Students in the SADL: lessons from LSE's digital literacy programme

Abstract

This chapter focuses on a three-year digital literacy programme that ran at London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) from 2013-2016, aimed at undergraduate students. The programme scaled up over this period to support students' digital and information literacies using a student / staff partnership approach. Some of the challenges involved making the programme sustainable and scalable and while it ultimately did not continue, SADL provided inspiration to other institutions in the sector. The chapter provides valuable lessons for anyone working in the field of digital literacy support for students and offers strategies for success including suggestions about how to work in partnership with students.

Introduction

Student Ambassadors for Digital Literacy (SADL) was a programme that ran at London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) from 2013-2016. This chapter provides an overview of the lessons that were learnt during the three years of running a student digital literacies programme. It draws on the evaluation work that was conducted at the end of each academic year to understand the impact of SADL. The chapter reflects on the approach taken and the challenges that were faced. It also highlights several key issues that student partnership projects and digital literacy progammes need to address if they are to be successful. Although the programme ultimately did not continue and recruited relatively small numbers of students, the impact on the students who took part was considerable. The benefits to students who became Senior Ambassadors and worked alongside staff was particularly significant. SADL also influenced a number of other universities to set up similar digital literacy ambassador schemes and was also highlighted by Jisc as an example of good practice in developing staff-student partnerships and in supporting student digital literacies (Jisc, 2016).

The programme was modified after years one and two and enhancements were made following feedback from the student participants and the staff who were teaching on the programme. Devising the content of the course and engaging with students was one of the least challenging aspects to SADL. Student feedback on the format and content of workshops was highly positive and suggested they developed a range of skills through participating in the programme. However one of the biggest challenges was justifying the resources required to sustain and make the programme scalable. This chapter highlights two important issues for others to address when working in this field including:

- Establishing, scoping and acquiring the resources needed to ensure a programme is scalable beyond a small-scale pilot.
- The importance of building evaluation into the programme and to have jointly agreed measures of success with all project stakeholders.

These issues are explored in the chapter under the challenges section and should be of particular interest to those developing digital literacy programmes in further and higher education.

Institutional context

LSE is specialist, research-led university focusing on the social sciences, based in central London, with a student population of approximately 9,000 full time equivalent. It has an international reputation for research with a relatively small undergraduate population (approximately 4500 students). Students study across the social sciences in quantitative subjects such as economics, maths and statistics, and qualitative subjects such as social policy, international history and anthropology. Students attend LSE from around the world, and it has a high percentage of international students and an excellent rating for graduate employment. The SADL programme was partly launched because of a an earlier study at LSE (Bell *et al*, 2012) suggested that undergraduate students had relatively few opportunities to develop their digital and information literacies, either as part of their course of study or as an extra-curricular activity. There was a concern that many undergraduates did not attend workshops offered by the Library and Teaching and Learning Centre. The research also highlighted

how academic staff made assumptions that students were already 'tech savvy'. However, as students attended LSE for all around the world it was difficult to make assumptions about what tools and technologies they might be familiar. While they were all high achieving students, experience showed their digital and information literacy skills varied enormously.

Aims of the programme

The SADL project started in 2013 as a pilot in two academic departments following a successful bid for a small external grant from Jisc and The Higher Education Academy under their 'Changing the Learning Landscapes' fund. The bid was jointly led by Learning Technology and Innovation and LSE Library, however they also secured support from the Students' Union and the Teaching and Learning Centre, who joined the project steering group. An important aspect of the project from the start was the idea that staff would work in partnership with students to better understand their needs in this field and to explore the feasibility of providing digital and information literacy support though a peer-mentoring network. The SADL programme was also an attempt to plug the 'digital skills' crisis identified in a House of Lords Select Committee report (House of Lords, 2015).

SADL aimed to develop students' digital literacies, but also provided an opportunity to understand more about what their needs might be. So throughout the three years of the programme, research was undertaken with the cohort to measure their abilities at the outset of the programme and to track how they might have improved by the end of the year. A pre-course survey on students' research practices adapted by a survey devised by Purdy (2013) was completed by students ahead of undertaking the programme. Many of the same questions were then included in the post-course evaluation survey to enable the team to collect data on how students' abilities might have improved. The programme was therefore partly a research project, aimed at better understanding students' needs in this field, while also attempting to work with them to improve the support available.

