

An experiment in blended career development: The University of Derby's social media internship programme

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It is possible to describe the capability of an individual to use the online environment to pursue their career as their *digital career literacy*. It is comprised of a range of different skills including the ability to: search; evaluate resources; communicate; network with other people; develop your reputation; and utilise an ever growing range of tools and environments as part of your career building. In another article in this edition of the NICEC journal Hooley (2012) has defined digital career literacy as encompassing changing, collecting, critiquing, connecting, communicating, creating and curating. This requires both the translation of offline skills and the development of new online ones. This article sets out the experience of running the social media internship programme (SMIP), an intervention to develop students' digital career literacy at the University of Derby.

Introduction

No one is born with digital career literacy; it is something that is acquired through experience and reflection. Furthermore, while some young people may have good ICT skills, this does not necessarily mean that they are able to identify what to do with these skills in the context of their careers. The idea that we have an onrushing generation of 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) has been criticised (e.g. in Bennett et al, 2008) in favour of an approach which recognises that technologies mediate existing skills and knowledge and that there is a wide range of things that you can do with a computer, which do not all draw on the same set of skills.

It is clear that digital career literacy is highly varied across the population. At one end of the spectrum it is possible to identify individuals with extremely high digital career literacy. For example, Ulrike Schulz¹ built a website about herself and went looking for a job in London. She created the Twitter identity @TheLondonJob and asked people to use the #HireUlrike hashtag to accompany photos of themselves on Twitter. She used social media and a loose network of well-wishers to build her profile as a candidate for work. Ulrike built up her online brand and the associated campaign to such an extent that she was offered a job as an Account Executive at the company We Are Social.

At the other end of the spectrum around 10 million adults in the UK have never used the internet with those in this group tending to be older, poorer and less educated than the rest of the population (Race Online, 2012). Students in higher education generally have considerable experience of using computers (and other forms of ICT). However, the experience of running the SMIP suggests that despite this competence in ICT they are not using the kinds of strategies employed by Ulrike Schulz and that, in fact, they were unaware that these strategies even existed.

A lot of people aren't geared towards the professional use of social media. They use it for fun and social life.

Sam McCaffrey,
Third Year, Creative Writing, Focus Group²

1 For more information about Ulrike Schulz see her website at <http://ulrikeschulz.weebly.com/>. In particular the press coverage in the Links section of the site.

2 Participants have given permission for their full names to be used in the publication.

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Recent studies that have examined digital career literacy (Bimrose et al, 2010; Hooley et al, 2010) have also found that career explorers are not using the internet in very sophisticated ways as part of their career exploration and career building.

Consequently it is possible to make a strong case that careers services should concern themselves with the development of digital career literacy. In fact it is becoming more difficult to imagine how people can develop their career management skills without considerable reference to the online environment. It is increasingly untenable to talk about self-reflection and not to mention blogging, or networking and not to mention LinkedIn³ or researching the labour market without mentioning Monster⁴. However careers professionals who want to explore these kinds of issues can be challenged, both by the ever changing number of technological tools and perhaps more critically, by the lack of established approaches for supporting the development of digital career literacy (Barnes & La Gro, 2009; Bimrose et al, 2010).

This article will explore these issues through a piece of action research that was undertaken at the University of Derby during February and March of 2012. The Career Development Centre (CDC), with the International Centre for Guidance Studies (iCeGS) used funding from the University's Teaching Informed by Research programme to develop a new career development intervention. This intervention sought to develop students' digital career literacy and to explore a model of blended delivery that combined one-to-one support and group work, and took place in both onsite and online contexts.

The social media internship programme (SMIP)

The SMIP emerged out of discussions between staff at the CDC and iCeGS. CDC is a service that has enthusiastically embraced online delivery of service

through its own website, a series of discipline specific careers blogs and a presence on Facebook⁵, Twitter⁶ and LinkedIn. The service is therefore well developed in terms of the delivery of careers services online. However, the CDC had a less developed approach for supporting students to improve their own use of the online environment for their career building.

An intervention was designed with the aim of recruiting a number of 'social media interns' from second and third year students. The interns would be supported for a six-week period through a training session and access to advice and mentoring. Their task would be to spend these six weeks using social media to develop their careers. To encourage and sustain participations it was decided that those who completed would receive a note of their participation in the programme on their Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) and this proved to be a motivating factor for some.

