D I S K U S

Digital Literacy in Religious Studies

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Abstract: This article considers the relevance of the concept of 'digital literacy' within the context of the discipline of religious studies in higher education and reflects on its potential impact on notions of 'graduateness'. It contemplates how digital technology can be integrated most effectively in learning design and reflects on the skills students need to be equipped with to recognise the challenges and opportunities of digital technology and understand its impact and role within the study of religions.

Keywords: Digital literacy; information literacy; communication skills; graduateness; religious studies; teaching and learning in higher education; learning design; digital technology; digital religion

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> "Education is an interesting phase between its 'ICT-free' past and its 'ICT-aware' future. […] Over the centuries prior to digital technology, education evolved into a system that used paper technology in a variety of highly sophisticated ways to fulfil its mission to develop and accredit knowledge and skills. Its future must certainly be one in which it extends this capacity to a sophisticated use of digital technology" (Laurillard, 2007, p. xv).

There is little doubt that "we already inhabit technical, social and economic, cultural and educational contexts in which digital forms of information predominate" (Beetham and Oliver, 2010, p. 158). However, "while industries such as music, newspapers, film and publishing have seen radical changes in

their business models and practices as a direct result of new technologies, higher education has so far resisted the wholesale changes we have seen elsewhere" (Weller, 2011). So, how can we best prepare students in higher education for "living, learning and working in a digital society" (Payton, 2012, p.1)? What does the 'sophisticated' use of digital technology within higher education involve? And when can we consider students (or indeed staff) to be 'ICT aware' or 'digitally literate'?

This article considers how digital technology, such as the Internet, smartphones or other digital media, impact on *what* is taught in higher education and *how* it is taught. It asks how notions of 'graduateness' and information literacy have been and will be affected by digital technology. In addition to considering how students can be supported in the development of their 'digital literacy' skills in more general terms, this article highlights the need to think of the particular relevance of the concept of digital literacy within the context of specific subject disciplines, and in this instance, the discipline of religious studies. It considers what this discipline can contribute to the development of learning design that prepares students for living, learning and working in a digital society.

Using digital technology effectively as part of blended tuition and learning

The sophisticated use of digital technology in teaching and learning is not necessarily related to the amount or extent of its use. More importantly it involves (or should involve) its *effective* use. In order to make the most effective use of digital technology, learning design needs to utilise its strengths and facilitate an environment that supports students in the acquisition of relevant subject specific knowledge and skills and more generic social, cognitive and technical skills, including digital literacy skills. As Terry Mayes and Sara de Freitas (2007, p. 13) argue, "the challenge is to describe how the technology allows underlying processes common to all learning to function effectively. A true model of e-learning would need to demonstrate on what new learning principles the added value of the 'e' was operating". So, instead of being seduced by the 'bells and whistles' of digital technology, we need to critically consider what can be gained through its use and how it can enhance existing teaching and learning practices. In particular, we need to ask ourselves: What can digital technology offer that other technologies or methods of teaching and learning cannot provide or do not provide as effectively?

At the Open University, for example, the availability of online study resources, such as electronic books, journals and academic reference works within the OU's online library and the wider Internet has significantly increased opportunities for OU students for independent study and research. In the not so distant past, OU students received all their learning materials in the post (though some set books had to be purchased) and there was little expectation that they would use additional materials, as many did not have access to libraries. Though most OU modules continue to include elements of face-to-

face and telephone tuition, the use of forums and wikis has created further opportunities for group work at a distance, electronic submission of assignments has enabled more rapid feedback and social media, such as Facebook or Twitter, have created new opportunities for students to network with each other on a more informal basis (though at the point of writing, Facebook or Twitter do not tend to be incorporated within the formal learning design – at least not within the Arts Faculty).

