Fashion, Business and Technology (FBT): Digital Storytellers

E-learning spoke to Charlene Gallery, Lecturer in Digital Fashion Marketing & Communications, to find out how Fashion, Business and Technology support their students to become digital storytellers.

Why was this project needed?

In the age of accelerating technological change, digital skills are fast becoming near-universal requirements for employment, particularly for highly-skilled positions, with over 80% of online jobs advertised highlighting 'baseline' digital skills as essential attributes. *'Digital'* is not isolated to a singular sector, digital technology is transforming an entire global economy. Graduates with digital skills earn an average wage differential of 29% over non-digital roles, yet whilst demand is high for graduates with digital skills, there is low supply and, troublingly, a large percentage of employers believe graduates are not able to evidence their suitability for an entry-level position, therefore universities can fundamentally enhance its value proposition through the strategic integration of interactive technologies throughout the student lifecycle.

The ever-evolving list of digital capabilities demanded by employers is causing ambiguity and uncertainty for students with 68% of students lacking understanding of which skills are required to start their careers. Whilst there is a great number of digital skills acquisition initiatives internally and external to the university, critically, it is essential students are supported throughout their studies to, not only develop digital skills, but to learn how to shape their professional identities and evidence their graduate skillsets to potential employers.

Students, in effect, need to become adept *digital storytellers*, capable of shaping their own personal brand narratives and disseminating their unique professional narratives across multiple online platforms.

Integrating digital tools into the curriculum

As early adopters of digital technologies within Fashion, Business and Technology, we have radically reshaped the holistic curriculum through the integration of digital tools, resulting in an industry relevant, inclusive and collaborative learning environment. Through our **digital portfolio** and **graduate**

showcase projects, students can effectively shape their professional identities, individual points of views and unique value proposition externally to potential employers. The portfolio provides a mechanism to encourage student reflection, which has the potential to assist with students' understanding of their own learning.

An online portfolio is an essential career toolkit which aids the student transition into industry. The portfolio project within Fashion Business & Technology supports students to;

- Investigate a specialist career pathway (employment, entrepreneurship, postgraduate study) most suitable to their individual and future aspirations.
- Critically assess, curate and appraise their work both independently and in collaboration with peers, academics and industry stakeholders.
- Use digital skills to assemble a public-facing portfolio which enhances their professional profiles.
- Demonstrate cultural and professional suitability for the targeted companies, thereby aiding the application and interview process.
- Become autonomous and self-confident.
- Formulate Communities of Practice and network.
- Become effective Lifelong learners, as the portfolio becomes a continual process, which can be refined throughout their career.

Moving to a digital degree showcase

The disruption caused by the 2020 pandemic was the catalyst for change within Fashion Business & Technology. Pre Covid-19, the traditional annual graduate show format involved printing and presenting students final projects on large scale poster boards. This format was already in need of updating and, although the university closure unfortunately halted the in-person celebration for students, it also provided an opportunity to embrace technology and digitalise the graduate show, which meant that, not only were FBT students still able to present their research and high-level innovative project outcomes, through technology, they were able to present their work to a much wider, more global audience.

As I already had extensive experience in developing online student portfolios at previous institution's, I presented the idea of an online degree showcase to the Discipline Head of Education for FBT, who was fully supportive of the initiative. Joined by Aurelie Le Normand, the lead organiser of the degree show, we worked quickly to develop the platform, eliciting 'buy in' from the final year students and helped students to curate and digitalise static content using

software such as Adobe Creative Cloud, Premier Pro, iMovie and Sketchup 3D, resulting in a highly interactive, online experience.

What did the project involve? How has it developed?

We originally developed two online platforms using issuu.com and wix.com, both of which are free, highly intuitive and accessible.
- Issuu is a widely used online tool where users can upload a static document and convert it into an interactive flipbook, which can be published and shared digitally,
- wix.com is a user-friendly, web development platform.

Currently, we've chosen Wix as our preferred web platform for online portfolio projects as both staff and students find the platform accessible, simple and effective with ready-made templates that you can drag and drop content into. Initially our students were apprehensive about developing their own websites, this nervousness was quickly dispelled once they realised, they didn't need to learn how to code to create a site!

With our pilot portfolio project, each participating student had an individual page in the yearbook showcasing their diverse final outcomes. We embedded each page with a code, which hyperlinked to their own digital portfolio on the wix developed website. Each student was able to link their own URLs to personal professional sites such as LinkedIn, on CV's and other, employer facing touchpoints.

As we moved closer towards a blended learning environment in 2021, the graduate show, lead by Aurelie Le Normand, evolved once again, and FSE E-learning helped to develop a website using WordPress. The digital platform proved highly effective. The University of Manchester reimagined the graduate event for 2021 and provided graduates with a virtual platform to showcase their projects and pitch innovative ideas to industry using a range of digital and multimedia tools.

