

## #Take5 #45: The Best Way of Teaching Academic Literacies Online?

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*This #Take5 post is brought to you by Carina Buckley, Debbie Holley and Sandra Sinfield. It is their take on a conversation held at Solent – and digitally across the nation – focussing on the possibilities of teaching academic literacies online. The authors have re-visited their initial recollections, to bring the discussion more up to date in a world of Covid.*

### **Teaching academic literacies online: revisiting our webinar in light of Covid-19**

The Webinar took the form of a ‘blended’ Panel discussion, with three panel members sitting with Carina at Solent and two joining online – and with ALDinHE colleagues around the country following the discussion live online and contributing via Twitter.

Panel members: Dr Carina Buckley (chair ); student panel member Anna Latchman (Solent); Catherine Turton (Solent) were joined in person by Dr Erika Corradini (Southampton University); and online guests were Prof Debbie Holley (Bournemouth University) and Sandra Sinfield, (London Metropolitan University).



*Pictured: Carina Buckley (not looking at all like @EvilDoctorB)*

### **Who would have thought!**

In December last year, we were debating about moving the teaching of academic and digital literacies online, and who could have guessed what would happen three months later! Our initial conversations were framed around models of teaching these literacies. For Debbie, they

are a way to support, develop and create spaces for students throughout the whole of their academic journey. She and Sandra both agreed that it wasn't about 'fixing' a student, but rather celebrating their diversity and making transparent the forms and processes of academia, and discovering ways to enable students to act powerfully in academic spaces, face-to-face (F2F) or online.

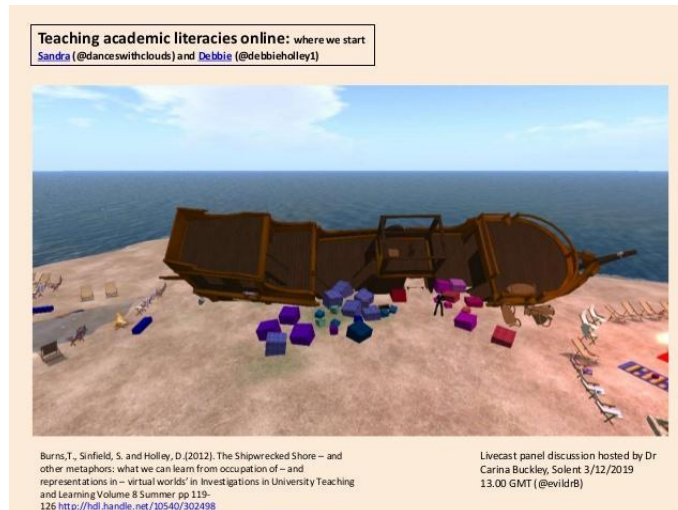
The panel agreed that students often learn what we term 'skills' or literacies without knowing that they are doing so, for they are embedded in our practices and processes. The problem is that academics and learning developers alike would like development of these academic practices to be somewhat conscious and witting. However the developmental nature of, for example, how you understand a text – or the immersive nature of academic research and writing – means that it can be hard to see the milestones. Digital literacy, in contrast, is seen by some as having more distinct, observable stepping stones in progression. Anna Latchman, a Level 6 Games Design student at Solent University, suggested that having checklists to break down all the stages of a digital assignment into simple steps are a good way to recognise progress. It's a process but it's also a personal approach, and, she argued, students benefit from having the exploratory time and space to try things out.

So, how do we develop academic and digital literacies in – or with – students – especially when, as we are at the moment, we are confined to engaging in this virtually and at a distance?

### **Students, social networks and spaces to learn**

Having space is important. Students can learn online, offline, and in the spaces in between. We can join students in a shared space and work alongside them; and we can help students occupy their space in academia powerfully and on their own terms, agents in their own learning. This can work online as well as in person, as Debbie and Sandra demonstrated through a project embedded in a suite of computing modules where 'skills' were not to be delivered as if to repair supposedly deficient students. Instead, learning development worked together with the computing lecturers to design a course of sufficient challenge and intrigue that it would stretch the students, developing digital and academic literacies in the process.

The 'History of the World in a Hundred Objects' challenge took place in real life (IRL) in F2F classrooms, computer suites and the British Museum – and in the virtual world of Second Life (SL). The project was difficult, creative and exciting, with students researching IRL and then building artefacts based on their research in SL – and presenting on their findings either IRL or SL – and in writing. The multiple challenges prompted the students to reach out for the skills they needed to be successful in the task in contextualised and seamless ways. Moreover, when they created their own augmented, immersive learning spaces in SL, these were much more fluid and creative than the typical lecture theatre (see picture).



*Pictured: the students' creation in second life*

Article: read it [here](#): The Shipwrecked Shore – and other metaphors: what we can learn from occupation of – and representations in – virtual worlds

### **Make it so?**

However, the speed with which we have all been expected to 'pivot' to online teaching and learning, means that many practitioners do not have the luxury of developing an intriguing, cooperative project. Instead, they are faced with quick changes to online delivery of 'skills' – often in isolation – and on poor tech or connectivity.

