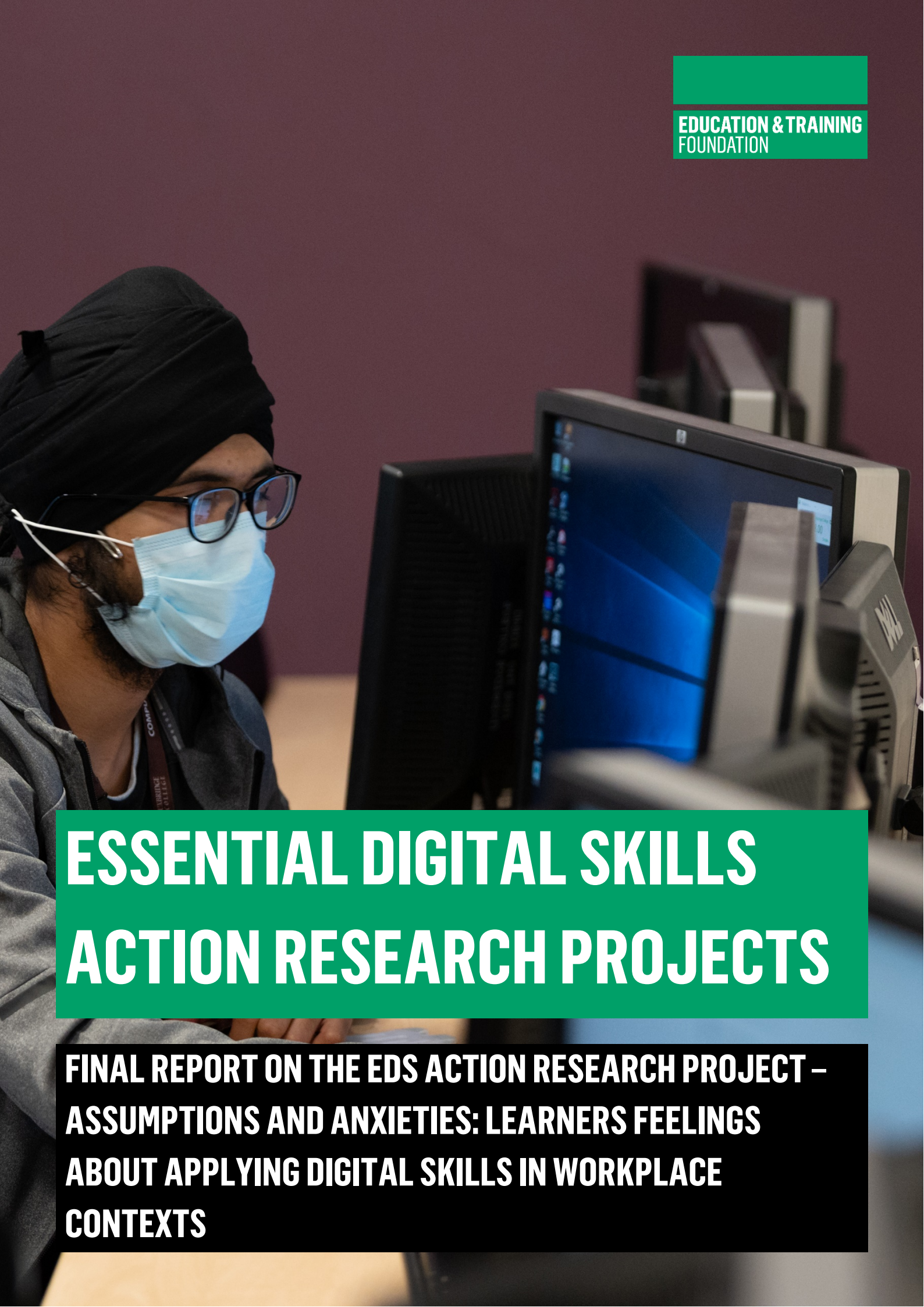

EDUCATION & TRAINING FOUNDATION

ESSENTIAL DIGITAL SKILLS ACTION RESEARCH PROJECTS

FINAL REPORT ON THE EDS ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT – ASSUMPTIONS AND ANXIETIES: LEARNERS FEELINGS ABOUT APPLYING DIGITAL SKILLS IN WORKPLACE CONTEXTS

Newcastle City Learning (2021) *Final Report on the EDS Action Research Project – Assumptions and anxieties: Learners feelings about applying digital skills in workplace contexts.* London: ETF.

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For further information regarding the EDS Action Research programme and this project go to https://ccpathways.co.uk/essential-digital-skills/.

