

Transcript

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Derek Bruff: This is “Leading Lines.” I’m Derek Bruff. I’m organizing this series of conversations at my teaching center this year on a theme. I was trying to come up with a title for this series. I looked at the topics we were considering, things like critical media literacy, multi-mobile assignments, and participation in the online communities.

I went with “teaching digital literacies.” It sounds a little weird. I hear digital literacy, singular, a lot more than I hear digital literacies, plural. But I knew we could go in so many different directions with the series. I wanted something that captured that breath. I’m not alone in trying to wrap my arms around the notion of digital literacy.

In this episode, we hear from Julia Feerrar, Head of Digital Initiatives at the Virginia Tech Libraries. She speaks with producer Melissa Mallon about a framework for digital literacy that she helped develop.

A framework that includes a variety of competencies, from discovery and evaluation to communication and creation, to identity and well-being. Julia and Melissa discussed the development of the framework across campus connections enabled by the digital literacy work and what’s next for digital literacy at Virginia Tech.

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Melissa Mallon: Welcome, Julia.

Julia Feerrar: Thank you so much. I’m so excited to talk to you today.

Melissa: We could just jump in a little bit into this new initiative, I guess we could call it at Virginia Tech. Were you one of the founding digital literacy pioneers?

Julia: Sort of. I don't know if I'd say exactly like that, but sort of. It's an interesting mix of things, because there's been a lot going on with digital literacy at Virginia Tech for quite a while. Especially with some of the other connected literacies that we might talk about.

Information literacy, data literacy, so there have been things going on across campus for quite a while, but it was about two years ago that the library started to really think about a more coordinated effort around a digital literacy initiative.

That came partially from a provost charge as well. That really got started. We put together a library's task force that was representative of people across libraries, and I was on that task force.

I did get to be part of that pioneering group who thought really about what does digital literacy mean, what does that look like here on our campus, what are other campuses doing. Really thinking about the "what" and the "why" of digital literacy which I think was important before getting into what we wanted to actually be doing with it.

Melissa: I'm really curious because at Vanderbilt we have recently, within the last year or so, developed a digital literacy committee and we created a white paper to hopefully get things started on campus, but we spend a lot of time talking about the "what" and the "why," but really the "what."

I'm very curious if you can remember back to some of those early days and those early conversations, "What sort of issues or concepts were you all thinking about that led into this more formalized framework?"

Julia: Yeah, that's a great question. We were very influenced by the Jisc and that's J-I-S-C digital capabilities framework that comes out of the UK and some of their areas are things like information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital scholarship and different forms of creation.

That was one of our big starting points and we also talked a lot about examples of tools that might be involved in digital literacy. But, I think, it was pretty clear for us early-on that, we

didn't want to focus too heavily on tools or technical skills that there were a lot of social and more critical thinking aspects that we wanted to be making sure that we were thinking about.

It was always multi-layered when we were trying to wrap our minds around things.

Melissa: Yeah, of course.

Julia: I'm trying to remember back to some of those conversations. We also talked through about how digital literacy could look different for different majors or people who have different goals.

We wanted to think about what are some of the baseline skills and core knowledge that we would want students to have and then how can we also be flexible to whatever their specific goals might be or what kinds of skills and knowledge make sense in their discipline in terms of digital literacy. So, we wanted to try to do both things.

Melissa: That's pretty ambitious.

Julia: Yeah, it is [laughs] . It's a lot [laughs], it's very nebulous and I think there's something to be said for trying to make it more concrete but at the same time I don't want to lose all of the complexity and nuance that comes with these really huge concepts like ethics in the digital world and identity.

Melissa: First of all, I love that you all focus on some of those more social and critical skills that a lot of discussion related to digital literacy can get wrapped up in the tools.

This podcast, Leading Lines, it's on educational technologies, but we spend so much time trying to dig beneath the tool, beneath the ed tech piece to figure out what kind of skills and thought processes are required to use those types of tools.

