

Repositioning Digital Literacy: Ethics, Pedagogy, and Student Voice

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Abstract

This account of practice critically reflects on the limitations of competency-based approaches to digital literacy across UK higher education, apprenticeships, and vocational learning. While frameworks have offered useful benchmarks, their static nature risks narrowing literacy to measurable outcomes, fostering compliance cultures, and reinforcing inequalities. Drawing on sector policy, UK scholarship, and practice evidence, the article argues for a dynamic, pedagogically embedded model of digital literacy that incorporates inclusivity, reflexivity, and student voice. It sets out three guiding principles for such a model and outlines the next stage of research, which will focus on transitions from further education to higher education. The work highlights the need for institutions to move beyond frameworks as compliance tools and towards strategies that sustain dialogue, adaptability, and equity.

Keywords

Digital literacy, Higher education, Pedagogical models, Ethical engagement, Reflexive practice, Iterative strategies

Introduction

Digital literacy is now becoming firmly embedded in the UK higher education (HE) policy landscape. Jisc's Building Digital Capability framework (2019), the Quality Assurance Agency's Digital Learning Review (2021), and the Office for Students' (OfS) report on Digital Teaching and Learning in English HE (2022) all position digital literacy as central to student success, employability, and institutional strategy. Advance HE similarly integrates digital practice into its Professional Standards Framework for teaching.

These frameworks and policy statements have offered a common language and visible benchmarks. They have enabled institutions to demonstrate commitment to digital transformation and provided a foundation for staff development. Yet their underlying orientation has largely been competency-based, focused on defining and

measuring discrete skills. While clarity has been achieved, it has come at the cost of flexibility and criticality.

Limitations of Static Competency Frameworks

Compliance cultures

Frameworks can too easily become instruments of compliance rather than development. Brown (2017) notes that frameworks risk becoming “box-ticking” exercises, where institutions demonstrate alignment without necessarily transforming practice. This is consistent with Ball’s (2003) critique of performativity in education, in which accountability cultures emphasise measurement over meaning.

For full-time HE students, this can manifest in the reduction of literacy to a set of digital checklists tied to induction, library sessions, or stand-alone workshops. While these interventions provide coverage, they are often experienced as disconnected from disciplinary study. Students may comply with requirements but are left without a deeper sense of how digital practices shape learning and identity.

Narrow definitions in apprenticeships and vocational learning

In apprenticeships and vocational learning, the narrowing effect is more pronounced. Apprenticeship standards frequently equate digital literacy with occupational competence, such as operating industry-specific software or completing compliance training. While these skills are necessary, they reduce literacy to functionality. This risks neglecting wider cultural and ethical questions, such as how technology shapes workplace power dynamics, or how learners can critically evaluate digital systems.

Research in vocational education highlights how outcome-based frameworks often privilege measurable competencies at the expense of reflection and adaptability (Tondeur et al., 2023; Jiang and Yu, 2023). This restricts opportunities for apprentices and vocational learners to develop as critical and adaptive digital practitioners.

Inequities of access

Equity remains a pressing concern; Jisc’s (2024) Student Digital Experience Insights Survey highlights persistent inequalities in device ownership, connectivity, and staff confidence. These disparities are particularly acute in further education and vocational contexts, where resources may be unevenly distributed across institutions.

Frameworks that assume equal levels of access risk reinforcing deficit perspectives. Students who lack resources or institutional support are positioned as falling short of benchmarks rather than as participants whose potential requires enabling. For HE students from under-represented groups, such approaches risk compounding structural disadvantage.

The problem of obsolescence

Competency frameworks date quickly; the rapid pace of technological change means competencies defined today may be redundant tomorrow. Without iterative review, institutions risk anchoring teaching and assessment to outdated practices. This

temporal mismatch is especially damaging in vocational and professional learning, where responsiveness to workplace transformation is essential.

Together, these limitations highlight the need to move beyond frameworks as static instruments. They may serve as useful starting points, but without translation into pedagogy they cannot meet the sector's long-term needs. These observations suggest the importance of reconceptualising digital literacy, shifting the focus from static competencies towards dynamic, socially situated practices that better reflect the realities of learning, teaching, and work.

Repositioning Digital Literacy Considering Ethics, Pedagogy, and Student Voice

Literacy as a socially situated practice

Academic literacies scholarship has long emphasised that literacy is not a neutral skill set but a socially situated practice (Lea and Street, 1998). Applied to the digital context, this means recognising that literacy is mediated by disciplinary cultures, institutional histories, and student identities. The same competency may have different meanings and implications across disciplines, workplaces, and vocational pathways.

For full-time HE students, literacy might involve navigating digital tools for research, assessment, and collaboration; concerning apprentices, it might mean engaging with workplace technologies critically and reflectively. Whereas for vocational learners, it may involve developing confidence with basic systems while also understanding how digital technologies mediate their access to labour markets. A socially situated approach allows these differences to be foregrounded rather than obscured.

