Everyone Learns From Everyone

COLLABORATIVE AND INTERDISCIPLINARY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN DIGITAL LITERACY

Renee Hobbs & Julie Coiro

Hands-on, minds-on learning for educators, librarians and media professionals relies on the power of collaboration and the engaging creativity that's stimulated with the use of digital media texts, tools and technologies.

Collaboration is magic. In it and through it, people find new wellsprings of creativity that could not have emerged without the active participation of another individual. As adult learners engage in the continual retooling that is necessary to participate fully in life online, collaborative relationships are at the heart of professional development in digital literacy.

We have both been remarkably lucky to be blessed with many fruitful and productive collaborative partnerships for most of our professional lives. When Renee arrived at the University of Rhode Island to found the Harrington School of Communication and Media and had the chance to collaborate with Julie Coiro in the School of Education, we began to imagine the possibilities of bringing together our overlapping research and teaching interests in the disciplines of human development, communication/media studies, and education. Since 2013, we have been exploring new approaches to the professional development of educators, librarians, and media professionals.

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Drawing on Shenk's (2015) ideas about how dyadic communication unleashes creativity, we acknowledged the important stages of a creative partnership, beginning with the initial meeting that establishes partners' mutual interests and inspires their need to create or build something together. The identification of similarities and differences contributes to the spark between people that ignites their creativity.

Of course, creative partnerships are vital to the work of scholars and teachers with interests in digital and media literacy. Yet, because reading and writing practices are sometimes conceptualized as solo enterprises, we may practice collaboration without giving it the theoretical examination or bandwidth it deserves. Collaboration as both a creative media production practice and an instructional strategy for professional development is still undertheorized and understudied in education. In this commentary, we describe why creative collaboration with digital media texts, tools, and technologies is vital to support the professional development of educators.

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Because of our shared belief that collaboration through inquiry and media making can generate personally meaningful, transformative learning experiences, we created the Summer Institute in Digital Literacy and the Graduate Certificate in Digital Literacy. We wanted educators, librarians, and media professionals to learn from and with one another, using inquiry practices in the design of transformative learning experiences with digital media and technology.

Advancing Professional Development in Digital and Media Literacy

The Summer Institute in Digital Literacy is an intensive professional development program for K–12 and college educators, librarians, and media professionals. The program is cohosted by the School of Education Special Programs and the Media Education Lab at the University of Rhode Island. The summer institute can be taken as part of the Graduate Certificate in Digital Literacy, a 12-credit postgraduate certificate program that uses blended learning pedagogies to advance leadership in digital literacy.

Both the Summer Institute in Digital Literacy and the graduate certificate program are designed to meet the needs of educators, librarians, and media professionals who are interested in exploring the practical implications of an expanded conceptualization of literacy. We intentionally attract people with broad interests in the intersection of media, technology, and education, and we all benefit from many different kinds of experts who bring deep experiences to share as workshop presenters and participants. In 2015, participants came from more than 20 states and 12 countries. Each year, we invite faculty members with diverse areas of expertise to join us for the week, alongside approximately 35 workshop presenters who also attend to share their knowledge and expertise. Over three years, the program has grown from 60 to 165 participants. We describe it as a "hands-on, minds-on learning experience."

Dyadic partnerships are a key ingredient of the program's curriculum design. Each day, each participant works collaboratively with a partner to develop a project-based instructional unit or series of lesson plans. The partners are asked to create digital media together as they conceptualize and design a learning experience. We are finding that collaborative and creative media production activities serve as a powerful intellectual stimulus for adult learners.

Experiences with creative collaboration helps build confidence in digital literacy.