So provocative questions emerge as we think about delivering academic literacies online: how can we as educators, facilitators and developers, acknowledge the skills and aptitudes with which students arrive in our virtual spaces, so that we create opportunities for growth? How do we build in opportunities for social connection in these spaces, when we are all so worried about delivering sufficient content? Can we join students in *their* spaces as well as our own, so that power is shared more equitably between staff and students in these most challenging of times? *If you have examples of your excellent practice during this time of #Covid – please get in touch about producing a #Take5 blog of your own!* Meanwhile – here's a summary of what emerged from our Panel discussion.

### **On 'becoming' ... academic**

Learning is often presented as an individual and even competitive pursuit, and a wholesale switch to online can exacerbate this perception. Arguably then it is even more important to develop collaborative working practices when developing literacies and learning online.

Tip: A good place to start for new students' online start, will be to facilitate the forming friendships alongside their reading and study groups; fostering well being as they relate to each other as human beings, as well as learning how to work cooperatively together.

*Working together – and academic identity.* Dr Erika Corradini, from the University of Southampton, likened the development of an academic identity to a journey: you learn how to become academic and an academic, over time and through the range of practices that you engage in in your studies and develop competencies that might only be recognised at the end of that journey. Part of that, becoming, as Catherine Turton from Solent University added, is developing your linguistic, discursive knowledge of your subject and of course, whether operating F2F or online, academic literacies come into that. The big question here might be, how do we draw discipline academics – and students – into this conversation about competences, without it being reduced to a reductive conversation, say, about employability for example? How do we work together with discipline academics to embrace the challenge of developing emancipatory practice when teaching their students?

*Voice is more than syntax:* We want to help students leave their degrees as professionals in their field; voice and identity are important to us but often overlooked in student work at the expense of grammar, spelling and punctuation for example. Working with our colleagues is vital if we want to promote real discussion between discipline academics and learning developers about the nature of academic voice and its role in inviting us to participate meaningfully in our various academic and epistemic communities.

*Voice and academic identities:* Erika gave the example of a project she carried out with Dr Marion Heron at the University of Surrey, which studied the writing identity of staff. They found that often staff weren't aware that they wrote in different ways for different audiences, nor were they aware of the implications this had for changes in their own academic identity. Making staff aware of this, revealed the social processes that create academic identities. Having discussions like these with discipline staff can reveal how important it is to develop voice – and this can initiate conversations with students about their academic identities that move way beyond a reductive focus on spelling, punctuation and grammar.

*'Skills' development as organic parts of the curriculum:* However, when it came to supporting academic literacies online, Erika was doubtful about the level of engagement possible, for overworked staff and pressurised students. Ideally, this development should be an organic part of the curriculum, so awareness is the main thing. In her experience, Catharine said, online resources work best when staff understand what's available and choose and curate what's most relevant for their particular students, and use them as part of the teaching, learning and assessment process, rather than have 'study and digital skills' resources as another place for students to go, another set of decontextualised tasks and checklists to complete.

*Play with the tech:* Debbie's focus was also on the staff, and encouraging them to take an interest in the holistic development of their students, and to have the courage to experiment with good blended learning. Improved learner analytics in the future will increase our ability to help students personalise their learning journeys, and that can only be a good thing.

*Creative challenge:* Sandra wanted us to set creative challenges that provoked curiosity and engagement, setting students off on their own journey, on their own terms. She gave an example of the 'Digital Me' assignment she set where students were asked to produce a multimodal artefact – using a tool of their own choosing – creating a 'something' that introduced them to their new friends and colleagues – and where their work was not presented at a dull assessment point, but shared in an Exhibition – with party. Their own engagement with this authentic challenge supported students in discovering the digital environment for themselves in a way that made them feel successful and celebrated. The joy the students experienced when presenting their work underscored this. Anna's experience with her dissertation chimed with that, as she valued being given the opportunity to explore an academic topic which first piqued her interest and then propelled her forward to investigate deeper.



*Pictured: Sandra's avatar in Second Life*

*And so:* After a long discussion, we came to the inevitable conclusion that neither digital nor academic literacies can be contained; they involve staff development, student development, learning development, engagement, community, relationship-building, in fact the whole culture of the university. The key to academic literacies' development, then, is partnership: between staff and students, and between literacies and subject. When writing becomes a topic of conversation within the discipline, then students become aware of it – not before. It comes down to community and connection, and knowing what everybody can offer and bring to the table.

### **And now we are all teaching online?**

Celebrating students, and what they bring; empowering students; thinking about lifelong learning; communities of practice across the university, bringing together learning developers, academics, librarians, technicians and working to co-create space for students to explore...

Our conclusion was that academic literacies is about having a space for students to explore, personalised so they can find the relevance to their life beyond university, and staff need to be there with them, emphasising openness in communication and sharing. And learning development is going to lead the way!

Carina Buckley (@EvilDoctorB) Sandra Sinfield (@Danceswithclouds) and Debbie Holley (@debbieholley1) are all members of the ALDinHE Steering Group. Find out more about [ALDinHE](#).



*Dr Debbie – in Real Life*

**Suggested resources:**

#DS106 – digital storytelling ideas and resources to ignite a fire in the minds of students – and staff: <https://ds106.us/>

Dr Debbie’s Blog: <http://drdebbieholley.com/blog/>

[Learnhigher](#) is a network for promoting and facilitating the development and dissemination of high quality, peer-reviewed resources for learning development in the higher education sector

StudyChat – our educational magazine for staff and PhD students:

<https://www.facebook.com/LondonMetStudyChat/>

Our slideshare:

[Teaching academic literacy online](#) from [debbieholley1](#)