It is also important to acknowledge that working with new technologies as a teacher does not only require the acquisition of new technical skills, but also of new teaching skills (Vaughan, 2010, p. 173). The skills required for the facilitation and moderation of discussions on an online forum are, for example, different from those required for the facilitation of discussions in a face-to-face tutorial setting. Or, to give another example, the design of online study materials requires different skills from those required for writing printed text books or giving face-to-face lectures, and the creation of the 'right' blend of different teaching and learning methods equally requires specific skills. This involves the identification of effective ways in which digital technology can best be blended, combined and *integrated* with other, more established modes of teaching and learning, such as paper-based or face-to-face teaching. 'Blended' approaches to teaching and learning "are based on the insight that it is not sufficient to simply 'bolt' new technologies onto already existing approaches, but that some thought needs to go into the development of pedagogical approaches that enable and support the integration of these new technologies" (Sinclair, 2011). Randy Garrison and Norman Vaughan (2008, p. 148) describe 'blended' approaches to learning and teaching as the 'organic integration' of new technologies and approaches into previously established ways of teaching and learning. Robert Ellis and Peter Goodyear (2010) employ the concept of the 'ecology of learning' to describe 'holistic' or 'systemic' approaches to the creation and sustenance of learning environments that enable the co-existence and co-operation of old and new technologies and teaching and learning methods.

In order to create such learning environments, the assets of different elements of the teaching blend need to be identified and utilised. "Digital environments are [for example] inherently more adaptive and open to multiple experiences than their offline counterparts" (Beetham *et al.*, 2013, p. 274). However, research has shown that face-to-face meetings – even if they happen only once within a 'blended' tuition model - play an important role in establishing a sense of connectedness amongst students (Conrad, 2005, p. 9) and in the creation of what Garrison and Vaughan describe as '*communities* of inquiry': "communities that stimulate and guide creative and critical reflection and discourse" (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008: 144). While face-to-face settings tend to be more suitable for spontaneous, immediate interaction, online forums can offer 'opportunities for reflection' and 'considered opinion' as they give students more opportunity and time to look up information, make connections and reflect (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008, p. 28). While online quizzes and games are often limited by multiple choice scenarios (though they are becoming increasingly sophisticated), they also have a number of advantages that can be utilised. This includes the fact that "learning activities

can emerge dynamically from learner interactions; there is scope for learners to make different attempts at the same task; [and that] the environment can be calibrated for different levels of challenge" (Beetham *et al.*, 2013, p. 261) to name but a few examples.

Apart from the utilisation of the assets of different teaching technologies and methods, basic elements that enable an effective, good blend include: clarity about intended learning outcomes students are expected to acquire, clear signposting, appropriate timing, clear ground rules, accessibility and help with technical issues, responsiveness to students' changing needs at different stages of their studies and last, but not least, the allocation of adequate amounts of staff time and funding. (For a more detailed discussion of characteristics of a good 'blend', see: Sinclair, 2011.)

Implications of living in an 'inherently digital' environment on notions of 'graduateness'

As Rhona Sharpe and Helen Beetham (2010, p. 86) point out, it is also important to recognise that "e-learning is not a separate way of learning but part of the everyday experience for students. […] When learners develop their skills, habits, practices and conceptions of learning, they do so in an environment that is now inherently digital." This is not only reflected in many students' use of digital technology for social networking, entertainment, travel, shopping or the way they register their car insurance and manage their finances. Research conducted on behalf of JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) in the UK has also found "that the internet is the primary source of information accessed by learners for the purposes of study" (Beetham and Oliver, 2010, p.162). However, this research also revealed that even though many learners were proficient in mastering the technicalities involved in the use of digital technologies, many struggled to critically evaluate the vast amount of information available to them and select appropriate, relevant and reliable information. It found that there were "many differences in approach, from sophisticated triangulation of internet references to a naïve faith in Google as a 'vast encyclopedia'" (Beetham and Oliver, 2010, p. 162). This highlights that there is often a lack of awareness of the limits to the reliability and quality of the information that can be accessed via digital technology. As Christopher Helland points out,

> "Although it appears that there is no end of possibilities for this technology to assist in both primary and secondary source research, there are significant limitations and gray areas on the Web, darkening this electronic illumination. Although the Internet and the Web can function like a library, it is not a typical one. The information is not all edited or reviewed by a press or peers. In the past, academics knew that you could not judge a book by its cover. In the electronic age, it is more apt to say that you should not judge a website by its home page" (Helland, 2006, p. 215).

This means that students need guidance on how to develop specific skills that enable them to effectively access the rich, diverse and wide-ranging resources that digital technology can make available to them at their fingertips, whilst also developing their capacity to critically evaluate this information.

