimes individuals behave like a 'resident' and others like a 'visitor'. The use of institutional virtual learning environments often falls into this visitor mode, where it's viewed like a tool shed, to upload content, rather than to transform teaching practices.

At the same time there has been a growing interest in 'open educational practices. Cronin [5] who calls this 'open praxis' identified four dimensions shared by open educators: balancing privacy and openness, developing digital literacies, valuing social learning, and challenging traditional teaching role expectations. Being open is defined in multiple ways but arguably open educational practices require a good understanding of copyright and open licensing models such as Creative Commons. Cronin found in her interviews with academic staff an absence of discussion about Open Educational Resources (OER) and open licensing. She stated:

... Where sharing of resources arose during interviews, I asked participants about their use of open resources. Discussion of copyright, licensing, and OER then ensued. This suggests that the relationship between OER and OEP may be more complex than sometimes conceived. [5, p.28]

Cronin also explored the role that an open educational policy might have in both encouraging and constraining OER awareness. This paper seeks to build on previous studies and better understand the relationship between copyright literacy, digital literacies and open practice. Arguably by teaching and researching in this space, there may be opportunities to better support staff transform their teaching practices.

## **3 METHODOLOGY**

The paper first provides an overview of the module EDM122, how it was designed, assessed and presents feedback from the first cohort to complete the module in 2018-2019. It also presents statistical data from the WordPress blog.

The paper then reports on findings from six interviews with academic staff to understand their attitudes towards digital literacies and open practice and the implications for their own teaching. This study was based on depth interviews which took a phenomenographic approach to explore how staff experienced both digital literacy and open practice. Phenomenography considers the variation in experience and can be used to plan a teaching intervention. It builds upon the author's previous research which explored the experiences of librarians in relation to copyright [3]. Many academic staff have a limited understanding of issues related to copyright and licensing, and it may be one of several factors that then impacts on their confidence when using educational technologies. The intention is that findings from the interviews will be used to inform the development of subsequent iterations of the module.

A purposeful sample was selected based on identifying staff who had recently completed the module or those who had taken the core module on educational technologies, which is required for those completing the technology-enabled route through the postgraduate certificate or diploma. Six individuals agreed to be interviewed, five of whom were lecturers at City, University of London and one was an allied health educator who was completing the masters programme as an external student. The questions were deliberately designed to focus on broader issues related to digital literacy and the concept of openness rather than to ask staff direct questions about their knowledge of copyright.

As the research is still being analysed, interim findings and a discussion of the data are presented below. In future the intention is to devise categories of description which will subsequently be developed into an Outcome Space as is common with phenomenographic research.

## **4 RESULTS**

The section provides an overview of the module design and feedback and then presents the interim findings from the interviews with academic staff.

### **4.1 EDM122 Digital Literacies and Open Practice**

#### *4.1.1 Module design and assessment*

The module was inspired by a course at the University of Manchester which is part of their Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education and called 'Open Knowledge in HE' (OKHE). I was a guest lecturer on OKHE in 2017 and was inspired to create a module that in addition to open practice also explored the relationship to digital literacies. In fact the original plan had been to update a 15 credit existing module on the role of ICT in Higher Education, but after consultation and reviewing the curriculum it was decided to withdraw this module and to replace it with EDM122 given the scale of the amendments that would have been needed. It was also an opportunity to design a module in which reflected my own expertise and one in which copyright and licensing was woven throughout the structure of the course, without being an explicit in the module title.

The module is structured so there are three teaching days and then a series of webinars which are presented by guest speakers who are experts in the field. It is taught over a period of four months. The webinars are all recorded and made available from the course blog:

<https://blogs.city.ac.uk/dilop/webinars/>

The three teaching days cover the following topics:

- Introduction to the module and definitions and terminology associated with open practice and digital literacies, including the myth of the digital native, what is open education and what is open access.
- The digital scholar, finding open educational resources and creating digital media
- Embedding digital literacies and open practice in the curriculum

On day three the cohort play an open educational board game that I co-created called the Publishing Trap, which is a role play game where players in teams take on the character of one of four academics and follow them through their career from completing their PhD to becoming a senior professor. They are asked to make choices about how they want to publish their research and share their expertise throughout their life.

Two assessments are required for the module including:

- A 5 minute video exploring an aspect of digital literacies or open practice and how it relates to your own practice and a 500 word reflective evaluation.
- A 2,000 word evaluative essay on the impact of open practice, digital literacy or digital technologies on an aspect of Learning and Teaching, Research or Administration in UK Higher Education or on your own department or.

