

# INTRODUCTION TO DIGITAL EDUCATION

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The term digital education is increasingly used, but often without clear understanding of what the term means. It is sometimes used interchangeably with technology enhanced learning (TEL) and with e-learning or online learning, however arguably each of these terms reflects a different stage in the evolution of the discipline.

Digital education is an umbrella term for any “education that is conducted at least partly in, with or through digital technologies. This is a deliberately broad definition that could encompass the use of technology in traditional classrooms, blended learning (which combines online and face-to-face instruction) and education that takes place entirely online.” (Allan, 2019)

In the 21st century, digital technologies are often an unseen part of daily life, from online banking, social media and streaming services, to education or work-specific activities such as email, PowerPoint presentations, and PDF handouts. However, when it comes to more overtly digital technologies such as the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), or creation or use of digital media resources, or adoption of pedagogical approaches specifically related to digital education things can feel a bit more daunting.

## WHY ENGAGE WITH DIGITAL EDUCATION?

Digital education provides many opportunities to engage learners, personalise learning experiences and widen access. It can make it easier for learners and educators to actively engage both with each other (e.g. through email, IM (instant messages), video chat, online forums, social media etc.) and with learning materials.

- **Accessibility:** Digital education opens up the opportunity to access education at a time and place of the learner’s choosing and to control the pace of study. This can support lifelong learning and help to widen access. It can enable access for students with disabilities e.g. through use of text-to-speech, screen readers etc. Online and blended learning can also increase access to education among ‘non-traditional’ students: for example, those who live a long way from a university campus or have work or caring responsibilities.
- **Personalisation:** The provision of learning materials in digital formats enables personalisation of the materials and / or the settings of the technology used to access them. This makes it easier for the learner to access and use the materials in the way that best supports their learning.
- **Flexibility:** Digital technologies often provide affordances not available in other formats, including the ability to provide

learning content in different formats or modes or languages, to interact synchronously and asynchronously with people across the world.

- **Authenticity:** the contemporary global citizen needs to be able to engage with the digital world, so digital capabilities are now a key graduate attribute.

*“To live, learn and work in a digital society, your students need to develop the digital skills that employers want now, as well as the confidence and deeper-seated capabilities that will enable them to progress in their careers and adapt to emerging technologies.” JISC 2018*

Fundamentally, for educators or learners not to engage in digital education risks them being left behind in this increasingly digitally connected global society.

## HOW TO ENGAGE WITH DIGITAL EDUCATION?

Engaging with digital education can be as simple as asking students to use a mobile device to access learning materials or providing an interactive quiz to engage students and test understanding of threshold concepts or a specific topic. Equally, it can entail designing and delivering a fully interactive online course or designing your own app or software programme, or any other use of digital technology that enhances learning. This might seem daunting but there are simple steps you can take to get started.

### 1. Take a pedagogically informed approach

However you decide to engage with digital education, it needs to be for pedagogic reasons rather than because the technology is popular, or its use is being promoted; and as with any technology or approach, it needs to be the right one for the job.

### 2. Get advice

Get advice about the technology or approach that you plan to use or see how other people are using it already. University learning technologists are an excellent source of support and ideas as well as often being able to demonstrate the use of technologies. It can be very useful to experience using something as a learner before you use it as an educator.

### 3. Start small

Once you’ve decided to try something, start small and in a safe environment. Try something yourself or with colleagues before using with a wider or more public group.

### 4. Reuse existing resources

Often there will already be digital resources that can be reused or revised. It’s reasonable to use resources again as long as they are still fit for purpose. It is also acceptable to use what other people have created provided that it is appropriately licenced. For example Open Educational Resources (OER)

are licenced for reuse – look for the Creative Commons Attribution but be aware that there are several different types of CC licenses. However, do not use copyright materials without permission of the copyright holder.

### 5. Have a back-up plan

Be prepared for things not to go to plan. We've all experienced digital technologies not working for us, so have a back-up plan for if things don't work (or don't work first time) but also be prepared to try again. This can be daunting if you have an audience but persevere. It is OK to ask for audience support, they may already know how to use the technology. Being able to adapt and develop your approach is more important than doing things perfectly first time.

### 6 Be creative

Just because a technology or approach is intended to be used in one way, if you can see another way that works for you then try it, with digital technologies very little is permanent or immutable.

### 7. Share your practice

People can learn a lot from hearing about your practice, including as much from where things didn't go to plan as where they did, as well as reflections on things you would do differently next time. Sharing your practice also encourages others to do so and then you can learn from them too.

## KEY TERMS USED IN DIGITAL EDUCATION

**Asynchronous learning** - Any form of learning or teaching that does not occur in the same place or at the same time.

**AV** – any material that is audio, visual or a combination of both.

**Blended learning** - A method of teaching and learning that integrates face-to-face and online delivery methods.

**Curated content** - material that is found, reviewed and selected to be relevant to your audience.

**Digital capabilities** (sometimes also referred to as digital literacy) - the capabilities which fit someone for living, learning and working in a digital society.

**Digital learning resources** - Digital materials included in the context of a course that support the learner's achievement of the described learning outcomes.

**Discussion board / forum** – an online forum for discussion, often provided as part of the VLE.

**e-portfolio** - a digital collection of work assembled and managed by a user.

**Flipped classroom** - A pedagogical model in which the learning material is provided prior to the session, enabling the session to use a more interactive approach to deepen understanding and application of concepts / practices.

**Lecture capture / Recording of face-to-face teaching**

- An umbrella term describing any technology that allows instructors to record what happens in their classrooms and make it available digitally; also refers to the process of doing this.

**Mobile learning (M-Learning)** - Using mobile devices e.g. mobile phones, tablets, to facilitate learning and teaching.

**MOOC (Massive Open Online Course)** – online course with open access and aimed at mass participation.

**Screencast** - A video that captures what takes place on a computer screen.

**Synchronous learning** - Learning that occurs at the same time but not always in the same place.

**VLE** - A Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is an online platform for providing support for learning and teaching. The VLE can be used to host blended or online learning.

**Webinar** - a web-based seminar i.e. one that is held live via the internet.

**Wiki** - a website or database which is developed collaboratively by a community of users, with any user being able to add or edit content.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Practice makes proficient. The more you engage with digital education the more confident and competent you'll become.
- Not everything you try will work (or at least not first time): think of this as a development opportunity.
- Find a safe space to practice.
- Ask someone who has already adopted the approach or technology for some support and feedback on using it. (University learning technologists are an excellent source of support and ideas.)
- Pedagogy should inform practice, so the choice to use a digital technology, approach or platform should be pedagogically informed.
- Share your practice and share back if you build on someone else's work.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

Beetham, H. and Sharpe, R., (2020) *Rethinking pedagogy for a digital age*, Abingdon, Routledge.

Pickering, J. (n.d.) *How to start using technology in your teaching*, York, Advance HE. Available at: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/individuals/strategic-priorities/technology-enhanced-learning>

Scott, D. (2019) *Unsure about edtech? Here's how to build confidence*. Available at: <https://www.tes.com/news/unsure-about-edtech-heres-how-build-confidence>

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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