We adapted and built on the work of others in developing the institute. Hiller Spires, whose work in professional development at the New Literacies Teacher Leader Institute at North Carolina State University, initially inspired our efforts. Spires was a faculty member in the Summer Institute in Digital Literacy in 2013. Although this commentary describes a bit about our dyadic collaboration, we must acknowledge that our collaboration involved not just the two of us. Many individuals, each of whom shared their creativity, time, treasure, and talents, helped shape the program in particular ways. We are especially grateful to colleagues who served as faculty members for the program—Jill Castek, Kara Clayton, Charlie Coiro, Rhys Daunic, Yonty Friesem, Kristen Hokanson, Diana McMasters, Kelly Mendoza, Mary Moen, Hiller Spires, and David Quinn—as well as keynote speakers Douglas Rushkoff, Joyce Valenza, and Howard Rheingold.

During the six-day, 42-hour program, participants are introduced to key theories of digital literacy in the context of an inquiry-learning paradigm, with time to experiment with and explore a wide range of digital texts, tools, and technologies. They collaborate in partnerships to create a project-based inquiry unit that enables them to demonstrate their digital skills in the context of an authentic and situated learning. By using the #digiURI hashtag via social media, they also become part of an online community of learners. All participants take part in sharing their knowledge to demonstrate that everyone has something to share and learn from everyone when it comes to the use, analysis, and creation of digital media texts, tools, and technologies.

Participants deepen their understanding of digital literacy while developing practical skills in accessing, analyzing, and creating with digital media (view a list of specific competencies as supporting information here: http://bit.ly/digitalmedialit). Participants also have time to reflect on the implications of the digital shift in education, leisure, citizenship, and society. With over 60 workshops and special sessions, the program offers participants a wide array of choices to learn new digital tools, explore digital texts, learn about promising instructional practices, gain information about new research, and discuss important controversies about the use of digital media and technology by children and young people within and outside of schools.

Digital Culture Relies on Interdependence

As global citizens and local change agents in the community, classroom teachers, college faculty, school leaders, librarians, and media and information professionals all benefit from acquiring leadership skills to help them advance digital literacy from an idea into action. We each see our own vision for digital literacy as ultimately interdependent on the others' because online reading and digital authorship are only two of the many significant dimensions of digital literacy. We also recognize that the instructional practices of critical analysis, comprehension, creative media production, and reflection on social consequences are all woven together, as Burnett (2015) proposed with the WOVEN acronym that identifies five multimodal forms (written, oral, visual, electronic, and nonverbal) that underpin the Writing and Communication Program at Georgia Tech.

No longer can we teach reading comprehension as separate and distinct from the practices of oral expression, writing composition, and multimedia production. No longer can we teach reading comprehension without bringing in critical perspectives about text, context, culture, and technology. No longer can we ignore the texts of visual media, mass media, and popular culture or make hard-and-fast distinctions between in-school and out-of-school learning. And because communication is a form of social power that can help maintain or challenge the social status quo, it is important to understand how essential literacy practices are for social action, reform, and political, social, and cultural change.

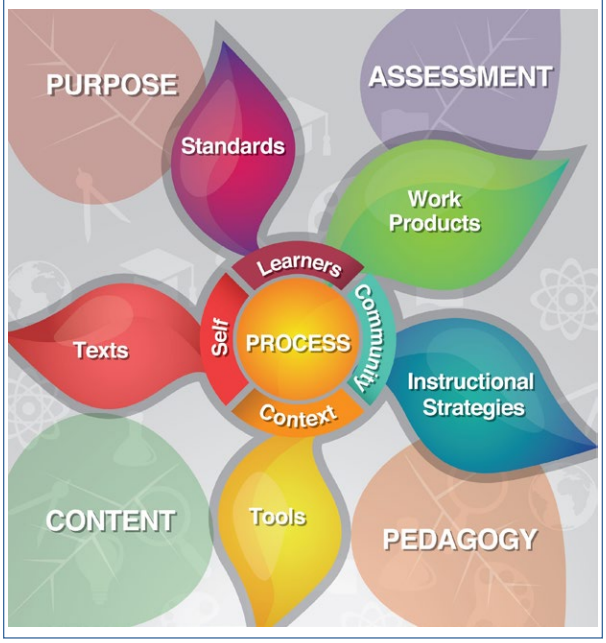
Unfortunately, academic culture often prizes the ideal of the lone creator, a figure that is deeply rooted in the Enlightenment mythos of the self-contained individual, working solo (perhaps by candlelight) to create works of art. As a way to counter this set of beliefs, filmmaker Tiffany Shlain (2012) explored the importance of networked creativity. She examined the shift in cultural values from independence to interdependence in the short film "Declaration of Interdependence." In the film, which was created using an approach she calls cloud filmmaking, Shlain edited video contributed by people from around the world as they recited a manifesto. We see and hear people of all ages, races, and nationalities sharing ideas such as, "What will propel us forward as a species / is our curiosity / our ability to forgive / our ability to appreciate / our courage / and our desire to connect" (1:29–1:47). With roots in the concept of remix culture, this film directly connects to ideas from Johnson's (2010) book *Where Good Ideas Come From*, where creativity is seen as emerging from people dipping into the cultural resources of the whole community ecology, remixing and connecting ideas. Naturally, we are attracted to this idea as an approach to professional development.