Pedagogy and socio-material perspectives

Socio-material perspectives further deepen this critique; Fenwick (2010) and Gourlay (2021) argue that literacy is produced through the entanglement of people, technologies, and organisational structures. This perspective challenges the assumption that literacy can be fully captured by competency statements. Instead, it draws attention to the dynamic interplay of human and non-human actors that shape practice.

This framing highlights the ethical and relational dimensions of digital literacy. It is not enough to know how to operate tools. Learners must also consider questions of power, equity, and identity. Embedding literacy within pedagogy creates the space for such critical engagement.

Student voice and lived realities

Student voice remains under-represented in institutional strategies. Nkomo, Daniel and Butson (2021) show that frameworks and policies are typically designed from the perspective of staff or policymakers, with students positioned as passive recipients. Jisc's (2024) findings reinforce this, showing that students often find

institutional definitions of digital literacy vague or disconnected from their lived experience.

Embedding student voice is critical not only for inclusivity but also for relevance. Students are active participants in shaping digital cultures, both inside and outside formal education. Their perspectives should inform the design of literacy initiatives, ensuring strategies reflect lived realities rather than managerial assumptions.

Towards a dynamic model of digital literacy

Guiding principles

From this analysis, three principles can be identified for a dynamic approach to digital literacy across UK HE, apprenticeships, and vocational learning:

1. Pedagogical embedding, literacy must be integrated into curriculum design, assessment, and staff development. It should not exist as a bolt-on intervention but as a practice embedded in teaching and learning.
2. Iterative responsiveness, strategies must be revisited regularly to adapt to changing technological, pedagogical, and social contexts. Effective strategies function as “living documents” (Dooris, 2002; ERS, 2025).
3. Inclusivity and student voice, approaches must explicitly address inequities in access and participation, and they must be co-constructed with students as active partners.

Research agenda

The next stage of the research will adopt a multimodal approach involving local further education colleges and university departments, examining the perspectives of both students and academics to inform the design of a digital literacy model and evaluate its effectiveness. The focus will be on the transition from further education into higher education, where structural gaps in access, confidence, and institutional culture risk compounding inequalities. By adopting co-design methodologies and cross-sector analysis, this project aims to produce a model that is both theoretically robust and practically usable.

Reflections on practice

Across UK higher education, apprenticeships, and vocational learning, frameworks have provided useful markers but are insufficient when treated as full strategies. For staff, they can offer reassurance and clarity, yet in practice they often translate into additional expectations layered on top of already heavy workloads. This is especially the case when digital literacy is framed as something to be delivered in addition to, rather than through, disciplinary teaching. Staff may be required to demonstrate alignment with institutional frameworks without always receiving the time, training, or resources to embed literacy meaningfully. These tensions reflect wider sector pressures in which audit and accountability can outweigh opportunities for innovation. Professional development represents a further challenge. While Advance HE’s Professional Standards Framework provides a structure for recognising digital practice, the translation of these expectations into everyday academic work remains

uneven. In some institutions, staff are supported through CPD opportunities and collaborative communities of practice. In others, digital upskilling is left to individual initiative, reinforcing disparities between disciplines and departments. The unevenness of this provision means that staff capacity is a critical variable in whether literacy strategies become meaningful pedagogical practices or remain as paper exercises.

Regarding institutions, balancing accountability and innovation is an ongoing struggle. Policy drivers from the OfS, alongside expectations to demonstrate digital readiness, create incentives to adopt frameworks quickly. Yet the very act of aligning to national benchmarks can inadvertently close down space for experimentation. The pressure to evidence compliance can overshadow opportunities for student co-design or for piloting new approaches that may not deliver immediate measurable outcomes.

Concerning students, the consequences are mixed; on the one hand, frameworks provide visibility and reassurance that digital skills are taken seriously. On the other, students can perceive literacy initiatives as disconnected or peripheral when they are not explicitly linked to disciplinary study or workplace practice. This is particularly evident in apprenticeships and vocational courses, where learners are often evaluated on functional competencies but are given fewer opportunities to reflect on the cultural and ethical dimensions of digital practice.

These reflections underline that the sector is only at the beginning of understanding how digital literacy can be developed as a dynamic and embedded practice. Observations suggest that while frameworks have created useful scaffolding, their impact depends heavily on staff capacity, institutional culture, and the extent to which student voice is taken seriously. This account of practice represents an early stage in a wider programme of work that will investigate how these challenges can be addressed, with particular attention to the transitions from further education into higher education. The aim is not only to describe the limitations of current approaches but also to begin identifying the principles that might guide more responsive and sustainable strategies.

Conclusion and recommendations

Digital literacy in the UK will remain an unsettled and contested concept. Its boundaries shift as technologies evolve, as policy drivers change, and as the student population diversifies. This uncertainty should not be seen as a weakness. Rather, it signals that literacy must be understood as a practice in flux, one that requires dialogue and adaptability rather than fixed closure.