Funding and set-up

The relatively small external grant was sufficient to establish the project in its first year and was largely used to fund the student workshops. Staff time was provided by the participating departments, however the funding allowed the team to provide catering and Amazon vouchers for students, which were offered as an incentive in the first year for all students who attended workshops. In subsequent years ongoing funding was secured from the Library and LTI at the same rate. Meanwhile it was decided that Amazon vouchers would only be offered to students as rewards for additional activities, beyond simple attending the workshops and. In years two and three the budget was primarily used to employ Senior Ambassadors. These were students who completed the programme the year before and they were employed on an hourly rate to support workshops and help plan sessions.

Recruitment and operation of the programme

As a pilot programme in year one, SADL was promoted to all undergraduate students in the Department of Social Policy and Department of Statistics at LSE at the start of the first term, during the induction week. It was advertised through social media, a poster campaign, through departmental emails and a 'shout out' in introductory sessions from the Student Union Education Officer. A job description and person specification was devised and students were encouraged to apply on a competitive basis. The Students' Union help in recruiting and advertising the SADL programme was important, however personal contacts in the Department's in years one and two, such as the department administrator and the undergraduate programme leader were also key.

In year one 20 students came forward to join the programme and this allowed the team to try out ideas with a relatively small cohort of 10 students from each department. Shortlisting was not required and all students were invited to a welcome event early in the first term. In year two SADL was extended to two further departments, the Department of Law and the Department of International Relations. Recruitment in these two years was relatively straightforward as it was possible to target invitations at first year students in the departments. Students in their second year were also able to join the

programme, but it was not promoted to third year students who it was felt would be too busy to commit. Recruitment in 2015-2016 when it was decided to allow first and second students from any undergraduate department at LSE to join, proved to be far harder, as it was more difficult to target the publicity. The programme in it's final year recruited 50 students in total, which given it was advertised across all departments was still a relatively small number of students. Partly this was because it proved impossible to send someone to promote SADL to every departmental induction, as had happened in the first two years. Recruitment therefore focused on a stall outside the Library during the induction week.

Senior Ambassadors

In order to try to make the programme sustainable and relevant to students' needs, it was decided to run it as a staff-student partnership project, which meant that students were teaching alongside staff in years two and three of the programme and had an input into the design of the workshops. These students were known as Senior Ambassadors and the idea came about at the end of year one when several students indicated they were keen to stay involved in the programme. In year two four Senior Ambassadors supported the programme, and in year three this was increased to nine Senior Ambassadors. They undertook a number of important roles in addition to teaching alongside staff, they supervised students working on group projects, they wrote blog posts and they generally helped to promote SADL. This even led to two students attending a staff student partnership conference, organized by Jisc and giving presentations about the work they had been doing.

The workshops

There were a number of features that remained constant throughout the three years of the programme, including the four workshops that provided the majority of the digital and information literacy content. In year two a welcome event was introduced and students were expected to take part in a group project, which they presented at the end of the programme in a final celebration event. The student projects came from a suggestion by a graduate of the programme in year one, who felt this might help the group bond and allow them to put their new digital and information literacy skills into action. Blogging was another

consistent feature of the programme, and the SADL blog had numerous posts written by students to share their experiences and what they were learning more widely. The first workshop introduced students to writing blog posts and in later years students were rewarded with Amazon vouchers for their contributions to the blog.

Workshops aimed to develop students' capabilities around four key areas: finding and evaluating information, using digital tools for academic practices, managing and sharing information and reflecting on their digital identity. They were taught in a highly interactive way and alongside this, students worked on a group project to consider the role of technology in learning at LSE. The team were keen to develop the peer support aspects to enable the skills to be cascaded to students outside the programme, however there was also an important community learning aspect to being part of this programme, which the team were keen to maintain. Providing students (and staff) with enough guidance and support, but also helping to empower them as change agents, was an important balance to achieve within such a programme.