#### *4.1.2 Module feedback*

*EDM122 Digital Literacies and Open Practice* ran for the first time in 2018-19 and received positive feedback from the first cohort including module evaluation scores of 4.5 on average. Positive comments from participants included:

*"[the Lecturer's] experience and enthusiasm for the topic made the module very valuable for my professional development."*

*"[the Lecturer] is passionate about the topic, fun and interactive. The board game was educational and fun"*

Some areas for improvement were suggested including the expectations related to the video assignment. Experience in the first year suggested the participants needed more guidance and were not familiar with the technical aspects of creating a video in the same way that they were about writing an essay. One participant said:

*"A little more supplementary guidance on Moodle about how to use media space (video uploads)."*

And another said:

*"Expectations around the video assignment could have been clearer."*

The module has also attracted interest from other universities after I presented at two conferences in the past year and several individuals requested additional information about the module.

#### 4.1.3 Word Press statistics

The course was taken by a relatively small cohort of students on the PGCert / PGDip at City University of London. In the first year 8 registered for the module and in year two, 20 registered, reflecting a growing interest in the subject. However, statistics available via the WordPress website show that the module had an impact beyond the institution. In addition, each of the webinars which were available to anyone, were viewed by a far greater number of people than who took the module.

The WordPress site enables page views and hits to be measured and since the blog was launched in November 2018 until 6<sup>th</sup> January 2020 it has had 2219 page views from 539 users. Monthly stats during the time the module was running were as follows:

*Table 1. Digital Literacies and Open Practice blog statistics*

	October	November	December	January
2018-2019	N/A	456	188	406
2019-2020	179	202	179	Not available

The blog was accessed mainly by people in the UK but the top countries that accessed the site after the UK were Sweden (186) Ireland (140) United States (120) Australia (97) Canada (19) and South Africa (16). The most popular page was the page about webinars and the most popular webinar was on open educational practices and delivered by Catherine Cronin in January 2019.

#### 4.1.4 Interview data: interim findings

The interviews were recorded and transcribed as verbatim accounts. These were then loaded in the qualitative analysis software Nvivo to enable analysis to be undertaken. The findings are still interim as further analysis needs to take place in line with the phenomenographic analysis method outlined by Akerlind [9]. However, even within the six participants who were interviewed and analysis to date, variation in experience is evident.

The interviewees discussed their understanding of both the terms digital literacy and open practice. In relation to digital literacy several people mentioned their own feelings about their levels of digital competence and contrasted that with students and with colleagues. Confidence around using technology in the classroom emerges as a clear issue and two individuals specifically felt that their students would judge them poorly if they were to try using technologies and run into difficulties. However some staff clearly acted as a peer mentor or guide to their colleagues and had greater levels of confidence.

The study explored individual's understanding of the term open practice and interviewees gave examples of sharing their teaching or research openly. I explored what might motivate them to be

more open, what the barriers were and the role that training and support, including through the modules that I teach are providing. Here there was clearly a wide variety of experiences and levels of knowledge. Many people talked about their desire to 'share' their content with those outside the academy. However, staff were also concerned about being open, worried their work wasn't good enough, that it might hamper their chances of being published or they were concerned about copyright, ethics or confidentiality issues. Some staff specifically felt they were not encouraged to share their content by senior leaders or by their institutional policy. It seems clear that there are disciplinary differences in attitudes towards open practice. For example, an academic working in health sciences was aware that colleagues who worked in the NHS may not have access to the same journals that she had, and that clinicians or researchers working in some countries were more limited in what they could access. For her, open practice was part of building an international community of practice to share clinical knowledge and practice. Another academic working in arts and humanities meanwhile, felt that sharing research openly at an early stage might hamper their chances of being published, or mean their ideas could be 'stolen' by other researchers. Finally, interviewees reflected on the value of taking a module such as EDM122, which for many had clearly been enlightening as a way of thinking about their own and their students' digital literacy abilities and the benefits and challenges of open practice.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The creation of the module EDM122 at City University of London is playing a small but key role in raising awareness of issues related to digital literacies and open practice. It also appears to be helping staff to recognise that in order to use technology in their teaching effectively there are number of literacies that they need to develop, most specifically digital, information literacy and copyright literacy.

The interviews suggest that there is considerable variation in experience amongst academic staff in terms of open practices. This may be related to the seniority or level of experience of the member of staff, but more importantly it may also be related to the academic discipline in which they work. The traditions within disciplines remain very strong and awareness of concepts such as open access amongst early career researchers can often be driven by more senior colleagues (for example their supervisor) in their department. In common with the findings from Cronin [5] there is relatively little evidence of use of open educational resources or an understanding of the nuances of copyright and licensing.

Further analysis of the interviews will be subsequently undertaken and presented at the INTED conference in March 2020. These will be used to feed into future planning for the module EDM122.

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