The evidence discussed in this account suggests that while competency frameworks provide useful starting points, they cannot in themselves sustain the depth or responsiveness required for the sector. To move forward, institutions must reimagine literacy as pedagogically embedded, iterative, and inclusive. Five recommendations follow; each linked to sector priorities across higher education, apprenticeships, and vocational learning.

1. Frameworks as starting points, not end goals

Frameworks such as Jisc's Building Digital Capability and the QAA's Digital Learning Review have offered structure and common language. They help institutions demonstrate alignment with national expectations and reassure stakeholders that digital transformation is being taken seriously. Yet these frameworks were never intended as pedagogical blueprints. When treated as complete strategies, they risk producing compliance cultures in which institutions focus on ticking boxes rather than fostering meaningful engagement (Brown, 2017).

In practice, frameworks should be adapted to disciplinary contexts in HE, to workplace cultures in apprenticeships, and to institutional capacities in FE. Their value lies in providing a scaffold that prompts local adaptation rather than a universal template.

2. Embedding literacy within pedagogy

One of the strongest messages from both research and practice is that literacy initiatives are most effective when they are integrated into teaching, learning, and assessment. This means moving beyond one-off workshops or induction sessions and ensuring literacy is embedded in disciplinary curricula. For HE students, this may involve connecting digital practices directly to research and assessment. For apprentices, it means linking literacy to authentic workplace tasks while creating space for reflection on ethics and power. For vocational learners, embedding might focus on building confidence with core systems while fostering critical awareness of how digital technologies shape opportunities in the labour market.

Embedding also requires investment in staff development, Advance HE's Professional Standards Framework already positions digital practice as a dimension of teaching excellence. Institutions should build on this by supporting staff to design curricula that interweave literacy with disciplinary learning rather than bolt it on.

3. Designing strategies as iterative and responsive

The fast pace of technological and pedagogical change demands that strategies remain iterative. As Dooris (2002) argues in relation to institutional planning, strategies must operate as "living documents." Education Resource Strategies (2025) makes a similar point about adaptability being central to long-term resilience. For digital literacy, this means that institutional approaches should be subject to regular review, with clear feedback loops from staff and students.

This is particularly important in vocational and apprenticeship contexts, where workplace technologies evolve quickly. A static strategy risks leaving learners unprepared for industry changes. Iteration ensures that strategies remain responsive to both sector-wide transformations and local institutional needs.

4. Prioritising equity in access and confidence

Equity remains a persistent challenge, Jisc's (2024) survey highlights uneven access to devices, inconsistent connectivity, and varied levels of staff confidence. These disparities can marginalise certain groups of learners, particularly those in FE and apprenticeships, where institutional resources are often stretched. A one-size-fits-all framework risks reinforcing deficit narratives by framing these learners as lacking.

Institutions must instead design literacy initiatives that explicitly address disparities. This could involve providing targeted support for students with limited access, creating peer networks to build confidence, and investing in staff development to reduce inconsistency in delivery. Prioritising equity ensures that digital literacy becomes a vehicle for widening participation rather than exacerbating divides.

5. Embedding student voice into policy and practice

Digital literacy strategies must be informed by student perspectives, as Nkomo, Daniel and Butson (2021) demonstrate, institutional approaches often position students as passive recipients rather than active partners limiting co-creation. Yet students are already shaping digital cultures in powerful ways, from social media engagement to peer learning practices. Ignoring these perspectives risks strategies that appear managerial rather than meaningful.

Embedding student voice means involving learners in co-designing curricula, contributing to institutional strategy discussions, and shaping how literacy is defined and measured. This is vital across all contexts. In HE, it ensures strategies align with lived academic realities. In apprenticeships, it gives voice to those negotiating workplace hierarchies. In vocational learning, it captures the perspectives of students who often experience the sharpest inequities in access.

Looking forward

The forward-facing task for the sector is to design a dynamic model of digital literacy that embodies these principles. This article has argued that such a model must be pedagogically embedded, iterative, and inclusive of student voice. The next stage of research will test this proposition by focusing on student transitions from further education to higher education. These transition points often expose gaps in access, confidence, and institutional culture. By working with students and staff in both sectors, the project aims to produce an approach that is not only theoretically robust but also practically usable.

This agenda raises further questions that should guide sector debate:

1. How can strategies remain flexible without losing accountability in a regulatory environment shaped by the OfS?
2. What forms of staff professional development are needed to sustain pedagogical embedding under conditions of workload pressure?
3. How can vocational and apprenticeship learners be supported to engage critically with digital practices rather than only functionally?
4. What institutional cultures best foster inclusivity, reflexivity, and ethical engagement with technology?

Addressing these questions requires cultural as well as structural change. Institutions will need to balance accountability with flexibility, ensure investment in staff capacity, and recognise students as partners rather than recipients.

Digital literacy will not resolve into a single stable definition. Instead, its value lies in sustaining a critical and inclusive dialogue across HE, apprenticeships, and vocational learning. By embracing its contested nature, the UK sector can move beyond static frameworks and towards strategies that are dynamic, equitable, and pedagogically grounded.

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