

CHAPTER 9

Digital Literacy for Refugees in the United Kingdom

ISRAEL PRINCEWILL ESENOWO



With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the United Kingdom put into lockdown on 23 March 2020, most higher education institutions in the UK and across the world moved parts or all of their classes online. Over a short period of time, both instructors and students had to adapt to new digital ways of teaching and learning. In this context, debates and controversies concerning digital access in terms of digital literacy as well as material access to a computer and a stable internet connection became key elements of ongoing discussions about inequalities in access to higher education.

Even before the pandemic moved classes online for large segments of the student population, the UK was fast moving towards a highly digitalised society. Indeed, digital literacy is essential in today's modern society and it is recognised in the European Reference Framework as one of the eight key competences for lifelong learning, as included in the recommendations of the European Parliaments and Council (European Commission 2007). The increasing number of online tasks in everyday life makes the use of the internet an integral part of life of many European residents (Costa et al. 2015).

Digital literacy is thus a key feature of social inclusion: it has become a vital proficiency in order to be fully active civil members of the community. Conversely, a lack of familiarity with digital tools and skills has increasingly become a barrier to full and effective participation. While digital exclusion is a broad problem affecting different social groups, displaced learners are confronted with particular forms of digital exclusion, rooted in global and local inequalities in access to and use of digital technology.

To respond to this situation, the University of East London Open Learning Initiative (UEL OLIVE) developed a Digital Literacy programme

aimed at equipping displaced learners with stronger digital skills. The programme also aimed at breaking down the digital barriers to entering university and developing the skills that students need to be actively involved in the community and support their social inclusion into society.

Based on my experience as an IT instructor at UEL OLIVE, this chapter reflects on our digital skills workshops, with a particular focus on the digital barriers faced by displaced learners. It also presents findings from a survey among fifty-two respondents from a diverse community of displaced learners, represented by OLIVE students and alumni of OLIVE courses (OLIVE UEL n.d.). The survey questionnaires aimed to collect data and information for a specific indicator related to awareness and improvement of the digital literacy experience as part of the pre-access programme at the university. Further to this, the chapter explores the pedagogical approach as implemented at UEL OLIVE and the challenges faced in the classroom and the solutions put forward.

Barriers to Digital Literacy

Digital literacy has been widely acknowledged as playing a key role in lifelong learning, and the career development of the individual (Chen et al. 2016), while also contributing to greater equality and opportunities for society at large. By participating in bridging knowledge disparities within the community, it contributes to sustainable development. Moreover, digital exclusion is both a cause and a consequence of other inequalities: people and groups already suffering from inequalities are less likely to be digitally literate, while in turn their lack of familiarity with technology and online resources can further reinforce their marginalisation.

While it has been acknowledged as a key component of contemporary societies, the concept and interpretation of digital literacy tend to be all-embracing and often refer to a range of different components such as ICT literacy, information literacy and technological literacy. This chapter broadly refers to digital literacy following UNESCO's definition, which sees it as 'the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. It includes competencies that are variously referred to as computer literacy, I.C.T. literacy, information literacy and media literacy' (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2018).

If we take a more societal-level approach to digital literacy by recognising its contribution to community as a whole, we can also argue that

digital literacy can be seen as a public good that favours overall social inclusion and cohesion. The importance of digital literacy is evidenced by the efforts of many national and regional government initiatives, in addition to international organisations, to come up with public policy and the implementation of strategic plans on digital literacy.

Inequality when it comes to digital literacy takes multiple forms in different contexts, yet some broad trends can be identified. The survey among OLIVE students and alumni revealed a number of issues relating to digital exclusion and access to higher education, which show some connection between the two processes.

Inadequate Income, Unemployment and Underemployment – 90.4 per cent of respondents are currently experiencing a high level of unemployment and poverty. For those working, there is a probability that they are employed in a low-skilled job, earning less than minimum wage. Livingstone and Helsper (2007) outline four indicators of digital exclusion that are more obviously associated with material deprivation: access, skills, attitudes and types of engagement. This means there is a strong correlation between socio-economic conditions and the experience of digital exclusion.

Immigration Status and No Recourse to Public Funds – The immigration status of displaced learners is a key factor that determines whether an individual will be able to access publicly funded services in terms of welfare benefits like income support, housing benefit, health treatment, education and student finance. Of the displaced learners surveyed, 78.8 per cent indicated that immigration status is a huge challenge and constraint that has a negative impact in terms of digital exclusion. Such constraints hinder displaced learners in developing the digital skills and competency they need in order to be actively involved in the community and further integrate into society.

Lack of Awareness of Institutions and Programmes – Some universities in the UK are already collaborating with migrant community organisations and other stakeholders to address the challenges linked to providing information on opportunities for higher education and digital learning for displaced learners. However, the constraints faced by displaced learners in terms of awareness and lack of information regarding higher education opportunities show that organisations working to support displaced learners need to do more. The survey indicates that 90.4 per cent of respondents would like to have access to information,

guidance, advice and support on opportunities related to higher education. Here, a lack of digital literacy works both as a cause and as a consequence of marginalisation in higher education for displaced learners.

