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## Conversation Currents: Digital Footprints

Julie Coiro

*University of Rhode Island*, [jcoiro@uri.edu](mailto:jcoiro@uri.edu)

Sara Kajder

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## Digital Footprints

Julie Coiro and Sara Kajder

Over the past few decades, we have seen a variety of technological tools that assist literacy learning—from typewriters to cell phones, from cameras to MP3 players. Most recently, digital technologies have enabled readers and writers to integrate text, image, sound, animation, and voice in new ways. The challenge for teachers is to integrate these constantly evolving digital technologies into meaningful and motivating instruction. We invited Dr. Julie Coiro, from the University of Rhode Island, and Dr. Sara Kajder, from Virginia Tech University, to share their thoughts about what digital tools are available and how they might transform classrooms and literacy learning.

Julie Coiro is an assistant professor with a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from the University of Connecticut, a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of New Orleans, and a B.A. in Special Education from the University of Connecticut. Julie's research focuses on strategic reading comprehension, new literacies of the

Internet, online reading comprehension, and effective practices for technology integration and professional development. She has taught in preschool, elementary, and middle school classrooms and also has 20 years experience as a staff developer.

Sara Kajder is an assistant professor of English Education with a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Pittsburgh. A former middle and high school English teacher, she received the first National Technology Fellowship in English/Language Arts. A nationally known consultant and speaker, she is also the author of *Adolescents and Digital Literacies: Learning Alongside Our Students*, *The Tech-Savvy English Classroom*, and *Bringing the Outside In: Visual Ways of Engaging Reluctant Readers*.

**This excerpted conversation was recorded on April 27, 2011, and has been edited for publication. The full conversation is available as a podcast (at [www.ncte.org/journals/la/podcasts](http://www.ncte.org/journals/la/podcasts)).**



### Julie Coiro (JC):

So when you were writing about this digital footprint idea, have you seen evidence of kids being interested in leaving this digital footprint? Does it sound odd to them? Also with teachers, I'm curious how teachers respond to that idea? We're so

afraid of leaving anything that would give an indication of who that person is. Are teachers nervous about using digital footprint ideas?



### Sara Kajder (SK):

The bulk of my work is with middle-schoolers and high school students. I think I have a lot more traction right now in that conversation with high school students, because they're in the process of wanting to be known for their good work.

I think that Bud Hunt started me on that path. I'm citing him here, in a way, when I talk about "putting their good work to work." They're in

the process of applying to colleges or starting in their career paths, and they recognize that some of what they've done inside of school really can matter in that. So, when we talk about "digital footprint," I'm not just talking about creating a website where you have posted some narratives or maybe a blog, but where you have a more extensive, searchable identity. Kids understand that we're "Google-able." That's a game to them in some regards—putting their name into *Google* and seeing what comes up. It's very different for them to think about *How do you manage that? How do you make sure things you're putting out there represent who you are as a reader and a writer and an artist and a scholar?* And not as someone who might have posted some pictures on *Facebook* that you wouldn't want to be part of your college application. Thinking about that, what's searchable about you? What can I find? And how do you manage that? So, ultimately, I think, it's a conversation where that divide between in-school and out-of-school becomes even more important. Students are still saying, *Well, this is the kind of thing that I do with my time.* They don't often think about their digital footprints in terms of school ways of thinking about it, or those roles as readers and writers, because those are school roles in their minds. Right?

**JC:** Right.

**SK:** They're thinking instead about all of the different things that are part of their literacy lives outside of the classroom. Teachers are intrigued by it, but they're also afraid. So, just to have the conversation on two different levels: (1) what's searchable about me as a teacher? and (2) how do I think about helping kids to have that critical disposition or that critical literacy of knowing and controlling and managing all the content that they have out there about themselves? The teachers who are quick to jump on this are usually the teachers who have an existing blog presence, or they *Tweet* as part of their professional development. They see some bit of their own digital footprint and can say, *Ah, I can see how I'm being really transparent about my learning in this digital space. My students could do that, too.* And they tend to be (and you probably see this in your work, Julie) they tend to be the teachers who are already thinking with the digital landscape of the classroom. Does that make sense?

**JC:** Yeah.

**SK:** And their classrooms are very different from the teachers who are a little bit more traditional and a little bit more hesitant to be thinking about what all this digital media means for their teaching.