Building Collaborative Energy Through Creative Tension

When it comes to the magic of collaboration, for many reasons, the concept of interdependence is hard to understand—even for the individuals who work in partnerships themselves. Dyads are intimate and personal relationships, and no two relationships are exactly alike. Certain key factors enable a creative team to develop a joint identity in the context of the work they create together. Collaborative relationships thrive as partners who take on distinct and enmeshed roles that enable them to contribute to the work process. "The authors of a new paradigm can't be total strangers to the field," Shenk (2014) wrote, "or they won't have the knowledge to do their work, let alone the influence to effect change. But they can't be vested insiders either, or they'll be constrained by convention" (p. 14). Creative partners often have regular fixed identity positions, with the partnership depending on their talents and particular areas of expertise. Yet, as "the most fluid and flexible of relationships" (p. xxii), the real creativity in a dyadic partnership comes as roles shift and change over time. It is these shifts and changes that generate the frisson of creative energy, a dialectic that supports new ideas and new forms of expression. Indeed, creative partnerships inevitably involve creative tension, as "the people we're drawn to may unsettle us" (p. 210). Indeed, it is that tension that stimulates and energizes innovation.

This was important to us in designing the summer institute, and it is also why work with a dyad partner is so important for our approach to professional development in digital and media literacy. During the week, we help participants reflect on their particular styles of collaboration and the habits of mind that best support their own ability to learn with and about digital media. Participants come together to design an instructional unit that addresses a particular learning context, creating at least two forms of multimedia for use in that unit using digital tools that they have

FIGURE 1 Digital Literacy Curriculum Framework



learned at the institute. We scaffold instructional design using the digital literacy curriculum framework, which we call the flower model (see Figure 1). It offers a systematic approach to curriculum development by inviting educators to consider these six elements as they design learning experiences:

1. *Context:* Start by reflecting deeply on the needs of the learner, considering the context, the community, and your own values and priorities as an educator. Teaching and learning are social practices that are situational and contextual.
2. *Purpose:* Identify the learning outcomes, standards, or goals of your curriculum.
3. *Content:* What resources will you use? How will you use print, visual, sound, or digital media texts and tools?
4. *Pedagogy:* What instructional practices will shape what happens during the learning process?
5. *Assessment:* What work products will students create? What criteria will be used to assess student learning?
6. *Task or activity:* What compelling question or scenario will you use to connect your learning tasks to the real world? This component emerges as a creative idea but gets refined and developed by considering the other five elements of the model.

As partners inevitably recognize as they work together during the week, the differences between them are a fertile source of creative energy. For example, in 2014, Amanda Murphy, a high school social studies teacher from Rhode Island, collaborated with Kara Clayton, a high school media teacher from suburban Detroit, Michigan. During the summer institute, they developed a project idea: to explore how to best help students use cell phones to support learning. During the 2014–2015 academic year, Amanda and Kara identified the gaps in students' knowledge and skills in the use of cell phones for learning. They discovered that although students use cell phones for social interaction, they are unfamiliar with the many productivity tools that can support their academic work. Then, students identified topics to learn about and worked to create short video tutorials (e.g., how to record a voice memo, set up a calendar notification, scan a document). Finally, students in Michigan and Rhode Island viewed one another's completed videos and offered feedback on them for potential revision. The teachers were pleased that their collaboration helped students extend the authentic audience for their tutorial videos beyond the walls of their school.