In recognition of the need to equip learners with the skills to utilise digital technology effectively for their studies, the Open University is currently in the process of introducing a 'Digital and Information Literacy Framework'. This framework focuses on the development of information literacy and digital social practices at different stages in learners' studies. It consists of the following five elements: (1) "understand and engage in digital practices", (2) "find information", (3) "critically evaluate information, online interactions and online tools", (4) "manage and communicate information" and (5) "collaborate and share digital content" (Open University Library Services / IET, 2012).
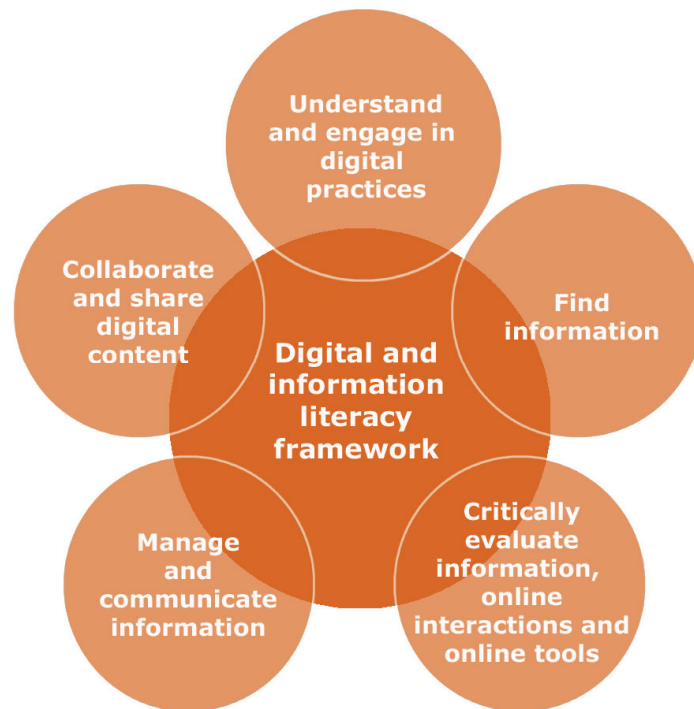
(Reedy and Goodfellow, 2013).

These five elements are developed to different degrees at levels 1, 2 and 3 and at post-graduate level. This new framework builds on the Information Literacy Framework that was introduced in 2009/10 (Open University, 2010). The associated OU website explains the difference between digital literacy and information literacy as follows:

"Digital literacy includes the ability to find and use information (otherwise known as information literacy) but goes beyond this to encompass communication, collaboration and teamwork, social awareness in the digital environment, understanding of e-safety and creation of new information. Both digital and information literacy are underpinned by critical thinking and evaluation" (Open University Library Services / IET, 2012).

This highlights that 'digital literacy' is not just based on the development of information literacy and analytical skills. It also involves developing students' communication skills, bearing in mind that advances in technology "not only affect the means by which people communicate (e.g. hand-held devices), but the manner in which they do so (e.g. tweeting or texting), […and…] the various ways in which participants conceptualize the computer-mediated environment" (Cowan, 2011, p. 461). So, the effective use of digital technology in teaching and learning needs to give students the opportunity to practice a range of communication and information literacy skills and develop their awareness of how technologies affect modes of communication and processes of identity formation. This includes the students' own identities and their awareness of the image they are projecting of themselves when they are communicating in different settings and to different audiences.

It is clear that teaching and learning within the OU have been particularly affected by the impact of digital technologies, not least because the OU has a particularly diverse student body with a wide range of different backgrounds, needs and previous experiences who bring a wide range of different levels of ICT skills to their studies. However, the development of digital literacy skills is clearly not just something that only concerns OU students. The JISC 'Developing Digital Literacies' programme's briefing paper describes the training of digitally literate graduates as a *responsibility* universities and colleges – regardless of whether they adopt a blended, face-to-face or distance learning approach - "in order to meet student expectations and the demands of employers, in addition to addressing wider concerns regarding the competitiveness of the UK workforce in global markets" (Payton, 2012, p. 1). In their recent book on *The New Digital Age*, Eric Schmidt, Executive Chairman of Google, and Jared Cohen, Director of Google Ideas, predict that with the growing influence of digital technologies, "our understanding of nearly every aspect of life will change, from the minutiae of our daily lives to more fundamental questions about identity, relationships and even our own security" (Smith and Cohen, 2013, pp. 3-4). Whether the extent of this prediction proves to be correct remains to be seen, but it highlights that education needs to prepare graduates for living and working in contexts predominated by digital forms of information and communication (Beetham and Oliver, 2010, p. 158). Though the focus on the development of digital literacy skills in teaching and learning responds to an increasing emphasis on employability skills, it is important to bear in mind that digital literacy does not only equip students for life and work outside or after university, "the use of digital technologies has [also] changed aspects of knowledge practices and the nature of subject expertise across the academic disciplines" (Payton,