**JC:** Right. One of the things I was thinking about as you were talking—I have had some teachers at the elementary school level ask me about this idea of leaving digital footprints. You said a word that I picked up on, and it was "matter." And in some of the work that I've been reading, the idea that students can say something and do something that will make a difference—that will really *matter* to someone—becomes an important springboard for learning. I wonder if, in the context of school settings, because teachers are held so accountable to school types of literacies, rather than having elementary-aged students manage their individual online identities, one idea might be to help students learn how to collaboratively manage the kinds of information they are gathering online and then consider different ways of shaping their message to send out to other people as evidence of what they've learned. So, in a sense, they are leaving a digital footprint of a slightly different kind that reflects how they construct knowledge together while making a public statement that matters to others. This conversation also reminds me that one of the interesting differences between you and me, Sara (laughter), is that you tend to see things very much from a composing kind of perspective, while looking at identity and out-of-school issues, and I tend to see things from an informational perspective while thinking about how to pull all these things together and make it sound appropriate for a particular audience in a learning context.

**SK:** Sure. It's interesting. Let me give you an example of what's going on in an elementary classroom that's doing exactly what you were just talking about. They found that when you can map the technology into something that you as a teacher want to do better instructionally, something that's not working quite well enough, we see an amplifier right there. Teachers see an immediate value-add, and they're more curious about how to unpack it.

What I'm seeing at elementary levels are kids using expressive multimodal composing tools—using iMovie, or using some of the comic creators like Toon-Doo, or a lot of the free Web 2.0 tools

like Glogster—to create multimodal texts. They capture the ways in which kids are multiply literate, ways that allow them to put art and sound and motion together as they're composing.

So, the elementary classroom that I'm working with right now is using *Voice Thread* as an electronic portfolio tool. The teachers were tired of carrying around and passing around these big, thick binders from year to year of kids' work. These portfolios really were containers. They weren't reflective thinking spaces. Teachers knew the tension between the messiness of real learning and the conventional practice with these particular portfolios, which focused on putting that expert piece in and not the messy steps that came before it.

The revised approach is now to use *Voice Thread* to ask the kids to create basically a postcard to next year's teacher where they take pictures of their work and set some learning goals for themselves, like in traditional portfolios. They also showcase the "messiness" of their learning by leveraging how VoiceThread allows

you to pair voice and image. The kids pair an image of their work with their narrated thinking about what's important about that image. For example, you might have a kid who really likes to write in pictures *and* in words. In his thinking, that's really important for next year's teacher to understand. In his portfolio, you see an image from the student's journal paired with the kid verbally unpacking that image and process for the teacher.

This has been a great tool for parents, as well, to actually see their kids moving as learners. And one of the teachers I was working with on the project was just completely ecstatic about it because of the way that she was able to hit all of her standards without ever putting together a standards-dictated rubric. It was just apparent, and it was there. She was able to use the portfolios in VoiceThread as a tool for kids to think about their learning and move further away from the kind of standards-driven *we must* container most of our portfolios tend to become. So, I wonder if that taps into what you were talking about.

## DIGITAL TOOLS MENTIONED BY SARA AND JULIE

**iMovie.** <http://www.apple.com/ilife/imovie/>

Software that Mac users usually have on their computers. Photo Story and Movie Maker are free Windows alternatives. What Sara calls an "expressive multimodal composing tool" to create multimodal texts are programs that encourage the integration of art (photos), sound, and motion. Making a short "movie" empowers a student by displaying their creative voice. As Julie states, it can help younger students with "developing identity without making it public."

**ToonDoo.** <http://www.toondoo.com/>

A comic creator that allows for multimodal expression. There are free and paid subscription versions of the site. While the paid version allows you and your students a few more options and more privacy (you can create your own ToonDoo homepage, for example), the free version allows your students to create and share their creations, and it's, well, free. Visit the site to determine which is best for you and your students.

**Blogster.** <http://www.blogster.com/join> A free blog-hosting site.

This Web 2.0 tool allows students and teachers to create blogs where they can share and comment on the entries of classmates. You can set up a blog for your class. View an example of a Kindergarten blog (hosted by another blog-hosting site, Blogmeister) here : [http://classblogmeister.com/blog.php?blogger\\_id=51141](http://classblogmeister.com/blog.php?blogger_id=51141). Maria Knee's students (using only first names with parents' permission) post artwork, writing, etc. that they would like to share.

**VoiceThread.** <http://voicethread.com/>

An electronic portfolio tool that, as Sara states, is "a postcard to next year's teacher." Pictures of the student's work are accompanied by a student's description of the image. Instead of a contained (and cumbersome!) portfolio that doesn't allow for depth and reflection, VoiceThread showcases a student's work and personal thoughts and gets at a

**JC:** Right. I think it does. I think a lot of those tools like Voice Thread or iMovie are easy enough to use, and they give young children a voice with which to personalize their learning while empowering them to gradually shape the curriculum by offering new ideas for the teacher to use next year. So, in a sense, it's dealing with identity, but I suppose it's more of an implicit way of working with identity rather than having each individual explicitly address the question of *What is my personal identity that I'm now sharing with other people?* So it's almost like the tools and the space to use them during the school day provide an opportunity for young children to develop that identity without necessarily making it public. *I can still have a voice. I can still personalize these ideas. I can add images or my voice and have a relation to it in a way that I can still be safe and anonymous but feel like I'm making a difference.*