That was one of the things that really drew me to the competency areas that you all determined at Virginia Tech because they do look at that bigger picture that help people become, dare I say, better people.

Julia: [laughs]

Melissa: I do think it's interesting that you were thinking about them, you had this moment of you want these areas to be very connected to disciplinary skills and requirements, but from what I can see on your framework is these seven competency areas are still fairly broad. Is that how you intended to present the information?

Julia: Yes, we were still trying to stay pretty broad and flexible hoping that our framework as a document can be a conversation starter and something to connect back to. As we move along, we'll be working on developing outcomes and more concrete examples, but for that first layer we really wanted to try to capture digital literacy in the broadest sense that we were thinking about it.

Melissa: Did you have a lot of disagreement on the task force or were people pretty well in alignment in terms of what they thought digital literacy might mean.

Julia: I don't know that I would say disagreement, but I think that the different emphases that we each brought with the different lenses were interesting to negotiate and grapple with. Those who come from more of a data literacy and data management background, there were certain things like curation which ends up in there that they were really thinking about.

I came from more of an information literacy lens, so things like discovery and evaluation were at the forefront for me in the way that I think about some of these things. It was more trying to bring together those different perspectives and multiliteracies which we do have at the outer layer of our framework. I think of that as lenses that you can take to digital literacy.

You can think of the kinds of digital content that someone might be engaging with and working with, could be data, it could be information. It could be some cross of those things. It may be something that we think about as media. It depends on where you're coming in from and what you're looking at.

Melissa: I love the idea of the different lenses. That fits really well with the different literacies that sometimes do fall into this. At one point they were called 21st century literacies, but now we have digital and media and information and computer and all of these different areas that really there is so much overlap.

They can look very different in different disciplines and depending on what background or experience someone brings to talking about these particular literacies. That leads me into

another area that I was curious about. It sounds like the development of this framework really was a campus initiative. Is that right?

Julia: We had that initial task force, and where the task force ended up was what the pieces of digital literacy were. Then a few of us took that further, and I worked with our creative services coordinator in the libraries to put that in a graphic that had some structure to think about how the different pieces are connected.

Then we took that first draft and had brought our conversations around campus trying to integrate into some existing faculty development opportunities for faculty who already were, one-on-one conversations, open feedback sessions, all culminating in a symposium last November. Trying to get feedback as broadly as possible, yes.

Melissa: Can you talk a little bit about that symposium? What your goals were and maybe any surprising outcomes from it?

Julia: Yes. Our goals, along with the framework and starting to think about digital literacy as a coordinated effort, was opening up a space for people who are already excited about digital literacy, to have conversations and connect with each other, and to, hopefully, start getting closer to being on the same page about what that is, what is important to us about it.

Just getting people in a room was one of my top goals.

[laughter]

Melissa: That's always a good goal. Just start with getting them there and then you can focus on the content.

Julia: Seeing who shows up, who's already excited, who are already our allies in this kind of work. Also, to have opportunities for people to share out about things that they're already doing.

We had some lightning talks during the day that any participant was invited to share things that were going on in their classes, or people in the library is talking about things they were working on. We also had Renee Hobbs from the University of Rhode Island as our keynote speaker.

Melissa: She's great.

Julia: She is great. She got us pumped up in the morning, thinking especially about the creative aspects of digital literacy and how we can encourage students to be creators in lots of different ways. It's one of our major themes for the day.

We did have a specific time to be looking at the draft framework. I led a conversation where we talked through, "Are there pieces that you think are missing from this?" "Does this align with things that are already in your courses?" and "Where do you see students having the biggest challenges with these kinds of concepts?"

Those were the questions that we framed around. Some of the themes that we saw was that, definitely, for the most part it seems to align or speak to things that people were already thinking. They often had things or examples and wondered, "Now, where would this fit in the framework?" Not necessarily that it was totally missing, but it wasn't totally clear.

For example, one of the areas in our draft framework was identity and self-development, thinking about who you are, and especially who you are as a learner in digital literacy and how you develop yourself.