In developing the professional development program, we also confronted professional and disciplinary differences as part of the collaborative process. Julie's research expertise in online reading embodies her passion for supporting students through the important processes of search, source evaluation, comprehension, and synthesis. Renee recognizes how the changing media environment is contributing to a shift in the concept of authority, which is destabilizing older hierarchical views of knowledge and enabling students and teachers to share and learn from each other. Julie uses a particular approach to analyzing patterns in the online search and meaning-making process as young learners gather information, interpret it, and analyze it (Coiro, Sekeres, Castek, & Guzniczak, 2014). She also has a deep understanding of how young people engage in the process of synthesizing and communicating their understanding in the context of academic schoolwork. Renee's work has been focused on examining the pedagogical strategies, learning contexts, and motivations of educators who aim to enhance students' ability to both critically analyze and create mass media, popular culture, and digital media in a wide variety of forms (Hobbs & Moore, 2013).

In developing the Graduate Certificate Program in Digital Literacy, we both gradually came to conceptualize our work in relation to the practices of

digital reading and writing. While we acknowledged the overlap and synergy in our ideas, we also recognized how our life trajectories and disciplinary home bases have shaped the choices we make in our scholarship and teaching. We also knew that digital literacy was much more complicated than just our particular areas of expertise. We know that a collaborative effort of knowledgeable, engaged educators, librarians, scholars, activists, researchers, media makers, leaders, and policymakers will be needed to make digital literacy a reality in schools, colleges, libraries, and informal learning settings in the United States and around the world.

One thing is certain: Although we both want to support teachers in advancing these practices in K–12 and higher education, we do not want these ideas to get oversimplified into a silly checklist, as sometimes happens in education. Given how fast technology and media are changing, what instructional strategies best prepare people for an unknowable future?

Why Dyadic Collaboration Contributes to Professional Development

When adult learners experience the authentic value of teamwork and collaboration to promote learning, their understanding of digital literacy deepens. We have very solid evidence that participants experience a life-changing form of education by participating in the Summer Institute in Digital Literacy. More than 70% of participants consider it to be the best or nearly the best professional development program they have ever experienced. In describing why she rated the institute a 10 on a 10-point scale, when asked to compare the program with all other forms of professional development experienced in her career, one teacher wrote, "It was interacting with and learning from researchers and other educators, the variety of pull-out mini workshops, the focus on collaboration, creating a final product, access to the wiki, and getting exposure to others' projects and ideas." Another participant wrote,

> Collaborating with colleagues, making new connections, having the material modeled to us and then getting the time to practice and interact with concepts, tweeting, friendships and encouragements of the heart to store up and provide motivation going into a new school year.

It is worth considering why educators benefit from the opportunity to work within a dyad partnership to create a project-based inquiry unit and create digital media products. What makes this a meaningful learning and leadership experience for participants? As we begin to explore why it works, there are at least three reasons that spring to mind.

First, dyads promote personal reflection in a social context. Working in a new, collaborative dyadic relationship forces participants to articulate their own identity in the context of their work and life, requiring them to think and communicate clearly to another individual about their own goals and objectives for using digital texts, tools, and technologies. In doing this, there is an opportunity for reflection. You may be wondering, How do participants find their dyad partner? Some people come with a partner from their school or community, but most find a partner at the beginning of the week, as several meet-and-greet experiences enable people to interact, socialize, and discover common ground. Although partners will sometimes have common career backgrounds and occupations, they more typically come from different backgrounds. Therefore, teachers have to explain themselves to someone they have just met. Sometimes this process actually helps people gain clarity about their own work, providing an opportunity to reflect on personal motivations and values. Getting to learn more about the dyad partner may also help people more deeply appreciate and value the affordances of their own particular work and life situation. This may explain why people come away from the summer institute feeling energized.