**SK:** Well, I think what it also has done is created a cyclical professional development for teachers that's naturally embedded in their work. If these students are moving up into my

classroom at the start of the next academic year, I then need to think about *Ok, how do I build on this now, this year? How do I learn how to use this tool so that what the students do is recursive and cyclical and matters?* So, we go back to that word "matter" again. I think the relevance for kids is really important, too. Putting a bunch of papers in a binder sometimes can feel, I don't know, "school-ish." It's really only a practice and an artifact that lives in the school world. Whereas, looking over your learning and reflecting on what you want to do next and setting goals for yourself and being so public about something that's usually very private, that ratchets it up and makes it matter in a different way.

In the same school, one of their goals is to really start taking the pieces of writing the kids do and make them useful outside of the school. So, it's taking the idea that we've always had as educators about publishing student work and ratcheting it up again by saying *Who are the audiences that we now can connect with who would provide kids feedback on their work?* But also, *How does this work or piece of writing mat-*

deeper and "messier" (in a good way) representation of the student. Parents also have access. VoiceThread is not free and may charge depending on a teacher's school or school systems' subscription. Visit the website to learn more (see an informational video) and ask around in your school or district to determine subscription rates.

**Annotated Google Maps.** <http://maps.google.com/>

Go to Google Maps and click on the "My Maps" (usually upper left side of the page) link. Watch the video or click on the "learn more" link that will take you to another page describing all of the annotating features of Google Maps. An example of a use for an annotated Google map might be students narrating a map of their community. This type of activity allows students to use their own voice while contributing to something that "matters."

**Podcasting (with Audacity).** <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>

This is a free, multilingual audio editor and recorder. Users can download the software depending on operating system. Sara and Julie talk about using the recording tool to remix conversations students have in literature circles. The students (here, they were 8th graders) created a "radio show" that was then posted as a podcast for others or classmates to listen and comment. These types of multimodal expressions motivate the students to consider voice and audience.

**Slife.** [www.slifeweb.com](http://www.slifeweb.com)

An application that tracks which websites you go to over a period of time. Sara uses it as a visual for teachers when considering the number of sites and programs students (usually older) use. A basic Slife account is free and tracks usage of applications, documents, and websites.

—Meghan Welch  
Georgia State University

ter outside of the classroom? Are they creating an audio text that helps us navigate a local art museum? Are they creating a *Google* map that has been annotated by kids for any students who were coming into their community, so they'd have a kid-created reference for the best places to find a park to play at or they'd find the best ice cream in town. Here, students are reading about their communities and learning about maps and writing and doing other things, but they are also finding a way to tap into a real and engaged audience. I think that also makes it less scary for teachers to use technology, because it's embedded in what's familiar for us in thinking about what we've always wanted to do and do well.

**JC:** I like that idea about embedded professional development. Teachers often ask me, *So where do I start? Where do I invest my time? There are so many different tools and ideas and technologies, it's really hard to know where to begin.* I think in the example you just gave, rather than suggesting that teachers just pick any tool and run with it, if a teacher has tried out VoiceThread, and students seem to be interested, and it seems to be ratcheting up different opportunities for them to express themselves in the classroom, that should be the inspiration for a teacher to learn even more about how that tool can foster learning and reflection in her classroom.

One thing I always try to tell teachers is, if you're looking for a place to start, ask yourself (from a standards-based curriculum kind of perspective): Is there something that you absolutely have to teach and are held accountable for that kids have become totally bored with in the way it's currently being taught? If so, a good starting place is to focus on a particular technology that might offer a little novelty that re-engages students emotionally with your content. Likewise, if there's something that you absolutely have to teach, and *nobody* in the class is really getting it, then one good starting place might be to think of how students might benefit from viewing or interacting with that challenging content in a different mode or format. Then, it's a matter of being aware of which technologies might be best suited for presenting information in that medium, and investing your time in learning how those technologies work, rather than trying to change your entire curriculum all at once with too many cool tools. So really, an important

starting place is to focus on things you either have to teach and kids are totally bored with, or things you have to teach and kids just aren't getting, and then use this information as a purposeful starting place in your curriculum to consider *what role a particular technology might play.*

**SK:** Right. And I think for me, it's continually looking at that landscape of digital tools, seeing that it is going to change every single day, recognizing that, nodding your head, and saying *That's fine, there are always going to be tools I don't know. I'm okay with that because I'm going to focus my attention on those kinds of unique capacities that map into my instructional needs* (just like you're talking about).