In the feedback, we found that we are missing the focus on health and wellness, the idea of digital hygiene, things like safety, which we did want to get at, so we switched in the final version of the framework to identity and well-being to highlight that better.

Melissa: How do you say I have never heard the phrase "digital hygiene," that I love it?

[laughter]

Julia: I have mixed feelings about it because it sounds a little gross.

[laughter]

Melissa: Yeah. It sounds like one of those things that maybe your parents should teach you before you leave home for college, right?

Julia: Right.

[laughter]

Julia: It does get a connotation of what are our responsibilities to ourselves and our digital health, and also what are our responsibilities as part of communities online in different ways. One of those baseline things that we can be doing, like having secure passwords, backing up our files, taking time away, if that's needed, disengaging.

Melissa: I can see how self-development would fit into that. Also maybe, believing into some of the other categories as well, because depending on how you learn can influence how you discover, evaluate and create.

Julia: Definitely. It's so tricky to try to create a framework, even though we have a lot of words on there, it still feels like limiting ourselves to just a few words to talk about these really complex ideas. If I was going to step outside of the framework, I would see that whole thing as your self-development and your learning.

Melissa: Absolutely. Out of the symposium and maybe even -- that was last spring, in 2018?

Julia: The end of last fall.

Melissa: Last fall, OK, 2017. Hopefully, that launched some conversations and you've seen a little bit more integration of digital literacy. Have there been any entrusting curricular tie-ends that either came out of this symposium or that have developed since?

Julia: Yes. Overall, I would say, it was interesting to see that we had at least one representative from every college on campus.

Melissa: That's great.

Julia: We were getting, even if it was just one or two people, interest from really broad areas. That was great.

Thinking about partnerships that have come out of that, one, this may take us in a different direction, alongside our digital literacy initiatives. Another piece to the puzzle is our e-portfolio program.

Melissa: I'd say that's very well connected.

Julia: [laughs] That is situated in the libraries as well.

Melissa: Is that across the University for an entire Virginia Tech initiative or is that just one department?

Julia: It is across the university. It has been in pilot mode. We are growing out from there, but there's definitely a lot of overlapping interests from similar faculty, similar groups of students in digital literacy, any portfolios, which I think makes a lot of sense.

Because e-portfolio can be a chance to think about your online identity and make some decisions about that, as well as a place to curate the things that you're actually creating and maybe doing with different digital tools and all kinds processes that would be involved in digital literacy.

We've had some interesting pilot programs looking at using e-portfolio in their courses. Also, co-curricular or non-curricular groups looking at that, too. That working with career and professional development on campus, like career services, is a growing partnership in both of those areas. That would be really interesting going forward.

There's just so much going on that are liaison librarians are working with faculty on as they're thinking about expanding or shifting the research assignments they've been using to reflect all the changes that we're seeing in the way that people do research, and the way that people can be creating.

Melissa: It's a really interesting time to be talking about digital literacy on campus, because it is so tied, at least to my perspective, and sounds like may be to yours and some other librarians, as well. It's very tied in to the way the research process is evolving in, pretty much, all of the disciplines.

You see it, especially, in things like digital humanities or some of the natural sciences, where the idea of data, literacy, data curation, is playing such a big role in the research process.

Do you find with your librarians, as they're starting to think through some of the different types of projects or the different ways that research can manifest, have there been any

interesting partnerships that have emerged with faculty to develop assignments that have that digital literacy focus?

Julia: That's a great question, yes. I'm just going through so many examples. I'm not sure about...

[crosstalk]

Melissa: Yeah, if you just want to pull one out to talk about. That'd be great.

Julia: [laughs] I'm not sure about assignments in particular. One partnership that I know of, that involves lots of folks in the libraries, is our first year experience class in statistics does a data visualization infographic project.

Melissa: Oh, interesting.

Julia: That incorporates developing a research topic, finding some sample data and putting that together in a visual way. I know that the liaison librarian has been working with another one of my colleagues to think about supporting those students online as well as in person.