Developing the digital portfolio project

As employability lead for FBT, I have noticed an upward trend on employers requesting online portfolios for 2nd year placement candidates, in addition to final year students applying for graduate positions. Increasingly, employers are asking for 'experiential transcripts' which combines the informative evidence of knowledge, with the tangible and professional competencies. We have since embedded the portfolio project into the 2nd year optional units within FBT and

have been facilitating orientation and portfolio development sessions for both 2nd and final year undergraduates.

Through our continued partnership with wix.com, we are now moving towards a University-wide implementation of a digital portfolio which will enable students to assemble and self-manage their individual web content.

Externally, this digital presence connects the students to a global reach and be professionally recognised for their skills and attributes. These student-led websites will also broadcast the University of Manchester's talents. Another benefit of using Wix is that students can own and continue with their website once they graduate.

How does FBT support students to develop their digital skills?

Digital is all encompassing, and as digital technology becomes more ingrained into society, digital literacy is a language of which many students entering Higher Education are fluent. Whilst arguably, most students could be viewed as digital natives, we recognise that the term "digital skills" covers a broad spectrum of competencies, skills and knowledge. Some students have greater digital skills and confidence than others when they begin their degree programmes.

To ensure a more equitable experience, in Year 1 of our undergraduate programme, we focus on equipping students with a solid foundation in digital skills typically used within the degree-related industries. We embed software packages such as Adobe Creative Cloud (Illustrator, Photoshop, InDesign etc) and Canva building skills in professional communication. Students are also introduced to professional data and analytics software such as Edited and learn how to extract and leverage data insights to inform their strategic decision making.

In the 2nd and final year, we accelerate the students' acquisition of advanced digital skills focusing on both consumptive digital capabilities, (i.e., foundational tools and systems such as Excel, PowerPoint) and productive digital skills, (i.e., data and analytical reasoning, advanced CAD, UX Design, mobile development, 3D modelling, Artificial Intelligence, Extended Reality applications). The curricula focus on complex and collaborative problem solving, deep-learning and data-driven strategic thinking. Students develop skills in Search Engine Marketing (SEM), Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), content marketing, and learn how to present critical responses to issues and convey innovative concepts through the medium of film. Students develop digital brochures using Adobe and/or Canva to present research and communicate strategic thinking, infographics are

developed as a format to transfer complex concepts and data and students leverage a diverse range of software to develop investor pitch decks and marketing campaigns, most of which are rooted in broader socio-political, environmental and cultural anthropology.

We benefit from several digital specialist academics within FBT, in addition, our technicians provide students with training in CAD (Computer Aided Design). We also facilitate workshops on how to develop a personal brand and specialist CV in collaboration with the Careers service and Masood Entrepreneurship Centre. Our diversity of units and assessment outputs provide students with the opportunity to practice and develop the relevant digital skills required for successful entry into the related industries, and to build a series of evidentiary outputs towards the online portfolio and the final graduate show.

What do your students think?

The reaction from students has been very positive. They enjoy seeing each other's work and recognise and appreciate each student's individuality and uniqueness. They feel more confident when applying for jobs, as they already have an online portfolio which showcases their skills.

Student testimonials:

"Initially I was nervous about developing a pitch deck as I did not have prior experience in video creation. However, it really helped develop my digital literacy and skillset which will be extremely useful post university, particularly as digital skills have become increasingly important due to the pandemic. The business project has enhanced my graduate profile and has been a key talking point for me at job interviews."

"This project has really shaped by career. Before this portfolio project, I didn't feel as though I had a voice at university, now I have had the confidence to develop my own platform and networking initiative called Black in Fashion UK, which increases fashion career opportunities for minoritized and underrepresented students and creatives. I have used the digital skills gained during my degree to build a successful career within fashion marketing and brand development, my website has opened doors for me and I now work with sustainable fashion brand Stella McCartney to effectively develop social and inclusive initiatives and communications strategies, whilst also still managing my online social network"

Impact in FSE?

Through the digital portfolio project and subsequent graduate showcase platform, we observed the power of digital literacy, not only to enhance and evidence students' employability skills, but to also enrich students' learning experiences. When using digital tools, students actively engaged with their learning as it required them to fully dissect, assimilate and think critically. Digital should be embedded as way of communicating and should be fully integrated within the culture of Higher Education and beyond. The continued development of the digital literacy level of students is fundamental in enhancing the inclusivity, efficiency, and effectiveness of the learning environment, in addition to ensuring students are equipped to, not only enter the dynamically evolving labour market, but to also future proof their careers.