Lack of Training and Accessible Facility – The survey questionnaire was inclusive, and it allowed for broader participation in the study by asking key questions about access to, training in, and use of digital technologies. Of those surveyed, 80.8 per cent lack access to training and digital facilities; this is a significant gap and further illustrates the digital exclusion experienced by displaced learners in accessing digital training and facilities.

These survey results allow us to draw a broad picture of the way in which displacement, digital exclusion and lack of access to higher education opportunities intersect and reinforce each other. In the next section, possible solutions and opportunities for change will be outlined.

Responding to Digital Exclusion

The rapid pace of change and the constant deployment of new technologies mean that residents in the UK must develop their skills and competences throughout their lives to actively engage with the community in which they live. People without digital competencies are at risk of becoming excluded from important activities, unable to take full advantage of the opportunities around them, and may also endanger themselves during the usage of digital tools and media (Ala-Mutka 2011).

In order to respond to the need for digital literacy among displaced students, UEL OLIve decided to set up a course addressing this particular issue. As a first step, we had to define what represents the appropriate level of digital literacy required by refugee and asylum-seeking learners. After examining various teaching content on digital literacy and based on findings from the UNESCO Global Framework of Reference on Digital Literacy Skills for Indicator 4.4.2, the Microsoft Digital Literacy Standard Curriculum was selected as a reference for our digital literacy course.

The adoption of the Microsoft Digital Literacy Standard Curriculum was based on the popularity and success of the implementation of the programme and curriculum in eleven countries around the world at the regional, national and international levels. It also provides students with the opportunity to learn digital skills and validate the knowledge and competencies by obtaining a certificate in recognition of their accomplishment.

Our course structure was designed following a pattern that can help learners exploring the use of digital technology in order to support their social inclusion, and to help them grasp the importance of computers in today's world. It focuses in particular on basic understanding of computers and networks, getting to know operating systems, working with applications and using virtual assistants. It also explores common productivity software applications deployed and used in business, education and at home.

The course also explains some of the common threats related to computer use, and how to safeguard networks and manage one's digital footprint. Additionally, it discusses creative skills and ways of establishing an avenue to collaborate with others. A strong focus is put on how best to use technology and digital skills in order to advance students' goals and career aspirations.

The digital literacy course was introduced at the beginning of the academic year 2018–19. One immediate observation was that every student in the class was different: some struggled with learning and some learned very well. In order to ensure that each student in the class was learning and engaged with the curriculum, I quickly understood that there was a need to be flexible in the learning objectives and to adapt methods and objectives based on the learning abilities, backgrounds, ages and ICT skills of each student.

Relatedly, a crucial and challenging step was to customise learning activities to individual interests and to effectively help the students in developing the specific skills they needed for work, study and home-based activities, while utilising the Microsoft Digital Literacy Standard Curriculum and adapting the exercises and activities to complement other e-learning resources.

The digital literacy course is only a first step towards enhancing the learner's ability and gaining an understanding of the opportunities presented by technology. It could also be the foundation that propels the addition of other essential life skills. Having discussed general challenges, in the next section I reflect in more detail on my classroom experience as the digital literacy instructor.

Inside the Digital Literacy Classroom

The OLive IT students were mostly adult learners diverse in age, cultural background, skill level, education and previous IT experience. Notwithstanding the differences and backgrounds of the students, it was a constant and ongoing effort to reach out to all learners.

The class sessions began with setting up the IT equipment, computers and other resources required to prepare for the class activities. Having observed the students' learning patterns, it was of the utmost importance to take a flexible learning approach to teaching, which took their different learning styles into consideration. The lesson plan for each class session was presented in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, and all class activities involved the use of verbal instruction accompanied by a demonstration on the board and directing the learners to try out the activities by performing a hands-on exercise.

During the class session, as instructor, I found it essential to move around the computer lab to personally observe each student and see that they had accomplished the tasks or activities. In most cases, students who needed more support required longer practice time and additional personal attention in order to complete the tasks.

Guiding and facilitating the learning process and the full participation of all learners in the hands-on exercise and class activities also involved keeping a degree of control over the way the sessions unfolded, not allowing them to stray too far from the particular focus of the class discussion. However, on a few occasions, those learners who responded better to a verbal process tended to dominate the discussion, often distracting other learners from concentrating on the class activities. To minimise this, it was necessary to assign learners to small groups to allow interaction with each other within a smaller unit.

I also introduced quizzes in the teaching sessions in order to aid the learners. This operated as a quick evaluation of the topic covered and as a means to review the learner's knowledge. The use of Kahoot!, a game-based learning platform widely used as educational technology, allowed the learners to collaborate and participate through multiple-choice quizzes. Once Kahoot! was accepted as a learning tool, it proved efficient to increase motivation, concentration and engagement.