Another piece that comes in is that we have a fairly new data-visualization studio in the library, which is part of our studio's network.

We have multiple studios that are kind of like makerspaces in some ways. We have a 3-D design studio, a fusion studio where students can get together and collaborate in groups. It's really a chance for them to get some access to different tools and creative processes and people that can help them.

Melissa: Oh, that's great.

Julia: That data-visualization space also supports that course. It's multiple things coming together. I'm not totally sure on the exact evolution of that assignment and at what point we were involved.

It's a really interesting example of a project that involves some of the more traditional research, information, literacy skills that we might have thought about libraries being

involved in for a long time. Packaged in more of that digital literacy lens, it then includes things like how you communicate that through a visual to a very general audience.

Melissa: Yeah, I love that. I love that this is giving you the opportunity to explore and blur some of those boundaries that I feel like a lot of librarians have already...We know they're there and we have been trying to cross them for many years now.

It's great to have that bigger picture framework in which to place some of these initiatives that seem a little foreign to some of our disciplinary colleagues, that help them think outside of the lines of their own disciplines, and how students communicate about research. I love it. That's fantastic.

Julia: Yeah. It's interesting to think about those different reactions to digital literacy. One way can be thinking, "If that's how I use a tool, do we really need that? Don't we already know how to use these tools?" The idea of the digital native as one who naturally has grown up and knows what to do.

On the other side, there can also be the reaction of, "This is so huge and so complex. How do I even get started or have a way in?" Trying to bring both of those back to the middle of, "This is what this can look like." "Here's something we can actually do." That can be challenging.

Melissa: Can you speak to that a little bit? Do you have an experience, since this all started, that you have had to convince someone -- or maybe that's even too harsh of a word -- but to gently encourage someone to join the initiative, or to start thinking about things a little bit differently?

Is there anything that stands out to you as a situation where you had to stretch and advocate for why this is so important?

Julia: Yeah. Really, the most interesting, for me, of those types of conversations have been starting to have them with students.

Melissa: Oh, interesting. I was thinking you were going to say faculty or an administrator. I want to hear more.

Julia: To some degree, digital literacy as a term and literacy maybe something that is at least a little bit more accessible to faculty, as a concept. For students, sometimes it's more accessible to think about the specific skills, or a certain area of those things.

Of course, it depends on how they've heard about it or interacted with it before. That's been something I've been trying to keep track of, how they respond to that as a term, if that's something they've heard of before.

One chance I had to do that was last winter as part of a student wellfest, where there were lots of tables with different people, in Blacksburg, in the community, as well as resources on campus for students related to all aspects of wellness. We had a table from the libraries talking about digital citizenship and wellness.

Melissa: Oh, that's great.

Julia: They encouraged us to think about having a very interactive table rather than just handing out information, which was challenging to think about. I was excited about what we came up with.

We created a quick personality quiz that answers what type of digital citizen are you. Some of the options are things like, I'm a content creator, I'm a social media influencer, I'm a skeptic, and a couple of other categories.

We had students take that quiz. We had an iPad and a couple of other devices as well as a link they could go to. Based on what their result was, what kind of digital citizen they were, we had some wellness tips for them. If you were a content creator, your wellness concerns might be people using your work in an ethical way.

Some tips are, "Here's a resource to go learn about creative commons. You might want to learn about creating an e-portfolio to house your work and think about how you share it," and a couple of other things.

Through engaging with them...To get back to your question...

Melissa: No, that's really interesting.

Julia: ... [laughs] engaging with them in that way and pulling them in, thinking about how they interact with others online, how they spend their time. Even if those categories didn't quite resonate perfectly with how they see themselves, it gave them an in to, "This is digital citizenship as a thing. I can think about myself as a person and what I value."

"Here are a few things that I might think about. I might want to go search my name in Google and see what comes up. Maybe I do want to check out my passwords and see how I might improve them." Having some tangible, "I'm going to do this," seemed to help them think about...

Melissa: A path forward.