Workshops were spread across the academic year with two workshops held in the first term and two workshops in the second term. Each workshop was repeated at least twice to cater for students' timetables and to keep the group size relatively small. The content of the workshops covered a range of digital and information literacies and evolved over the course of the 3 years, but it was the style of the workshop that was particularly different. From the outset a decision was taken to run participatory, interactive style workshops which would be unlike the traditional information skills sessions offered by the Library. The team wanted students to share their practices and knowledge by working in small groups, and undertaking activities to engage them in the topic. Lesson plans were devised so that different teachers could run the sessions and students would get a consistent approach to the content.

It was decided at the outset that computer classrooms were not suitable for the workshops, as in these learning spaces students tended to work alone and spend

their time behind a computer screen. Therefore the 'bring your own device' approach was adopted and laptops and ipads were available for loan in the session if students did not bring a device. In the first year teaching took place in a variety of classrooms around LSE, however in years two and three the team were able to use a dedicated library teaching room, where the room layout could be controlled. It was also a room within the Library, which encouraged a greater link with Library staff. To keep the workshop friendly and informal students were provided with drinks and refreshments during the workshops and the room was arranged cabaret style for group discussions.

The workshop content was as follows:

Workshop 1: Finding and Evaluating Information

The first workshop was a chance for the Ambassadors to meet each other and the SADL team, and disucss the kinds of skills students need to excel in their studies. Students and staff discussed how to find and evaluate information for their studies and for their social lives.

Activities in this session included**:**

- Welcome and an ice breaker activity
- Group work where students discussed the digital and information literacy skills they found useful to have on their courses, and considered the differences in skill sets required by their peers in their department and in other departments.
- Using Search Engines – students compared and evaluated methods for finding resources on Google, Google Scholar and the LSE Library Search Engine and the different sources that were found by each tool.
- Students considered how to evaluate the quality of the information they find online, and how to spot spoof websites. They also reviewed the value of different types of information sources.
- The SADL group project was introduced where students were to be supervised by a Senior Ambassador to explore one of three topics: improving learning spaces at LSE, improving feedback and assessment and the role of peer learning.

- Finally students were introduced to the idea of blogging and given editing access to the SADL blog.

Workshop 2: Academic Practices: Reading and Research

This workshop covered how to use reading lists and strategies on how to use readings effectively. It also explored how to use tools to facilitate note taking, and getting organised.

Activities included**:**

- Students worked in groups about how they approached an assignment and to draw out the stages in the process. This could include everything they did, from distraction techniques to actual research methods. They presented and compared their maps.
- Reading strategies covering what, how and how much to read and also going beyond your reading list
- Using tools to plan your time, get organised and take notes better.

Workshop 3: Managing and Sharing information

In this workshop students explored how they currently store, share and use information that they find for their studies. They discussed different approaches to their 'information behaviour' and looked at some tools that can help, depending on their way of working. The group shared their favourite tools and discussed ideas with each other. Finally this session discussed issues related to academic integrity with the message that sharing is important but students must be mindful of plagiarism.

Activities included**:**

- Review of the student ambassadors role and sharing activities
- Information behaviour activity and current techniques for managing, storing, citing information
- Review of tools that can help in this process.
- What is plagiarism – a quiz to find out how much students know about plagiarism, citing and referencing.

Workshop 4: Managing your digital identity and the digital future

In this final workshop students explored how to manage their digital identity and digital footprint through social media. They reviewed different aspects of their identity including their use of social networking, production of online media, issues related to online security and their online image. As this was the final workshop, we also reviewed some of the concepts covered throughout the programme. The students were invited to capture feedback on their experiences over the course of the programme through recording short video clips. The session also provided some guidance on creating videos which were useful for the research project students were working on.

Activities:
- Googling another student and reviewing the type of personal information that is available online about people
- Considering how to improve their digital identity and giving advice to other students.
- Learning how to interview other people to collect information from them and how to use cameras and voice recorders for the SADL group project.

The SADL teaching team

The teaching team was drawn from LSE Library and Learning Technology and Innovation. In the first year the Students Union Education Officer also helped to deliver several of the workshops and there was a contribution from the Teaching and Learning Centre. In years two and three the teaching was mainly undertaken by Academic Support Librarians and Learning Technologists. It was important to brief the teaching team on the content and approach to the workshops, because of the new content that was included and the style of the workshop. Lesson plans were produced and a standard set of PowerPoint slides were developed for each workshop, however staff were encouraged to be responsive to the needs of their group. They were also encouraged to view themselves as much as learners as the students and to encourage students to contribute their ideas. In year's two and three the teaching team also included the Senior Ambassadors. They helped to

plan the content of the workshop in years two and three and gave invaluable feedback on what worked well and less well in sessions.