So, for me, as a younger teacher, I wrestled with literature circles and how I could have kids authentically make meaning from their discussions. I often found that it was a problem when I moved from table one to table two, because table one would do a great job having conversation about text when I was standing there, but when I moved off to another position, the discussion tanked. That's when I discovered podcasting, where kids recorded the audio from their conversation and then remixed that into something that mattered by itself. We created radio shows out of what they had in their discussions on the books that they were reading. These were sixth graders, but they had some fairly sophisticated ideas and responses to the texts we were reading, and they had feedback that started coming in from other authors, other teachers, and folks who were using their podcasts as learning tools in their own work. So, bringing new practices and tools into my teaching is a kind of intertwining of instructional need in a unique capacity.

I think it is also making a point of saying, *It's okay if this is going to fail.* It's finding a place in your curriculum where you can say, *I've got a little bit of wiggle room—a little bit.* And that happens naturally in our curriculum—whether we're thinking about a multimodal, or technology-infused lesson or just a standard, traditional thing that we do all the time. Sometimes things just don't work. And that might happen a little bit more often when you're getting experimental with the technology, but that's still a safe and smart thing to do.

You were talking about shifting modes to engage kids or a different way of sharing informa-

tion. I think that that “mode-shifting” is so powerful, and it’s one point that I try to emphasize with teachers. Written language is not going to go away. We’re just at a stage, I think, where we’re closely intertwining written language with other modes and modalities. So, we call kids’ attention to the fact that what we express in one mode isn’t going to immediately translate into another. Right? The movie is never the same as the novel. That’s worked for me when I’ve been asked to have kids write the five-paragraph essay of a memoir. I can explain to them that that multi-layered text of a digital story will never be the same thing as what happens in their five-paragraph essay. But it’s a way to really let them think about how language works, and what happens when you pair image and words, and ask *What are you really communicating?* There are just so many layered, exciting things that you can do there.

But I think that that’s part of what we’ve always done as English teachers. Right? It makes me frustrated sometimes when I read about the pedagogy of multiliteracies or things like that because it makes something that we’ve already been doing sound so distant and so theorized. We’re thinking about just asking—as I hear you saying—*What happens when I have an alternate starting point? And what happens when I affirm all the different ways that kids are smart, and I make a space for that in my classroom?* So, I like that.

**JC:** I had one quick thing I wanted to add here to something that you mentioned about mindsets and really having teachers understand. I think because technology changes so quickly, it’s not necessarily about that particular tool or technology, as much as really understanding the purposeful reasons behind why you’re trying to engage kids in a particular opportunity. What the particular tool is (because it will definitely change) is not really the issue as much as *Do I understand these best principles of practice, and how might this tool today and a different tool tomorrow really enhance those principles in a way that helps students feel good about themselves and interested in their learning?*

**SK:** Sure. One of the things that I ask kids to do (and this is whether I’m working with gradu-

ate students or kindergarteners), we often will download a little app called *Slife*, and it tracks for you which websites you go to over a period of time. It also will track how much time you spend in *Microsoft Word* or *EXCEL* and whatever else. Especially when working with adolescents, I like them to look at how they spent their time over a month. What was their attention literacy? We then configure a *PowerPoint* slide, where they have to put a graphic or an icon for each of those social media sites that they’ve been to over the course of that month. One thing that I emphasize with teachers is that’s the part that’s always shifting. Right? The tools that we use are always shifting.

It’s not so much the knowing of the tools that’s important. Let’s say I have a class of 30 kids, then I’m going to have endless variations across all the tools with which they’re smart or knowledgeable. A lot of kids can’t give me much explanation as to why they use a particular tool, so it is a leap to call them literate with it. When we’re looking at that landscape of tools, teachers need to focus on knowing how those tools work, what the dominant characteristics of them are, or what the qualities are of what kids are doing when they go online. For me, it goes back to multimodal expression, to thinking about audience (like you were talking about), or to processes for finding an authentic audience who values what you have to say as an expert. Right? That’s one of the reasons that kids are going online, and one of the unique affordances of those tools that they’re looking at. There’s also the idea of creating a text that has some real relevance, so others are using that text to do something as they’re learning and contributing inside of that community, and then (like we were talking about before) that digital footprint.

In other ways, this work is about exploring how you can become known to other communities for the ways in which you’re smart. For teachers, it’s less about knowing *Facebook* and a lot more about knowing *What do kids do in Facebook? And how do I look at those skills and literacies and make them matter in my English classroom?*

**Julie Coiro** is an assistant professor at the University of Rhode Island. She can be reached at [jcoiro@mail.uri.edu](mailto:jcoiro@mail.uri.edu). **Sara Kajder** is an assistant professor of English Education at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia. She can be reached at [skajder@vt.edu](mailto:skajder@vt.edu).