Second, dyads provide cognitive and emotional support for the process of learning to use digital tools. Most participants identified themselves as beginning- or intermediate-level users of digital media and technology. Some arrive with fears and anxieties that their skills are not adequate. During the week, participants have many opportunities for low-stakes exploration of digital tools. They have many opportunities to experience success. Quantitative and qualitative evidence from the program evaluation has helped us learn that participants appreciated the mix of theory and time for hands-on exploration; they valued the opportunity to choose which digital skills to develop and to have time for using, exploring, and creating (Hobbs, Coiro, Friesem, Viens, & Jaffee, 2015). Having a partner nearby and being able to rely on other people to help with problem solving when experiencing challenges can be helpful in dealing with the frustration that can occur when learning to use new digital tools.

Third, dyads support the cycles of risk taking, experimentation, creative iteration, and rapid prototyping, which are key parts of the creative design process. Ideas grow out of shared conversation (Riverdale Country School & IDEO, 2012). We give teachers enough time to get to know each other while learning new digital tools and new pedagogical approaches. We model and scaffold a variety of versatile instructional strategies during the day. Having a dyad partner to share ideas with and explain what has been learned creates repeated opportunities for practice. We surround them with people who have expertise using digital tools, texts, and technologies. Most importantly, participants see us engaged in problem solving when things do not go as planned. Because we demonstrate the ability to work through the inevitable challenges and snafus that occur when using digital media and technology for learning, we think this helps build teacher confidence.

Confidence in one's own ability to figure out how to use digital tools and teach others how to use them is a critical outcome of the Summer Institute in Digital Literacy. Many participants arrived at the institute knowing no one and being completely unfamiliar with many types of digital tool or types of digital learning activity. They leave the program having created a new unit of instruction, having explored a dozen or so digital tools, and having created two digital work products. Data from the program show that more than half of the participants believed that of the 18 digital tools explored during the program, they could show someone else how to use them (Hobbs et al., 2015). Awareness of changes in one's own skill naturally creates a burst of confidence for program participants. Figure 2 offers a model of how we see the value of the components of the institute as contributing to professional development.

FIGURE 2 Key Features of the Summer Institute in Digital Literacy

Hands-on workshops
+ Inquiry learning pedagogy
+ Exposure to big ideas
+ Structured collaboration with a dyad partner
+ Digital media production
+ Reflection on the learning process
= Confidence in implementing digital literacy

Yet, our research findings show that educators' confidence was not localized to feeling more comfortable with the digital tool or technology: It extended to include confidence in collaborating with colleagues and peers on curricular activities; implementing digital literacy projects with students; exploring and using new digital texts, tools, and technology independently; and offering formal or informal staff development programs to educators.

Conclusion

Our interest in digital literacy is rooted in the belief that intense, purposeful, hands-on multimodal reading, critical analysis, reflection, and media production activities can provide the kind of meaningful learning experiences that advance learning for students and their teachers alike. We believe that books, movies, music, television, video games, websites, apps, and social media can serve a variety of learning purposes both in school and in the world outside the classroom. Although the saturation and ubiquity of these forms of communication and expression are integral to our daily life experiences, no one yet has a complete understanding of the full scope of competencies required for participating in digital culture. We are all learning how, day by day. When we share and learn with one another, we learn more. Through collaboration, people can harness the massive potential of inquiry learning in a networked world. As one Summer Institute in Digital Literacy participant expressed it, "There was a great sense of everyone being in this together, people supporting one another and learning from each other." This is the essential dimension of authentic lifelong learning. It is why we say, "At the Summer Institute in Digital Literacy, everyone is learning from everyone."

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jaal.502/suppinfo:

- Appendix A: Digital and Media Literacy Competencies (http://bit.ly/digitalmedialit)