SADL as a student / staff partnership

The interactive nature of the workshops, where staff teach some aspect of digital literacy, but are keen for students to share their ideas and experiences, lay at the heart of the SADL model. Student ambassadors were encouraged to discuss their approaches to using technology in their daily life and they learnt lessons that could be be applied to academic study and the workplace. Senior Ambassadors helped to shape the content of the workshops and to lead of some activities in the workshops, to bridge the gap between staff and students. The impact of the programme was measured through an evaluation survey which considered how students' digital skills had developed over their time on the programme. The team also carried out interviews with students at the end of each year. This research suggested leadership, collaboration and team working skills were gained through the programme. The interviews revealed that the opportunities to gain skills valued by employers were a key motivation to students who joined the programme. The students were also rewarded with a statement on their Personal Development record, although most acknowledged this was less important to them. Amazon vouchers were considered useful but many students did not say these has motivated them to join the programme. The opportunity to develop their own digital literacy skills came across as the key factor in each year.

SADL built a deeper level of engagement with students than would be possible during one off workshops. It also provided a supportive community where students could share their current digital practices, learn about new tools and technologies and develop a range of skills including digital literacies. Students from across LSE departments had an opportunity to reflect on disciplinary differences in digital and information literacy and to discuss their ideas with staff. Technology was used in all the four workshops but group work, discussions and creative teaching techniques were important to learning in a fun and collaborative way.

Impact and benefits

The impact of SADL was measured in a number of different ways but after each year an extensive evaluation study was undertaken (Secker & Karnad, 2014; Lau et al, 2015; Wang et al., 2016). Evidence that was collected included:

- Data collected on students' research practices pre- and post- SADL using a survey and interviews.
- Evaluation data collected via interviews with students on the value of the workshops and the programme as a whole. This included one interview with a student following their graduation, one year after leaving LSE.
- Statistical data to analyse hits on the SADL website and the number of blog posts written by students.
- Metrics gathered from outputs of the teaching team through presentations at national and international conferences.
- Interviews with staff to capture the benefits of being involved in a collaborative project and their experience of teaching different types of interactive sessions with staff from other teams.

The SADL programme was unlike other teaching undertaken at LSE and it attempted to change the dynamics of the relationship between staff and students. One of the key features was that both staff and students learnt together, and the evaluation of the staff experience suggested they had a better, deeper understanding of the students' needs. However, it was also challenging because LSE students tended to be less comfortable with being asked to share their practices with others and it took many of them some time to develop their confidence and trust in staff. Our experience suggested that student ambassadors and champions would be valuable in any university or school. Furthermore, if those students can be supported to act as peer mentors then the model becomes sustainable and scalable. However, there was a challenge to build student confidence, to empower them to act as 'change agents' without a relatively high degree of structure and support from staff on the programme.

Student research practices

SADL's reach and impact on the students who took part in the programme and in particular, those who acted as Senior Ambassadors, was found to be significant. The students developed digital skills but in the final year evaluation it was clear they also valued the non-technical skills they gained in the programme, such as leadership, presentation skills and team working. The data collected over the three years into students' research practices showed small changes in student behaviour in areas such as: greater use of the library search engine and Google Scholar, feeling better organized when undertaking research and a greater awareness of their digital footprint. However, perhaps unsurprisingly students remained unsure of their ability to critically evaluate information and often relied on their reading lists. Undertaking a pre and post course survey was a particularly valuable way to try and measure student improvements, if only in their perception of their ability.

