Meeting the challenges of a changing global economy, a more fluid workforce, the impact of technology and Australia’s engagement with the Asian region requires our graduates to have a wider set of competencies and employability skills (Walsh 2016). These range from problem solving and communication skills (oracy), to digital and cultural competencies that could be important to Australia’s engagement with the Asian region. They form the building blocks of lifelong learning, which are important to the ability of graduates to adapt to a shifting workforce in which more than one career may be undertaken. Certain skills involve ‘doing’ as well as ‘knowing’. The OECD has suggested that the “world economy doesn’t pay you for what you know, but what you can do with what you know” (Schleicher 2013).

A 2015 report suggests that 60 per cent of Australian students are being trained in areas that will be radically affected by technology in the workplace. Technology is driving increased demands for digital literacy, with an estimation that over half of the workforce as a whole will need the skills to “use, configure and or build digital systems in the next 2–3 years” (FYA 2015). The same review suggests that 70 per cent of young people currently entering the labour market will be affected by automation. According to another report, two-fifths of jobs in the eastern Australian state of New South Wales “are at high risk of being lost to computerisation and low- to middle-skilled workers across the state are expected to bear the brunt of pain brought by artificial intelligence, cloud computing, the Internet of Things and big data” (Dumas 2016).

Technological transformations are shifting the needs for skills or transforming labour market sectors entirely through automation. Automation is making redundant whole fields of labour, creating uncertainty as to what the future of the workforce will look like globally.

In a fluid and uncertain economy, learning how to learn is particularly essential to adaptability. But what does this look like when our focus shifts to ‘digital literacies’?

A key challenge continues to be developing digital competency and literacy in students and educators as a basis for teaching and learning. This challenge concerns how we think about proficiency in the educational use of technology by students and educators, and the institutional and cultural barriers they face on a daily basis in higher educational settings.

Firstly, there continues to be a somewhat misleading notion that “digital natives” are leading the way. Research suggests that young people expect technology to be present throughout daily life – even where access is limited. However, while many young people are competent in using technology, they are not necessarily digitally literate. Where competency involves being able to basically use a device such as an iPad, computer or app, digital literacy involves higher order skills to critically navigate and evaluate information and technology. It moves beyond basic competency to becoming creative in the use of information and a range of digital media and being able to manipulate and use media in new ways.

It is often assumed that young people are digitally literate when often they just exhibit basic competency.

The same applies to educators in higher education.

Drawing across my own and others’ experience as educators and education researchers, that a significant generational difference is both empirically evident and compelling as a site for inquiry shouldn't go unnoticed.
Worryingly, this difference is characterised by low levels of competency amongst some educators, who continue to grapple with the basic use of platforms like Moodle, and who struggle to integrate digital media into their learning environments. Despite the ubiquity of technology in our society, educators often lack digital literacy in the sense described above.

This is a shame because there is some outstanding work being done. Being able to critically and creatively use digital media opens up all kinds of opportunities, such as through the use of "flipped classrooms". I am not suggesting that technology should drive teaching and learning – good pedagogy, curriculum and providing rich and diverse learning experiences should always be drivers – but there are many powerful, freely available and relatively easy to use tools out there that are arguably under-utilised.

And while some young people may not be digitally literate, a basic competency in using technology is taken as a given, so there should at least be parity with educators in digital competency.

Put bluntly, we can do a lot better.

Educators face a number of additional challenges even as educational institutions are constrained by a variety of factors. A few years back, I was part of a team that conducted research in the Vocational Educational Training (VET) sector, which showed that limited technology usage was attributable in part to factors such as a lack of exposure to effective practice and professional learning, as well as lack of access to suitable and up-to-date equipment, technical support and assistance (Walsh et al. 2011).

Another delimiting factor goes back to professional learning and development: there needs to be greater emphasis on developing digital literacy during the initial development of educators in higher education. Universities could be doing better at this, although there are pockets of good practice. The point is, the cultural settings and climate of practice and expectation in which educators teach (and learn) are significant – particularly when they are starting out.

Developing sustainable, organic, functional and inspiring communities of practice is as much critical as it is vital. Given the high levels of access and relatively inexpensive availability of tools, apps and devices, there is no longer an excuse for educators to be complacent about digital media. The choice not to use these tools should be a conscious and deliberate one based on what works best in educational settings. And we should be aiming for digital literacy to be the base standard – not digital competency.

Skills and competencies, including digital literacy, are important for developing resilience in graduates to deal with changing labour force conditions, as well as broader challenges in life (Walsh 2016). But while we routinely rely on, assess and report on basic academic skills (such as ATAR), we lack robust mechanisms to assess or certify a wider group of skills and attributes necessary for navigating employment and life in general.

The combination of an increasingly competitive higher education market and global workforce is a driver to develop – and more explicitly recognise – these soft skills. Indeed, developing and harnessing soft skills such as digital literacy is one implicit feature of Monash’s Better Teaching, Better Learning Agenda. We must ask then, how can we better explicitly develop, assess and recognise these skills in all students and educators? Also, given that young people in particular value hands-on learning, in what ways can we embed opportunities for hands-on learning of these skills through meaningful and sustainable community and industry partnerships?
Faculties could more explicitly engage with developing these skills and providing opportunities for teaching and learning in the community, with industry and in the world at large. Where some are doing this well, we need to find ways of making good practice common practice.

Finally, any discussion about digital literacies must also be cognisant of major shifts in the nature of the labour force alongside other demographic, political and cultural factors that are shaping young people’s lives. These shifts have implications for how we think about teaching and learning. In other words, we must also – and always – be prepared to ask whether Monash’s strategic plans and graduate attributes are meaningful and relevant to the broad trends that are shaping young people’s lives, drawing on the best that research and professional insight have to offer to what must be our ‘critical conversations’.

References