In addition to the digital literacy class, we also run an IT study skills support session in order to personalise the learning experience and help the learner to focus on skills of interest. Our aim is to offer the learner a range of IT learning and activities outside of the regular class learning hours. UEL students on placement from the computer science department support this IT session and have provided excellent help to OLIVE students through the various activities, assisting them with e-learning resources, and through personalised learning that helps OLIVE students to gain more ability in a specific area in a supervised setting. Some aspects of the process produced certain dissatisfaction, such as the con-

stant need to remind learners, often unsuccessfully, to make notes of their log-in details. Such apparently minor issues could accumulate, requiring patience in dealing with requests.

While evaluating the IT class, observations that were made highlighted that each class session and each learner is unique, and that topics of interest and relevance to some learners might not be interesting to others. Some find specific topics more challenging and require additional support to get a thorough grasp of the lessons. One suggested solution was to invite the more advanced learners to help their peers in order to keep the class more actively engaged through collaboration.

In other words, while the aim of the class is to close the digital gap, it was also a constant challenge due to the different skills and interests of the student groups. Allowing for everyone to acquire fundamental skills was sometimes experienced as a frustrating process by quick learners, who felt they were slowed down by others, and this sometimes entailed changing learning schedules and learning plans to allow more time. Finding a creative way to engage learners at different levels in the class proved necessary, and the active involvement of more advanced learners by empowering them to take on a supporting role was one of the efficient ways I found to maintain cohesion in the classroom despite the variety of needs and levels.

Concluding Remarks

Some students learn more quickly than others. However, the privilege and experience of teaching IT to students on the OLIVE course has been truly fulfilling. The ability to balance the different needs of the learners and modify teaching methods to reflect students' requirements has been a rewarding and challenging experience. This also evidenced the need to be resilient, creative and patient when working with mature students who sometimes find school environments difficult.

In order to sustain the goal of enhancing the digital experience of the OLIVE students and displaced learners in the UK, my experience has led me to believe it is necessary to develop a framework and a standard metric to collect data and determine the full extent of the digital exclusion experienced by the displaced learner community as well as other social groups affected. Refugee and migrant community organisations should collaborate with relevant stakeholders, agencies and government institutions to initiate policy plans and promote digital literacy for displaced learners as a vital step to acquire digital skills for employment, study and participation in society.

The successful experience of adopting the Microsoft Digital Literacy Standard Curriculum at UEL OLive can serve as a foundation for further ICT courses, which would in turn contribute towards better understanding the centrality of digital literacy in today's world and offering more effective solutions to displaced learners as well as other groups in needs of such support.

Israel Princewill Esenowo, MBCS, is a digital literacy enthusiast and IT instructor who studied for a Joint Degree in Information Technology and Business Information System BSc (Hons) at Middlesex University London. He also holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Business Information Systems Management from Middlesex University. Israel works as an IT instructor for the UEL OLive weekend programme, a university preparatory course aimed at enhancing access to higher education for displaced students. An experienced PC system engineer, Israel has also planned, prepared and delivered quality lessons in lectures and lab format regarding digital literacy. He is a member of the British Computer Society and active at the BCS since 2010, in addition to being an IEEE Computer Society member.

References

- Ala-Mutka, K. 2011. 'Mapping Digital Competence: Towards a Conceptual Understanding'. European Union, Joint Research Centre, Institute for Prospective Technological Studies.
- Chen, J.S., J.Y. Wang, F.S. Chen and D.W.S. Tai. 2016. 'Applying Fuzzy Delphi Method to Construct Digital Literacy Competences for Senior High School Students', *Proceedings – 2016 5th I.I.A.I. International Congress on Advanced Applied Informatics (IIAI-AAI)*, Kumamoto, 2016, pp. 277–80.
- Costa, F.A., J. Viana, E. Cruz and C. Pereira. 2015. 'Digital Literacy of Adults Education Needs for the Full Exercise of Citizenship', *International Symposium on Computers in Education (S.I.I.E.)*, Setubal, 2015, pp. 92–96.
- European Commission. 2007. 'Key Competences for Lifelong Learning', *Official Journal of the European Union*, 1–12.
- Livingstone, S., E.J. and Helsper. 2007. 'Gradations in Digital Inclusion: Children, Young People and the Digital Divide', *New Media & Society* 9: 671–96.
- OLive UEL. n.d. *OLive UEL Digital Literacy Questionnaire*. https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeVmGBUQjSX2G7aJXQBTKExut-WN3JmWFKeCABilbaypyNgHg/viewform?usp=sf_link (accessed 12 December 2019).
- UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2018. 'A Global Framework of Reference on Digital Literacy Skills for Indicator 4.4.2', Information Paper No. 51. <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/ip51-global-framework-reference-digital-literacy-skills-2018-en.pdf> (accessed 15 June 2019).