Challenges

One of the drawbacks with SADL was its resource intensive nature and the fact it did not reach large groups of students. The relatively small class size worked well given the interactive nature of the workshops, it also helped to build trust and the sense that the cohort was a learning community. The personal contact with students over an academic year arguably meant the staff learnt about how better to support all students at LSE. In the third year the team decided to cap the programme at 50 students to foster the sense of community and to allow workshops to be run for no more than 20 students at a time. However, this meant each workshop had to be run at least twice, often three times and with 2 staff and 2 Senior Ambassadors teaching each workshop.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges to SADL proved to be securing an ongoing commitment towards funding and resources, including a commitment to staff time being invested in maintaining the programme in this format. Staff development also required an additional time commitment to ensure that all the teaching staff understood the aims of each workshop and were confident with the new approaches and content that was used. Consequently it proved difficult

to get all the teaching staff to attend pre-workshop briefings or evaluation sessions, due to lack of time. Therefore the lesson plans and resources that were developed by the team sometimes had to be used by staff who were less clear of their intended learning outcomes, or less comfortable teaching in a more interactive way.

Another key challenge proved to be providing students with guidance and support to develop as peer mentors, so they could cascade their learning to others. The intention was to allow the Student Ambassadors to develop their confidence and skills to become workshop leaders. Developing student skills and confidence to teach the workshops was more challenging than originally envisaged, due to the support they required. Additionally measuring whether the cascade effect of SADL had been achieved proved to be more difficult than anticipated. Had the programme continued, greater effort would have been invested in training for students in how to act as peer mentors. Related to this was a tension between student autonomy and agency and the level of support they needed. So while the intention was for students to lead a group project and hold drop-in surgeries, sometimes staff found the students were unsure about how to do this effectively. While the Senior Ambassadors were invaluable in helping to plan and facilitate the workshops, it became clear that they needed greater training and support to lead workshops. Our experiences showed the training we gave was not adequate to develop their confidence as teachers until relatively late on in the term.

In any programme that requires significant resources, demonstrating impact and having agreed measures of success between the project team and the stakeholders is vital. Our programme evaluated the impact on both staff and students each year, however in the end it became clear that senior management had not agreed the measures of success and were looking for the programme to deliver support to greater numbers of students than had been possible. This was disappointing for the project team but highlighted how important ongoing dialogue with senior management is. However, it also highlights the challenges of reaching large numbers of students while building an in-depth understanding of

students' needs. Many students stated in the evaluation the reason they liked SADL was because it was small and personal and they got high levels of support. This often contrasted to how they were taught in their undergraduate programmes at LSE.

Key points and lessons learned

Over the course of three years at LSE the SADL team learnt a lot about what motivates students to get involved in digital literacy programmes, what rewards they might want, and how challenging building a network of peer support can be. Our experience suggested that students are motivated by recognition and rewards such as Amazon vouchers, but that digital literacy skills are valued by students in their personal, professional and academic lives. Student feedback in the final year of SADL suggested more advanced digital skills could be included, such as advanced use of Excel and coding skills. Our experiences also suggested that developing digital and information literacy skills for students will benefit them beyond higher education in 'the real world'. Graduates from the programme who kept in touch with the team indicated that this was their experience after entering the workplace. One Senior Ambassador blogged about her experiences on the programme, shortly before completing her course, but after being offered a job. She had remained part of throughout her three years at LSE and said:

> "….being a Student Ambassador helps you build the confidence and leadership skills required to become employable, but to me, it also meant differentiating myself from other candidates because of the set of skills that I gradually picked up from the SADL programme." (Delior, 2016)

Technology is an integral part of students' lives and understanding how to use it effectively while at university is something many students value. However, the benefit of the wider skills, such as communication, teamwork, being a peer mentor and a leader were some of the most valuable experiences students gained from this programme.

Looking to the future

In Autumn 2016 LSE created a new learning space within the Library known as LSE Life, as a focus for academic, personal and professional development activities. A wide range of new workshops were developed by the Library and this meant staff resources were significantly stretched. It was decided to suspend SADL for the academic year 2016-2017 while LSE Life was established and the resource implications could be better understood. However a number of new workshops that were developed as part of SADL continue to run as part of other learning support activities. The value of a peer mentoring study skills scheme was recognised and the development of a dedicated space in the library, meant it this will be far easier to take forward in the future. LSE remains committed to enhancing student digital literacies and a variety of options are currently being discussed. There were many lessons learnt from the three years of SADL and the notable successes and challenges outlined in this chapter should help those working in a similar field at other institutions.

More information

For more information about SADL visit the SADL blog which contains historic information about the programme: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsesadl

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