Research Connections

New Literacies and Adolescent Learners: An Interview With Julie Coiro

Julie Coiro
David W. Moore

Julie Coiro is an assistant professor in the Reading Department at the University of Rhode Island. Her research focuses on adolescents’ online reading comprehension development. She has served as co-editor of the Handbook of Research in New Literacies (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008), among many publications.

DWM: What perspective on new literacies do you find most compelling?

JC: I have always had a passion for understanding what makes people literate and productive as learners. I’m fascinated by the range of strategies that readers use to make sense of the world around them, and I tend to gravitate toward ways of supporting learning for information and knowledge application in new settings.

As I watch people make the transition from learning with books to learning in digital spaces, I usually focus first on the cognitive and metacognitive processes that they use to navigate and negotiate these dynamic online contexts. My time with the New Literacies Research Team from 2001 to 2007 at the University of Connecticut clarified my thinking about the skills, strategies, dispositions, and practices that readers need to understand and use the information they encounter on the Internet.

For instance, our team’s work in several schools enabled me to observe firsthand that while skilled readers use many of the same strategies across both online and offline reading tasks (e.g., activating prior knowledge, determining important ideas, monitoring understanding), they also employ additional reading strategies to make sense of online texts. Some of these additional, or new, reading strategies include generating digital queries, scrutinizing search engine results, and negotiating multiple representations of text.

Online readers also spend much of their time monitoring their reading pathways to evaluate whether they are moving closer to or further away from relevant and reliable information that suits their reading purposes.

More recently, I’ve become intrigued with how learners interact with each other around online texts in relation to these cognitive reading processes. By exploring the forms and functions of student interactions during online reading activities from a more social constructivist lens, I’ve discovered new ways of thinking about productive online reading and knowledge construction.

It’s been interesting to watch how pairs of students scaffold and support each other’s thinking in online reading situations in ways that extend beyond what
DWM: How are traditional and new literacies alike and different?

JC: I find it helpful to compare traditional and new literacies by thinking about reading to comprehend online texts (i.e., digital texts found on the Internet) in relation to reading to comprehend offline texts (i.e., information texts on the printed page).

For example, a typical offline reading assignment asks students to read a common text, answer questions about the main ideas, and respond to these ideas through writing, art, or class discussion. In contrast, a typical online reading assignment requires students to sift through disparate sources to locate their own texts, synthesize the most reliable and relevant information within those texts, and respond with online communication tools such as e-mail messages or blog posts.

I think one of the biggest differences between offline and online reading comprehension is that offline texts reside in familiar and bounded spaces that remain static over time, while online texts are part of a dynamic and unbounded information system that changes daily in structure, form, and content.

In my experience, these dynamic mediums foster increasingly complex interactions with texts that present a host of new reading demands for adolescents. Readers also often end up working more collaboratively to solve online information problems, so there’s a whole new level of dialogue and discourse that needs to be negotiated when reading on the Internet that doesn’t typically happen when reading books.

Unfortunately, in many schools, skilled and unskilled readers of offline texts have few opportunities to deal with these rapidly changing online complexities as part of their daily reading curriculum. In my opinion, we’re doing students a disservice by not making more explicit how, when, and why coordinating the use of similar and unique reading and responding strategies serves specific online purposes.

DWM: What secondary school practices devoted to supporting new literacies appear to be most promising?

JC: Not long ago, I reviewed a wide range of practices to determine what appears to support the development of new literacies in classrooms and drew several conclusions (see Coiro, 2009). First, inquiry-based practices that begin with interesting problems and no certain solutions tend to engage students in ways that create a sense of mattering, of being able to make a difference in today’s complex world. Adolescents want to feel like they matter, and online activities are ideal springboards for their contributions.

Second, opportunities to explore a compelling issue from different angles and collaboratively mesh ideas into an original digital composition for a real audience have been found to spark creativity and innovation—two dimensions that many believe are critical to success in today’s knowledge economy.

A third practice seeks to not only acknowledge but also honor the literacies that adolescents bring to school from their daily lives. It’s beneficial to learn what adolescents are reading and writing outside of school and make space for them to demonstrate their knowledge of digital literacies inside school; doing so links to their identities as competent learners.

Fourth, teachers can promote growth in online reading comprehension by offering think-aloud models that help secondary school students compare strategies for engaging in personal and academic online reading activities.

It is also helpful for teachers to navigate more equalized relationships with students that appear integral to productive peer inquiry and collaborative online reading. Because literacy contexts change so quickly on the Internet, teachers do well to make time to flexibly explore and clarify what is expected of themselves and their students as they negotiate these changing roles and relationships.

Finally, productive secondary school practices typically pair inquiry-based instruction with learner-centered assessments that engage students in self-, peer, and teacher reviews of their online reading comprehension.
Research Connections: New Literacies and Adolescent Learners: An Interview With Julie Coiro

130 teachers walked away with new partnerships and a host of lessons they infused with new literacies.

The teachers continued their work with job-embedded sessions throughout the following year, and a subsequent 2011 summer institute (massnewlitinstitute2011.wikispaces.com/) coordinated by the Teacher Leaders brought together 100 additional Massachusetts teachers and administrators. In small interdisciplinary teams, educators collectively designed 28 new literacy projects guided by essential questions that relate directly to their local curriculum goals and state standards in literacy and content area learning.

This professional development effort was recently awarded a John I. Wilson Leadership for Learning Award by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills. This model of meeting teachers where they are, alongside strong administrative support, with access to a range of social networking tools and systematic job-embedded experiences that adapt to reflect changing technologies, is one that can inform other states seeking to make progress in this area.

Through these experiences, teachers also learn how to become mediators, supporting students’ self-reflection and self-regulation in ways that enable adolescents to gain greater control over their own literacy practices with networked information technologies.

References


Coiro is an assistant professor in the Reading Department at the University of Rhode Island, Kingston, USA; e-mail jcoiro@snet.net.

DWM: How do you approach professional development in new literacies?

JC: A first step in successfully working with schools is to understand the diverse needs and interests of teachers and administrators with respect to the idea of using new technologies to foster literacy and learning. Classroom teachers bring a range of abilities, assumptions, and comfort zones with them into any professional development situation, and they need time to express their ideas and concerns in a way that explicitly shapes the direction and pace of their learning.

Once a plan has been established, I offer short sessions with systematic, job-embedded, and risk-free opportunities for teachers to explore innovative technologies and access digital support systems for connecting and collaborating with experts and other teachers, both locally and around the world.

There’s a whole host of amazing ways that teachers and students are using the Internet to pose questions, discuss alternative perspectives, and compose creative solutions to share with others. Once teachers have supported time to engage with these activities and reflect on the ways they connect to their curriculum themes and learning standards, their passion often prompts them to get quite involved and venture out of their comfort zones in partnership with local colleagues.

A powerful example of this type of professional development is the New Literacies Teacher Leader Institute that I worked with in a collaborative effort between two university research teams, the Massachusetts State Department of Education, and 10 Massachusetts teacher leaders (see newlitinstitute2010.wikispaces.com/). After a one-week intensive institute designed to build local capacity while exploring digital tools and models of inquiry-based instruction.