Julia: ..."Sure, I think I could that. I could try that." It seemed like digital citizenship wasn't necessarily something that they had heard of before or were familiar with. The general reaction was very much like, "Uh, what is this? What table is this?"

Melissa: [laughs]

Julia: "Who are you with?"

Melissa: "Who are you with? Where did you come from?"

[laughter]

Julia: Going through that process with them, by the end, there was some level of buy-in. At least like, "This sounds like some helpful things to think about. I think I would consider this."

Melissa: I love that you mentioned earlier that there's a lot of focus on the curricular, but then this goes more into that co-curricular realm, which to be honest, there are so many opportunities on campus for students to develop these skills that will improve their digital citizenship that maybe are not curricularly related.

That sounds so much fun. I'm also curious if you took the personality quiz. Do you know what kind of digital citizen you are?

Julia: I did. One of the ones that I did not mention was community contributor. That's where

I would see myself, maybe someone who isn't always the one to post something first, but then might share it, or might spend time online connecting with people and forming communities, and being interested in that. That's where I'd see myself.

Melissa: I love it. I feel like you're accomplishing that right now with this interview, right?

Julia: Thank you.

[laughter]

Melissa: This isn't [inaudible 29:12] . It sounds like it has been an evolutionary process since the early task force days. Where do you see the digital literacy initiatives going in the future at Virginia Tech? Do you have a path forward that you've already established, or maybe some dreams just of your own that you would like to see?

Julia: That is a great question. To get back to your comment about all the co-curricular opportunities and that we often think about this in the curriculum, one of the biggest challenges for us -- I would imagine anyone thinking about launching programs like this -- is prioritizing and figuring out where to dig in. If we try to do everything at once, that's not going to work too well.

Our plan for this year is to focus in on first-year students and graduating students, and to build multiple layers around that. We are going to be working on learning outcomes connected to the framework. We will probably focus in on those two groups even though if that's not necessarily how our outcomes end up looking. That will give us a little bit more of a concrete audience to think about in terms of learners.

Then building some kind of sample curriculum or sequence of things around those outcomes, that might be rethinking or repackaging some of the programs that are already existing. Building partnerships around that, just something to practice that experience of actually assessing those outcomes and thinking about how we would then scale that more broadly.

One of my goals is to really have something concrete that's a sequence of learning opportunities, I'm not sure exactly what that will end up looking like, and to be also focusing on and building out our partnerships across campus.

Alongside those, I'd probably really digging in to things like first-year experience, or our living-learning communities, or career and profession development, or capstone courses, exactly what that is is yet to be defined, but something that really gets those bookends of experience.

Thinking more broadly in long-term, my hope is to be a key partner within the libraries of people who want to be doing digital literacy work, as well as a cross-campus, and for our programs to amplify the other work that's going on on campus, recognizing that there are lots of partners in faculty development, in student learning, in student experience, who are doing work around this as well.

My dream would be that we could say that we really have campus communities within our campus engaged in the power of digital citizens, whatever that looks like for people.

The long-term vision for me would be thinking about how we can be building and supporting those communities and coming back to the idea of, "What are the baseline things that we hope for all of our students, and then what are the ways that we can be shifting that, adapting that, having different opportunities for them to pick and choose, what makes sense for themselves?"

Alongside of that, really digging in to our online learning opportunities and building out modules and resource, things that people can re-purpose, that's definitely going to be a big piece for us.

Melissa: That sounds fantastic. I tend to be a little bit of an optimist, but I think that that is an achievable dream and I'm sure that you will make it.

Julia: Oh, thank you.

[laughter]

Julia: That's nice to hear.

Melissa: [laughs] Just hold on.

Julia: [laughs]

Melissa: You already have such a great start. One of the reasons that I was excited to talk to you is that, I will admit that partly it's that I think libraries have such an important part to play in developing digital literacy, but I also am just excited that there is a United States based group that is creating a framework.

As you mentioned, you used the Jisc from the UK and there's a lot in Australia and a lot of other areas that focus on digital literacy, but not a lot of frameworks in United States. This is one of the few that I've seen that really get at this idea of that whole picture of development and identity.