2012, p. 2). Digital technology is impacting on how academics conduct their research, what they research, how they find, share and publish information and ideas, and how they network and interact with each other (Weller, 2011).

This means that the impact of digital technologies on society requires a careful reassessment of notions of 'graduateness', i.e. the skills, knowledge and attitudes students are expected to develop by the time they graduate. Notions of graduateness are clearly not set in stone and have a long history of being hotly debated. Indeed "the search for the meaning of graduateness is as ancient as university education itself. Every era has its own, sometimes conflicting views on what makes someone a graduate" (Steur *et al.*, 2012, p. 863). However, while there is a need to prepare students for learning, living and working in a society that is increasingly influenced by digital technologies, a review of notions of graduateness in light of the impact of digital technologies does not require us to 'throw the baby out with the bath water'. While it does require a rethink in learning design, it does not require a *fundamental* shake-up of established notions of intellectual, personal or moral aspects of notions of graduateness. As the OU's Digital and Information Literacy Framework highlights, digital literacy skills are essentially "underpinned by critical thinking and evaluation" (Open University Library Services / IET, 2012) – and there is no doubt that these are already recognised as essential elements of graduateness.

Digital technology and communication skills in religious studies

The Higher Education Academy's *Employability* guide for theology and religious studies (TRS) students lists the "ability to read and use texts both critically and empathetically, while addressing such questions as genre, content, context, perspective, purpose, [and] original and potential meaning" and the ability "to gather, evaluate and synthesise different types of information" as well as the development of "highly sophisticated written and verbal communication skills" (HEA, 2009, pp. 5-6 + 13) as important examples of TRS graduate skills. These are all skills that digital literacy skills are closely related to.

In light of the particular centrality of communication skills within religious studies, the insight that digital technology affects not only the means, but also the manner by which people communicate (Cowan, 2011, p. 461) is of particular poignancy. Religious studies students need to acquire the skills to approach and discuss potentially controversial issues in a sensitive, balanced and informed manner. They need to learn how to carefully negotiate and manage their own religious identities and beliefs (or lack of) in academic discourse and engage with a range of different points of view without promoting or discrediting particular religious identities or traditions. These skills are challenging enough, but require a heightened degree of sophistication, reflection and awareness of the complexity of different modes of communication in an online environment, where the boundaries between personal, social, public, political and academic practices and discourses are often blurred.

As Doe Daughtrey points out, students often find the management of their religious identities (or lack of) particularly challenging in an online environment and need practice, advice and guidance in developing these skills (The Religious Studies Project, 2013). Daughtrey, who teaches religious studies at Arizona State University, argues that it is important to give religious studies students an outlet, such as an online journal, where they can express strong opinions or beliefs, while making clear that they need to moderate their own strong beliefs or opinions in academic discourse. She has also set assignments asking her students to select an example of a website or a YouTube video that reflects their own religious views and explain why they chose this particular example (The Religious Studies Project, 2013).

A further difficulty in engaging students in discussions around potentially sensitive issues is what John T. Strong describes as the 'intangible dynamic of personality' of teachers and students in an online setting. He argues that in the absence of body language, and in particular of facial expressions, it is harder for students to gain "a sense for the person behind the teacher" or to establish a positive 'virtual classroom dynamic' and a sense of trust (Strong, 1998, p. 100). In his own teaching of a religious studies module at Southwest Missouri State University that was entirely presented online, Strong tried to address this problem "by having the students write short autobiographies, complete with a picture, during the first week of the course", but came to the conclusion that this "needed to be followed up by other ways to discuss ourselves and each other as a class needed to be done as the semester progressed" (Strong, 1998, p. 100).