I wanted the thing on my transcript. Having a line about social media on my transcript would look good and would enhance my chances of jobs.

*Sam McCaffrey,
Third year, Creative Writing, Focus group*

Interns would be asked to explore how to use social media effectively for their career development by experimenting with a range of packages and reflecting on their experiences through a blog. Support for the interns would come from a tutor (Debra Longridge, a careers professional) who would work with them throughout the six-week period in a variety of media. The interns were also encouraged to form a community of practice (Wenger, 2002) and to provide each other with peer support. They were provided with a LinkedIn group to facilitate this peer support as well as many-to-one interaction with the careers adviser; but they were also encouraged to interact with the adviser and their peers in whatever way and through whatever technology seemed most appropriate.

The SMIP was designed to foster engagement with

³ LinkedIn is a professional networking tool. It can be accessed at <http://www.linkedin.com/home> .

⁴ Monster is a career support and recruitment site. It can be accessed at <http://www.monster.co.uk/>

⁵ Facebook is a social networking tool. It can be accessed at <http://www.facebook.co.uk> .

⁶ Twitter is a microblogging and social networking tool. It can be accessed at <http://twitter.com> .

the online environment and to develop digital career literacy, but it was not about teaching students to use a particular tool e.g. Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn. Rather it took a tool neutral approach in which participants were encouraged to try out a range of different tools and choose the one that met their needs and best enabled them to link to their professional networks. In the initial training session participants were briefly shown how to use a blogging tool called Posterous⁷ and encouraged to set up an account on LinkedIn, both for the purpose of professional networking and so that they could use LinkedIn Group as a private discussion forum. However these were introduced as sample tools rather than course requirements. Only two interns used Posterous as their blogging tool and the use of LinkedIn was variable. Tool neutrality was an important element of the programme design because it: (1) prevented the programme from being seen as an ICT training course; (2) allowed participants the opportunity to choose the tool that was most appropriate for the community that they wish to access; and (3) because it recognised students existing knowledge and investment in online tools.

The programme was advertised through the CDC's normal channels and applicants were asked to complete an online application form, which asked for some demographic information and explored their use of social media and their career planning. Fourteen applications were received but one was disqualified as the applicant was not a current student at the University. This meant that thirteen students were invited to the initial training session. Only eight attended this initial session, the remaining five students were contacted and offered the chance to receive the training session materials following the event. One agreed to this meaning that the final cohort numbered nine.

Running the programme

The programme was conceived as a piece of experiential learning and it is possible to map the elements of the programme onto Kolb's (1984) cycle as follows.



Table 1: Kolb's Learning Cycle and the elements of the social media intern programme

Concrete experience	The interns were encouraged to have experiences relating to both their career (e.g. contacting a potential employer) and online tools (e.g. trying out LinkedIn).
Reflective observation	The interns were required to reflect on their experience using their blogs.
Abstract conceptualisation	The interns were aided in conceptualising their experience through both the initial training session and through feedback from a guidance practitioner.
Active experimentation	The interns were engaged in the process over a six week period and were encouraged to develop their practice of their digital career literacy throughout.

⁷ Posterous is a blogging tool. It can be accessed at <https://posterous.com/>.

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Career learning programmes tend to operate within a relatively small number of pedagogic modes: information provision; the one-to-one guidance interviews; group workshops; employability programmes and so on. There have been some attempts to explore how these modes might transfer online through either one-to-one e-guidance (Madahar & Offer, 2004), through a structured online learning programme (Goddard, 2010), or through looser kinds of intervention such as blogging (Hooley, 2011). However, none of these really offered many lessons for the SMIP which combined a rigid assessment structure (blog every week in order to get recognition through HEAR) with a loose multi-platform learning structure (talk to the programme's leader and to each other whenever, wherever and however you choose).

Despite the looseness of the programme's structure it was still important to ensure that learners' experience was scaffolded through training and support. An initial training session set out the structure and purpose of the programme and addressed both conceptual (how to build your career online) and technical (how to use online tools) issues. Following this the SMIP tutor stimulated engagement every week with an email which encouraged participation, highlighted examples of good practice amongst the cohort and reminded them about the programme requirements. The tutor also monitored all of the participants' blogs and their participation on the LinkedIn group and other social media platforms. Those who were not maintaining their engagement were contacted and provided with encouragement and additional support where necessary.