Julia: That has been interesting to map out where all those other frameworks are. It does seem that there are a lot of us around the world who are really tackling these questions and trying to visualize how these things connect. There are a lot of really cool frameworks out there.

Melissa: That's great. Julia, I've got one last question for you that we ask all of our interviewees on Leading Lines. Sometimes people get panicked about this question, but [laughs] I think that you'll do just fine. The question that we like to ask is, "If you have a favorite analog ed tech tool, so non-digital...I know it's a toughy but..."

Julia: It's always tough to choose a favorite...

Melissa: [laughs] .

Julia: [laughs] ...of anything from me.

Melissa: [laughs] .

Julia: I love brainstorming on a whiteboard.

Melissa: Nice. It's a classic.

Julia: It is a classic. One of my favorite classes I've taught as a librarian was one where I had students doing some topic brainstorming on whiteboards and I remember because I took a picture...one student drew this really intense robot to demonstrate his topic.

[laughter]

Julia: I can still imagine it, it did stick with me so I hope that it was a meaningful topic for him to explore.

[laughter]

Melissa: I love it. That is great, I don't know that I've ever heard that sort of manifestation of a research topic, but somehow it just makes sense.

Julia: I think there is something about the freedom or flexibility of a whiteboard that you know you can erase it. It's not in this official document that I think a Word document or a Google Doc even can feel like "I'm putting these words on the page."

There's just something that feels a little bit more freeing to me.

Melissa: I love it. That's a great answer. I like your justification.

Julia: [laughs]

Melissa: That's good.

Julia: [laughs]

Melissa: We're wrapping up on our time here. Is there anything else that we didn't talk about that you want to make sure to mention or that you would like to tell the world about your work with digital literacy?

Julia: That's a great question.

[laughter]

Melissa: That is actually a big ask. Isn't it?

[laughter]

Melissa: I'll bring it back down. Just any parting thoughts that you might have.

Julia: I think that one thing for me that's been interesting, getting into the conversation around digital literacy, is finding how inner-connected some of the community around digital literacy is online, on Twitter and people who are talking about it.

I guess what I would want to share as parting words is some of the other resources that I found useful and that were a way in for me in terms of digital literacy. The Horizon reports coming out of the new media consortium have done some great work about bring together some of those example frameworks from all over the place.

Melissa: They are definitely, for several years now, have been very big proponents of Digital Literacy. It's shown up in the report, right?

Julia: Yes. Also, the work of the Digital Pedagogy Lab out of Mary Washington, the Hybrid Pedagogy journal, that was a really important way in for me for a lot of these conversations. One exciting resource that I was looking at recently was Mike Caulfield's work with NewsWise. It has some new fact-checking videos out. I love their work. It's really exciting to me.

Melissa: That's great. We will include the links to these resources on the podcast page, so that listeners can check out these resources and join these communities, and continue the conversation. These are all really great resources. Thank you for mentioning them.

Julia: That sounds great. Thank you.

[background music]

Derek: That was Julia Feerrar, Head of Digital Initiatives at the Virginia Tech Libraries. Thanks to Vanderbilt's Melissa Mallon for the interview. If you like to see the framework that Julia and her colleagues have developed, check her show notes. You'll find those show notes in our website, leadinglinespod.com, where you'll also find past Leading Lines episodes with full transcripts.

We're on Twitter and Facebook too, just search for Leading Lines Podcast. We would love to hear your thoughts on the challenges and complexities of teaching Digital Literacies. What does that look like in your teaching context? How do you see that landscape changing over the next few years? Find us online and share your thoughts.

Leading Lines is produced by the Vanderbilt's Center for Teaching, the Vanderbilt Institute for Digital Learning, the Office of Scholarly Communication at the Vanderbilt Libraries and the Associate Provost for Education Development and Technologies. This episode was edited by Rhett McDaniel.

Look for new episodes, the first and third Monday of each month.

I'm your host, Derek Bruff. Thanks for listening.

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