Given that online forums can offer important 'opportunities for reflection' and 'considered opinion' (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008, p. 28), it could, on the other hand, be argued that the setting of online forums is in some ways more suitable for discussions of potentially sensitive issues than a face-to-face setting that puts students 'on the spot' and does not give them as much time to reflect or 'cool down'. Online forums also give students the opportunity to practice their online communication skills in a relatively safe environment that is moderated by a tutor. By far the most popular discussion strand on the online forum for the OU's MA programme in Religious Studies, for example, has been a strand asking students to explain why they are interested in the study of religions. This has prompted lively discussions where students reflect on their own backgrounds and motivations and often find mutual ground and shared interests with other students or engage with different points of views. The fact that these discussions do not happen in 'real time' gives participants time to reflect. Indeed the 'ground rules' posted by the tutor at the beginning of the programme advise students to treat other students' posts with respect, even if they disagree with the views they express, and to give themselves some 'cooling off time' should they feel offended by a post. Potentially offensive posts can also be quarantined by the tutor, and there is the opportunity for the tutor to follow up any arising issues with the group within the context of the forum or on a one-to-one basis with individual students outside the forum setting, for example by e-mail, phone or in a face-to-face consultation.

While digital technology has created new ways in which teachers and students can interact with each other, it has also given students the opportunity to practice and develop different types of communication skills. This can also have potential implications for assessment design. The Open University module A150 'Voices and Texts', for example, an interdisciplinary level 1 module offered by the Arts faculty, currently gives students the option of including their forum contributions in their assessment (with the alternative of submitting a reflective commentary instead). Another example is an assessment that forms part of the recently developed OU religious studies module A332 'Why is religion controversial?'. This requires students to digitally record an oral presentation (using a tool called ART) and submit the audio file electronically for assessment. How the experience of delivering a presentation to a virtual audience in an asynchronous setting compares to giving a presentation in a live, face-to-face environment is an issue which requires further investigation, and so do the challenges of assessing and providing feedback on this work. There are, of course, many other digital tools or systems, such as Elluminate or Blackboard, that can potentially be used for these purposes. While the benefits and challenges of the use of these tools for assessment purposes need to be further explored, it is clear that digital technology has created new opportunities to practice and assess a wider range of communication skills in higher education, particularly in blended and distance learning settings.

Debates around how scholars and students of religious studies should manage their own religious identities within academic discourse are nothing new as such and clearly concern both online and offline settings. However, learning design needs to take advantage of the opportunities digital technology can offer, whilst raising awareness of the challenges posed by the new modes of communication enabled through digital technology. This does not necessarily need to involve the extensive use of digital media, such as online forums, e-mails or blogs, as modes of teaching, and neither does it require a fundamental shake-up of what is assessed. Most importantly, learning design needs to equip students with the critical analytical skills to distinguish between personal, social, public, political and academic discourses and communication practices in increasingly complex settings and develop their social awareness and communication skills in a range of different environments (including digital environments).

Digital technology and information literacy in religious studies

In addition to changes in modes of communication, the 'information landscape' within the discipline of religious studies has changed considerably in recent years through the availability of digital technology. As George Chryssides points out, "it has been said that religion is the second most popular topic to feature in the World Wide Web" (Chryssides, 2007, p. 382), 'surpassed' only by pornography. The Internet has enabled the wider and faster accessibility of information about different religious groups, organisations and institutions and their leaders (for example, through their

own websites, Facebook pages, blogs or Tweets), the wider accessibility of relevant political documents, political speeches and government policies concerning religious issues, of digitalised historical archives and statistical resources, of retail websites selling specialist religious products, such as *kosher* food or *halal* fashion, of representations of religious groups and traditions within the news and popular culture across the world and of academic publications and other literature. Digital technology has also significantly widened opportunities for networking and sharing information with other students and scholars of religion across the world. In the study of religions, digital technology "brings us into contact with a considerably wider range of informants and deeper pool of data than we might otherwise expect" (Cowan, 2011, p. 463), and at comparatively low cost, great speed and without the need to travel.