The tutor also provided support to the cohort across a range of platforms. This included face-to-face guidance interviews, conversations on the telephone, emails, comments on interns' blogs and responding to discussions on LinkedIn and other social media platforms. This level of attentiveness to the cohort was time consuming but not as complex to manage as the multi-platform approach might suggest. In essence the role was divided into proactive programme management (checking each interns' blog once a week and engaging with the LinkedIn group) and reactive learner support (answering queries in the media of the students' choosing, chasing non-participation, engaging in social interactions whilst using social

media). Participants seemed very responsive to this multi-platform engagement and considerable rapport was built.

An unexpected benefit I've found from the internship is the input from the careers advisor co-running it... the input, anecdotes and insights she has offered have been really great. A careers advisor has had insightful advice on topics relating to finding a path to careers – I don't know why it is unexpected come to think of it.

Second Year, Graphic Design, Blog Post

It is possible to identify concerns about the movement of career guidance online. Key concerns include the idea that without face-to-face contact there will be a loss of quality and depth, as well as the idea that the move online will have the effect of reducing professional autonomy and skill. The experience of running the SMIP challenged these concerns and the programme's tutor found that she experienced deep and sustained levels of engagement with the interns, which required her to use both her guidance and technical skills to meet their diverse needs.

The student experience

The student cohort that began the programme was comprised of nine students. In their initial applications most of the cohort indicated that they were already engaged in the active development of their career and that they were also regular users of social media (Facebook in particular, but also Twitter, Youtube and LinkedIn). However, only one of the interns was blogging regularly at the start of the programme. In summary the cohort were digitally literate and engaged in career building (although this was often more in principle than in practice), but had not put the two together.

Seven out of the nine interns completed the programme successfully. One intern dropped out when he became ill, whilst the other unsuccessful intern did not engage with the programme at all. Interestingly he was the student who already had an established blog which he used to showcase his creative work. Despite a meeting with the programmes careers adviser he did not engage in any career development related

activities.

For those students who completed the programme the experience seemed to be both an enjoyable and personally productive one.

It's coming to the end of this social media internship now and even in this short time my career prospects have grown, be that directly because of the internship and my exploration of social media forms, and the general activities I undertake being a final year "creative" student. I think both have contributed to the other.

*Daniel Turner, Third Year,
Popular Music with Music Technology, Blog Post*

However, despite the generally positive experience, the interns also reported that the programme was more demanding than they were expecting. Samantha Neff (Third Year, Sports Psychology, Massage and Exercise Therapy) highlighted the difficulty in moving from her general (social) use of online tools, to the use of these tools for career building.

I decided to take part in this internship because, honestly speaking, I thought it would be easy... I spend half my time on Facebook, I have an account on Twitter, and I've set myself up on LinkedIn – therefore it should be easy... yet it is not.

However, the interns generally felt well supported

during the project and recognised that the programme had enabled them to draw in support for their career development.

Whenever there was an issue in one of my posts I got an email. I knew that you were watching."

*Sam McCaffrey,
Third Year, Creative Writing, Focus Group*

As will be discussed below, the peer support elements of the programme were less successful with interns' participation in LinkedIn being intermittent.

The interns used the programme as an opportunity to work on a wide range of issues relating to their careers. Blog posts covered diverse subjects within the broad frame of personal and career development, they included posts on: the student experience ("been a few highs and lows in the realm of my third and final year as an undergraduate"); transitions ("job interviews, final projects and a higher education fork in the road"); the evaluation of online tools ("so far I've found LinkedIn and Twitter to be especially helpful in my Social Media endeavours"); reflecting on skills and experiences ("I was praised by my managers for having the ability but lacking focus"); and career building ("it has given me new contacts and opened my eyes to new directions I could take my career in"). Figure 1 summarises all of the blog posts that were posted during SMIP.

Figure 1: Summary of blog posts¹



¹ TagCrowd is a tool which can be used to summarise text. It presents the most frequently used words with those that are used most rendering in a larger font size. It can be accessed at <http://tagcrowd.com/>

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The interns were able to report a range of impacts from their participation. One Second Year Graphic Design student found that through the course he gained insights into how social media could be useful to his career:

Social media can be useful to establish connections, find information, engage with the right people and aid the pursuit of the right career path... I do think it is pretty obvious actually, but still it is quite surprising and exciting to actually do these things and share the experience of others doing them.

Other interns were able to report more concrete impacts such as expanding their support networks through social media.