The programme was delivered on behalf of the Education and Training Foundation by -

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Final report - Assumptions and anxieties: Learners' feelings about applying digital skills in workplace contexts

Newcastle City Learning

> *"Your assumptions are your windows on the world. Scrub them off every once in a while, or the light won't come in."*
>
> Isaac Asimov

This project investigated learners' feelings about digital notetaking in the health and social care workplace. The key discovery was that learners' anxieties were based around the content of the notes themselves rather than the digital skills required to undertake the task. In response, supportive time-limited tasks were developed that modelled real-life scenarios whilst developing learners' digital literacies.

Summary

Newcastle City Learning is an institution which provides a variety of courses to Post-16 learners developing knowledge and practical skills for work in the UK. This project focused on a group of trainee caregivers enrolled on the Care Academy course. The group were a mix of ESOL and native English learners.

The main area of exploration was in relation to a work-based Care Academy and how to support potential carers to develop their digital skills for the workplace. The team supported learners to work on specific skills most pertinent to their area of work, including notetaking. The team found that building in time for talking and reflection with learners was especially important to help learners grow in confidence but also to reflect important values for working in care.

Rationale

Assumptions are often made about what learners can or cannot do, particularly in relation to digital skills and capabilities. Note taking is a particularly important skill that learners need to develop when preparing to work in health and social care and increasingly these need to be written and sent digitally. Digital skills are often taught discretely and not applied in work situations until after learners have finished their course. This research aimed to gain a fuller understanding of how learners feel about applying digital skills competently by simulating a workplace situation, within a given time frame. Additionally, this research aimed to introduce the learners to, and improve, digital note taking skills.

Approach

Before:

At the start of this project the tutors discussed the content and context of potential activities, the logistics and the delivery of this topic within the short 4-week window

of the course. All tutors involved have contributed to the planning and delivery of the Care Academy curriculum, therefore they had a good understanding of the care standards required from the learners.

Tutors devised 4 open questions about aspects of digital notetaking skills competencies. In order to discuss in depth and to get ideas from all the learners, the class was arranged into breakout groups with an allocated tutor. They were then encouraged to discuss their feelings about digital notetaking skills. This allowed tutors to identify where their anxieties come from, rather than simply accepting that their anxieties were present.

The project team shared the responses and information collected from the learners and agreed on the next activities and strategies. Therefore, activities were planned around learners' expressed anxieties rather than what we assumed were their anxieties.

During:

Most of the learners had neither seen nor written care notes before so scaffolded notetaking activities were developed, including exemplars, practice work and top tips for digital notetaking.

To start, example care plan cards were discussed in small groups and ranked from best to worst based upon learners' educated guesses. Following this activity, students were encouraged to give feedback on the cards and their reasoning behind the rankings. This was intended to make learners think about appropriate and inappropriate notetaking practice.

Top tips for writing notes were discussed and examples were created as a group that listed the information they thought should be included when writing a care note. For example, physical changes such as: deteriorating health, pain, injuries or a change in hair colour.

A comparison of good and bad exemplar notes describing the same scenario was the final activity which prepared learners to produce their own digital care notes. Using a detailed scenario and some previous notes about the patient, learners digitally wrote and sent care notes with realistic time pressures. Tutor and peer feedback followed to discuss what learners felt confident or less confident about.

Reflecting:

Learners completed a questionnaire about the notetaking activities and shared their feelings about it. They were given 8 sentence starters to encourage discussion about their perceived confidence and ability when making digital care notes. This proved very useful to distinguish the various skills used and areas for improvement in teaching.

In depth discussions with two learners with contrasting English language abilities gave more in depth student feedback.

Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices

This project impacted on our professional practice in numerous ways. Firstly, it led us to question our initial digital skills assessments and ask if they are too skills based and to a certain extent superficial. How can we get a clear image of students' digital skills without witnessing them in a relevant context? This led to us changing our initial assessments by making them more discussion- and activity-focused to ascertain learner starting points.

Learner perceptions of their digital skills were different to our assumptions, and this made us question how much of our other teaching is based on assumptions. Learner perceptions were more focused on the desire to get it right with notetaking and their anxieties were directed here. Pullinger and Franklin (2010, p.111) discovered similar anxieties among pharmacists when writing healthcare notes. One pharmacist stated, *"You wouldn't want to be wrong in the notes… you've got to be pretty sure of your facts"*, a sentiment shared by our learners. Recognising this has reminded us to be fully prepared to work digitally to alleviate these concerns through blending the unfamiliar skills of notetaking with more familiar digital skills.