As stated above, students not only need to learn how to access this treasure trove of primary and secondary sources, they also need to learn how to use this material effectively. They also need to be aware of the challenges and opportunities inherent in the fact that "unlike traditional publishing, Web publishing is not subject to any kind of quality assurance" (Chryssides, 2007, p. 384), which makes the publishing process a lot more democratic, but also means that the information presented is often less reliable. Learning design needs to raise students' critical awareness of issues related to the authorship or authority of sources as well as of the often complex nature of the relationship between online and offline worlds (Campbell, 2013; Campbell, 2012; Campbell and Lövheim, 2011; Cowan, 2011; Lundby, 2011). Digital literacy also involves the awareness of the increasingly blurred distinction between information provision and visitor participation in interactive online environments (Cowan, 2011, p. 461). Students equally need to consider the fact that even though digital technology enables the often instant publication of new information, online sources can also be suddenly lost or withdrawn and are sometimes not updated – a phenomenon that Douglas E. Cowan refers to as the "paradox of *online ephemerality* and *outdated durability*" (Cowan, 2011, p. 465). As Cowan points out, students and researchers that use the Internet as a source of information also need to develop awareness of the "ramifications of political interference with or corporate control over Internet access and content, [and of] the digital divide (which still indicates that the vast majority of the global population does not have access to the Internet)" (Cowan, 2011, p. 461).

The development of digital literacy skills also needs to be concerned with ethical issues associated with the use and analysis of digital technologies. This includes issues "concerning authenticity, the boundaries of private, public and political [spheres] and the responsibilities of individuals and societies" (Campbell and Lövheim, 2011, p. 1093). Furthermore, the widespread availability of information through digital technology has not only heightened the need to equip students to critically evaluate and handle this information responsively, students also need to learn how to acknowledge and reference very different types of sources and avoid plagiarism. Digital technology has created a lot more opportunities for students to commit

plagiarism, but it has also made it much easier for educational institutions to detect plagiarism through the use of software, such as TurnItIn.

OU Library Services have developed a collection of short, accessible and openly available activities aimed at developing students' digital literacy skills. This award–winning collection is called *Being Digital* and includes activities on avoiding plagiarism, communicating online, deciding who and what to trust online, finding and filtering information, managing your digital identity, using social media, making the most of online networks and online tools, using Wikipedia, selecting effective search terms, and evaluating information (Open University Library Services, 2013a). *Being Digital* includes an activity introducing students to the use of the PROMPT checklist, which is a tool developed to assist students in critically evaluating sources. This tool is not limited to the evaluation of *digital* sources of information, but is a very useful starting point for students. The PROMPT checklist advises students to consider a source in terms of its **p**resentation (i.e. its layout, use of language, structure etc.), **r**elevance (i.e. its usefulness for the task at hand), **o**bjectivity (i.e. the author's position of interest), **m**ethod (e.g. with regard to how the information presented was gathered), **p**rovenance (e.g. in terms of the credentials, reliability and trustworthiness of the source of a piece of information) and **t**imeliness (e.g. when it was produced) (Open University Library Service, 2013b). While PROMPT has not been specifically designed for students and scholars in religious studies, OU religious studies modules refer to this tool and religious studies tutors base tutorial activities around it and refer students to this tool in their assessment guidance and feedback.

Other similar tools have been developed to evaluate Internet sources and used by scholars and students of religions. This includes a method known by the acronym CARS, which Chryssides discusses in his chapter on "The Internet as a resource in the study of religion". CARS stands for: **c**redibility (i.e.: What makes this source trustworthy and believable?), **a**ccuracy (i.e. How precise, in-depth and detailed is the information presented), **r**easonableness (i.e.: Is the material written in a fair, objective way? Is it clearly structured? Does it present a convincing line of argument?) and **s**upport (i.e.: Are the sources appropriately referenced? What evidence is used to back up arguments? How up to date is this evidence?) (Chryssides, 2007, pp. 389-391).

Cowan has developed a list of research questions that are more specifically related to the study of religion on the Internet (see Cowan, 2011, p. 464). He divides this list into several levels of analysis: (1) a descriptive level (e.g. a description of the content of a website) (2) a level of analysis that identifies "both the source(s) of online content and the material's consumer audience" (Cowan, 2011, p. 464) (3) a consideration of *how* the material is being used (e.g. how content providers intend material to be used and how it is actually used; or how usage is controlled) and at level (4) the analysis asks *why* information is presented in particular ways, what explains online behaviour and "what we can learn from it, for example, about the relationship between religion and technology or the (d)evolution of religion in an increasingly computerized world" (Cowan, 2011, p. 464).