One journalist I have followed and started to message through Facebook has offered to help me in a mentoring role and he has already given me some very helpful advice and notes.

*Sam McCaffery,
Third year, Creative Writing, Blog Post*

Daniel Turner (Third Year, Music with Music Technology) also used social media to expand his network. He used Twitter to make contact with a local company who asked him to write an article in a local magazine. Another intern was able to network with employers and find a job through the programme.

I thought you might like to know that I had an interview today with someone I found on LinkedIn and have provisionally accepted a job with him. If I hadn't done the social media internship I never would have found this opportunity, so thank you.

*Fiona Southcott,
Third Year, Business Studies, Email*

Lessons learnt about programme design

The SMIP was a pilot study which explored a new kind of intervention. As described in the previous section there seems to be evidence that participants in the

programme both liked it and were able to identify clear impacts in terms of their skills, networks and labour market opportunities. However, there were also a number of lessons learnt through running the programme that this section will examine to inform future programme design. In particular these lessons focus on the establishment of the community of practice and the level of scaffolding that was offered to support the engagement of participants.

One of the aims of the programme was to use social media to provide participants with ongoing access to a peer support network or community of practice. The hope was that students could share their experiences of developing their careers online and learn from each other. A LinkedIn group was set up to facilitate this community of practice and the interns were asked to use this to flag blog posts that they had written or read, to offer peer support and to share information. However, the level of participation on the LinkedIn group was low with only three of the interns using the group regularly. LinkedIn was clearly not a technology that most of the interns were using regularly before they started the programme and did not become something that most of them checked regularly. Because there was no clear location for the community's interaction, the community itself did not cohere and consequently the levels of peer support were lower than anticipated.

I kept forgetting about LinkedIn. I didn't really keep up with other people's blogs.

*Sam McCaffrey,
Third Year Creative Writing, Focus Group*

In essence the failure of a functioning peer-support community to emerge meant that the programme was operating through a one-to-many rather than a many-to-many paradigm. This increased the level of resourcing required from the tutor as all discussion was directed towards her.

It is possible to suggest a number of ways to improve the functioning of the community of practice. One option would have been to locate the community's interactions within a technology that the interns were routinely using e.g. Facebook. However, there are potential dangers in co-opting students' social spaces for learning and careers work (Madge et al, 2009), as

well as potential benefit for the interns in increasingly their engagement in professionally focused social media like LinkedIn. A second possibility would be to increase the weighting that was given to participation in the community of practice within the assessment. In the current programme design interns are required to create content to receive credit on HEAR, but they are not required to interact. It would be possible to develop these criteria further. The third possibility would be to use greater structure to bring the interns into more regular contact and use this to support the development of the community of practice.

Feedback from the interns suggested that some of them would have liked more structure and the opportunity to meet with each other more. (Second Year, Graphic Design) complained that “being left to our own devices so much was not very engaging” and suggested that he would have liked “more directed goals”. Fiona Southcott (Third year, Business Studies) would have liked tutorials on “the best ways of using each media”. These quotes demonstrate how increasingly the scaffolding around the programme, perhaps by having a weekly workshop, could have provided a stronger social learning context, but also could have allowed more space to develop the interns’ digital skills and managed the way in which they interacted with the tutor. In particular the focus of the programme around blogging, meant that some students felt that they would have liked more support to help them to develop their confidence as bloggers.

I would have found it helpful to know more about blogging – the different types of blogs and which is best for what type of writing, to be taught how to write blogs.

Fiona Southcott.

Third year Business Studies. Focus group

SMIP was designed to be an experiential learning programme in which the interns were required to engage outside of the “safe” space of the University. It was designed to encourage self-reliance, problem-solving and to develop confidence in presenting online. Given this it is unsurprising that some interns felt that SMIP moved them beyond their comfort zone and would have liked more support. It is important that the challenging elements of the programme are not lost, but given some of the feedback there may also be a

case for developing the programme in ways that both enhance peer support and increase the programme’s scaffolding.

Final thoughts

The social media internship programme was an experiment in the blended provision of a career development intervention. It worked well because it did not make artificial distinctions between online and onsite provision, but instead focused on providing an environment for experiential learning and reflection, and on engaging with the interns across the multiple platforms in which they were active. The experience of running and reflecting on the SMIP suggests that these kinds of blended career development practices can be highly effective. The experience also suggests that they make good use of career professionals’ pedagogic and guidance skills and their knowledge of the labour market.

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