We now appreciate that learners need opportunities to overcome these anxieties. Our planning has taken on a new focus on integrated tasks that can achieve this, rather than singling out desired skills to improve and expecting learners to know how and when to use them appropriately.

Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices

The project enabled a space for staff to connect and talk about teaching and learning. This is something that is not always prioritised but was really appreciated. With ever increasing time taken up with administration and developing the technical knowledge needed to teach online, it was a powerful reminder of the importance of tutors taking the time to 'talk' about teaching and learning.

There is now a greater focus on talking, listening and Socratic questioning, which is filtering into other aspects of teaching and learning. Development in this area has been highlighted as key to developing critical problem-solving skills.

Existing teaching and activities for this course are being reassessed, including pace and timings, to create time for these changes.

The benefits of the action research approach have been disseminated within the wider organisation and an action research sharing CPD programme is being developed to demonstrate the success of our adapted approach.

Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression

In applying their digital skills to a real situation, the majority of learners changed from thinking that hand-written notes would be faster and easier, to agreeing that digital notes were their preferred option (See appendix 3).

Learners commented that they made fewer mistakes working digitally. When discussing benefits of digital notes one learner commented *"When I write it down [on paper] I'll probably make 2 or 3 mistakes"*. Some learners felt more comfortable moving towards digital notetaking practices if they were able to write a draft in their phone first before adding their notes into the official document. This highlighted the importance of familiarity with technological devices and showed that the basic skills were present, learners just needed that extra step to demonstrate their digital notetaking competence.

Learners felt that they got through their digital skills activities more quickly, because they were using them meaningfully. Helsper and Deursen (2015, p.129) support these findings by stating *"… [digital] training is more attractive for individuals when it's built around contents and assignments that are appealing to those concerned."* This clearly made an impact on students as the course recorded 100% achievement and retention.

On completion of the course every learner had the opportunity to attend an interview and 60 - 80% secured employment. One employer commented that *"the learners recruited from the course had much more awareness and confidence than our usual recruits".*

Learning from this project

Learning from this project has been wide ranging. Despite tutors' assumptions, learner concerns were less about whether they had the required skills and knowledge, but whether they could apply the skills and knowledge in the role, and within a certain time frame, with many asking themselves *'Am I going to get it right?'*

Work in health and social care is perceived as low skilled and needing few qualifications. We wrongly assumed this meant learners would have limited digital skills or lack confidence, *"Those most likely to have low levels of digital literacy tend to be simultaneously economically, socially and personally disadvantaged."* (Helsper and Deursen, 2015, p.129). However, our findings showed many learners are confident using technology and opportunities to apply them in the workplace is a key area for development.

It is easy to assume that technology is the issue and that learners' digital skills are limiting their ability to take care notes. How often are we guilty of making assumptions because we are unaware of our biases? How often should we 'scrub off' these assumptions and let the light in?

More time needs to be made to talk to students about their concerns and starting points rather than developing token checklists to file. If we stick to the latter, we risk making activities less meaningful and relevant to future practice in employment.

Integrated and context specific activities prepare learners for the workplace and build confidence. Increased opportunities to feedback and communicate their feelings led to increased engagement and feeling 'valued'.