Critical evaluation skills can best be developed through practice and application to specific examples. Given that there are particular concerns around students' frequent, but indiscriminate use of Wikipedia, it is, for example, advisable to design activities that develop students' critical use of this particular source. As mentioned above, the OU's *Being Digital* collection includes an activity on Wikipedia, and activities exploring the use of Wikipedia in more specific settings are included in a wide range of OU module materials at different levels of study (starting with modules at Access level). The first chapter for the new OU module A332 'Why is religion controversial?' does, for example, include an online activity that builds on a generic activity on 'Using Wikipedia in your research' (Open University Library Services, 2013c) developed by OU Library Services and extends it into an activity that is of specific relevance to Edwina Newman's chapter on "Jesus in history: scholarly interpretation and controversy" (Newman, forthcoming). In this instance, students are asked to find the entries for 'Jesus Seminar' in Wikipedia and in the specialist online encyclopaedia *Jesus in History, Thought and Culture* (Houlden, 2003), read and compare these entries and answer the question: "Which source do you think would be most useful as a means of understanding the methods and conclusions of the Jesus Seminar?". When students have written an answer in a textbox, a comment is revealed that discusses the advantages and weaknesses of both sources in this particular instance (Newman, forthcoming). This is just one of many examples of activities that develop students' critical evaluation skills. It highlights the plentiful possibilities of developing activities like this, which can explore different examples of online sources and be tailored to specific subject areas or topics.

Again, the skills that students need to acquire to critically evaluate online sources are not fundamentally different from those required to critically evaluate any other type of source. However, the critical evaluation of the much wider range and increasingly complex nature of sources that digital technology has made available to a much wider audience requires a heightened degree of sophistication.

Digital technology and religion

In the development of students' digital literacy skills within the discipline of religious studies, it is also important to draw attention to the fact that digital technology has not only affected how religions are studied and how information about religious traditions, groups and practices is communicated, but has also impacted on "the delivery, reception and experience of religion" (Cowan, 2011, p. 470). As Knut Lundby argues, "the Internet […] offers new ways for religion to happen" (Lundby, 2011, p. 1231). Digital technology has created new opportunities for social interaction and religious experiences and for the development of new cultural practices, patterns of belonging and participation. New expressions of religion include "cyberchurches, cybertemples, online rituals (such as e-prayer and virtual pilgrimages), and online religious communities" (Campell, 2005, p. 311), webcasting of religious

services, interactive worship, for example via avatars (Campbell, 2013, p. 1), as well as numerous websites, Facebook pages, iPhone apps, Twitter accounts, blogs and online forums dedicated to religious issues or the provision of religious services. While some scholars, such as Chryssides, have highlighted some of the limits of religious activities on cyberspace due to the absence of physical sacred space and the lack of physical presence of officiants or sacred objects (Chryssides, 2007, p. 400), others scholars like Brenda Brasher have gone as far as to predict that "using a computer for online religious activity could become the dominant form of religion and religious experience in the next century" (Brasher, 2001 cited in Cowan, 2011, p. 462). Whether or not this will turn out to be the case, it is important to bear in mind that the way religion is presented, discussed and practiced online also impacts on the ways it is perceived and practiced offline (and vice versa). As stated above, students need to become aware of the links between online and offline worlds, given that "the Internet has increasingly become embedded in the everyday lives of many individuals, facilitating their social, economic and work-related tasks" (Campbell and Lövheim, 2011, p. 1083),

When a form of communication, a practice or an experience becomes 'religious' is, of course, another matter, and so is the question of the extent to which "forms of mediation should actually be regarded as an integral part of the definition of religion" (Lundby, 2013, p. 226). There are many different approaches to the definition of the concept of 'religion' – an issue that has always been of central concern and a matter of much debate within the discipline of religious studies. However, in light of the rapid speed of development of digital technologies, issues of definition and terminology often lag behind. As Heidi Campbell points out, "while there have been radical changes in communication technology, the terms or frames used to describe these changes and how religion is conceived of within digital culture have not always kept up" (Campbell, 2013, p. 1). The terminology can indeed be confusing (not only to students), though scholars have made various attempts at introducing new terminology that offers some clarification. 'Cyber-religion' was, for example, one of the first terms to be used in the mid-nineties. Helland (2000) then went on to distinguish between 'religion online' - digital technology as a tool providing information about religion – and 'online religion' – the way religious practices or beliefs have been influenced or altered by digital technology. However, in recognition of the fact that the distinction between what Helland conceives of as 'religion online' and 'online religion' is becoming increasingly blurred, the term 'digital religion' has recently been used by scholars, such as Campbell. In her recent book *Digital Religion*, Campbell explains that " 'Digital religion' does not simply refer to religion as it is performed and articulated online, but points to how digital media and spaces are shaping and being shaped by religious practice" (Campbell, 2013, p.1). This highlights the interactive nature of the relationship between religion and digital technology, i.e. the fact that religion can not just be shaped by digital technology, but that religious beliefs, practices and institutional authorities can influence choices designers and users of digital technologies make.

Campbell also stresses the wider relevance of the study of digital religion. In fact, she regards it as a "microcosm for studying Internet trends

and implications" (Campbell, forthcoming). She argues that the study of digital religion provides important insights into larger social and cultural changes related to digital technology (Campbell, 2005, p. 312), and particularly into ways in which "digital culture shapes notions of identity, community, authority, and authenticity" and in which "traditional narratives, social practices, and structures have evolved in and adapted to a network society" (Campbell, forthcoming). The discipline of religious studies is also in a particularly good position to make important contributions to the study of the social impact of digital technology not only in light of the prominence of religion as a topic featured on the Internet. The fact that the discipline of religious studies draws on and combines so many different approaches, including historical, sociological, anthropological, psychological and philosophical approaches enables religious studies scholars and students to gain a particularly rich and multi-faceted picture of social and cultural developments. While this highlights the particular significance of the study of religion and of the discipline of religious studies, Campbell and Lövheim also stress the need for "increased cross-disciplinary studies and scholarly dialogue" (Campbell and Lövheim, 2011, p. 1093) in order to gain a fuller understanding of the social and cultural impact of digital technology. Media scholar Lundby (2013) highlights the particular benefits of linking approaches in religious studies to those adopted in media studies, and argues that media studies can provide deeper insights into the production and wider reception processes of new media. The benefits of multi-disciplinary forms of research in the study of the relationship between religion, (digital) media and social change have also been advocated by Gordon Lynch who states that

> "There is a growing network of scholars working in media studies, media history and the anthropology of media, who have both a sophisticated theoretical understanding of the social significance of media, and a strong understanding of the relationships between media and religion. Their expertise can usefully be complemented by sociologists of religion, or those working more generally in the cultural study of religion, who bring alternative conceptual frameworks and who may raise critical questions about media scholars' use of particular theoretical understandings of religion and the sacred" (Lynch, 2011, p. 208).

Conclusion

In order to develop students' digital literacy skills and prepare them for "living, learning and working in a digital society" (Payton, 2012, p.1), a clearer understanding of the characteristics of 'digital societies' needs to be gained. Though there is a wealth of emerging theoretical frameworks, in light of the rapid speed of the development of technological innovations, the social and cultural impact of digital technology remains a field that requires further extensive study. The discipline of religious studies, and the study of 'digital religion' in particular, can make important contributions to this, especially in co-operation with other disciplines, such as media studies.

This article has highlighted the need to think of digital literacy in higher education, which includes both information literacy and communication skills, not only in generic, but also in discipline specific terms. Given that "digital literacies are often related to discipline areas" (Payton, 2012, p. 2), learning design needs to reflect the ways in which digital technology has changed aspects of knowledge practices and the nature of subject expertise within our respective academic disciplines (Beetham, 2012). The issues raised and the examples mentioned in this article in relation to the discipline of religious studies only provide a starting point and need to be further discussed amongst colleagues teaching religious studies in higher education. The development of learning design and pedagogical approaches that make the most effective use of digital technology and critically consider the complex impact of digital technology on what is taught, how it is taught and what is assessed within religious studies is of great importance and urgency, but requires careful thought and reflection, frequent reassessment and resourceful responses.

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