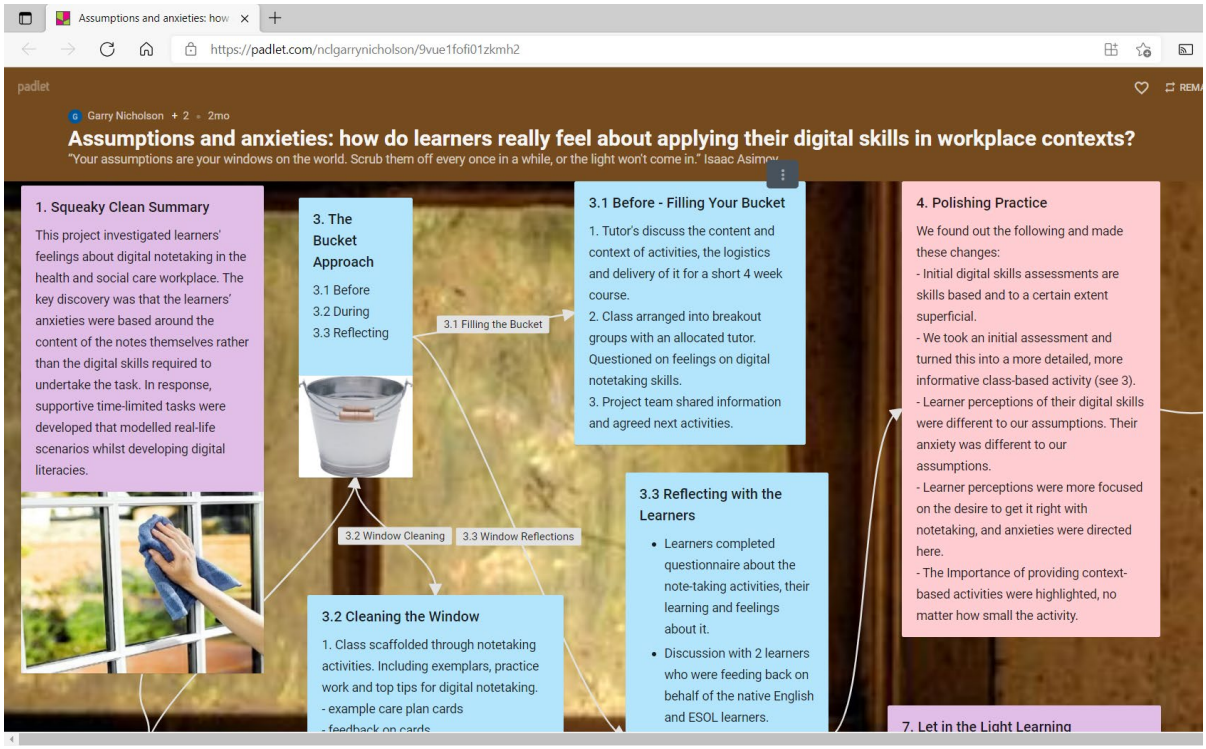
If we were to do this again, a suggestion to improve the digital note taking task would be to simulate a more realistic digital system for submitting the care notes. This would give learners a more accurate experience.

ESOL learners in particular could benefit from some help to understand the skills they are developing so they don't remain overly focused on the knowledge they are learning.

Appendix 1 – The project team

Project Role	Name	Job Role
Project Lead	Garry Nicholson	Adult Learning and Skills Tutor
Deputy Lead	Carol Watson	Adult Learning and Skills Tutor
Project team	Katie McKeown	Adult Learning and Skills Tutor
	Debbie Griffiths	Adult Learning and Skills Tutor
Project Mentor	Chloë Hynes (ccConsultancy)	
Research Group Lead	David Prinn (ccConsultancy)	

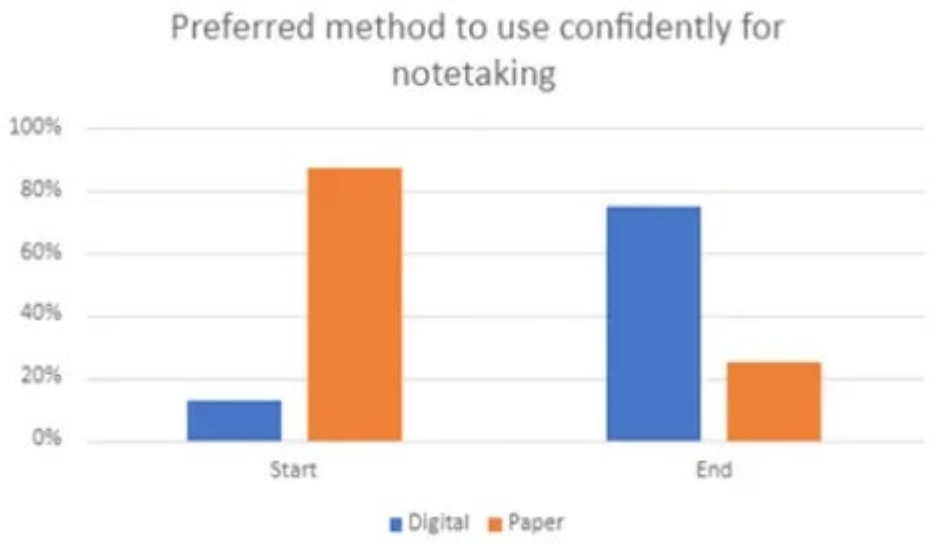
Appendix 2 – Multimodal Report



Access here: https://padlet.com/c_collins2/NCLEDS2021

nb This is a snapshot taken at the end of the project. The original may or may not still be available here https://padlet.com/nclgarrynicholson/9vue1fofi01zkmh2 and may have been updated since this snapshot was taken.

Appendix 3 – Table: preferred method of notetaking



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