

# Design Features of a Professional Development Program in Digital Literacy

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To advance the digital literacy competencies of educators, create opportunities for them to reflect on their motivations for using digital media, make collaborative inquiry a substantive component of the hands-on learning experience, and create opportunities to put teachers and learners (not machines) at the center of attention.

We had been together for five years before we decided to celebrate. Instead of celebrating with a party, we wrote this article to reflect on, wonder about, and consider what we have built together with the help of many willing hands, including 25 faculty colleagues from around the country and around the world.

Every summer since 2013, we have worked with K–12 educators, youth media professionals, school leaders, college faculty, and librarians who share our interests in the intersection of education, information, communication, and media studies. Through designing, implementing, and assessing a professional development (PD) program, we have conceptualized digital literacy in relation to the needs of experienced adult learners whose motives for wanting to incorporate digital texts, tools, and technologies into the curriculum vary widely. Our collaborative work in digital literacy is thus located in pragmatic action focused on PD.

Over time and as a result of sustained exposure to the many more than 500 adult learners who have participated in an intensive PD program at the University of Rhode Island's Summer Institute in Digital Literacy (SIDL), we have collaboratively built a joint understanding of digital literacy education. In developing the program, we have taken time to consider the interplay among elementary, secondary, higher education, and informal learning contexts, and our approach spans the disciplines of both literacy education and communication/media studies.

A little context may be useful here: The first SIDL was held in July 2013, and the program has run annually since then. As a weeklong, 42-hour PD program,

the SIDL has enrolled participants from 25 states and 15 countries. Each year, 60 to 120 people have enrolled in the program. It was one of three PD programs showcased in the U.S. Department of Education's (2016) National Educational Technology Plan. The program has included keynote lectures from authors, educators, and activists such as Douglas Rushkoff, Howard Rheingold, Joyce Valenza, Christopher Lehman, Dan Gillmor, and Nuala and Len Cabral.

During the week, participants select from among 40 workshops in which they can experiment with digital platforms, tools, and texts and learn about research and program development in digital literacy. Each afternoon, participants collaborate with a partner to develop a Design Studio project that is relevant to their needs, showcasing this work to their peers at the end of the week. A variety of face-to-face and online learning activities encourage collaboration and metacognitive reflection on one's identity as an educator, learner, team member, and leader. In the summer and extending all year, the learning community shares ideas and

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information using the hashtag #digiURI on Twitter, Google Plus, Facebook, and other platforms. The Media Education Lab also hosts free online webinars that showcase the work of former program participants, enabling everyone to learn from everyone long after the PD program has ended.

Three important program design features of the SIDL are promoting reflection on one's motivations for advancing digital literacy, deepening appreciation for collaborative inquiry, and focusing on how educators and learners (not machines) personalize learning. For readers of *JAAL* who are involved in advancing digital literacy education through creating, implementing, and assessing PD programs for inservice or preservice teachers or other adult learners, we invite you to consider how these three features of the SIDL may be valuable to you.

In this article, we show how these features have contributed to the perceived relevance and value of the PD program. If you are working to help educators or adult learners work together to advance their own and students' digital literacies, these concepts may apply in your own work. By sharing our experience in designing learning environments for educators, librarians, youth media professionals, and higher education faculty, we seek to reflect on our choices and strategies. Before we offer insight on these themes, we briefly review the theoretical frames that have shaped our inquiry.

## Theoretical Frames

We define *digital literacy* as an expanded conceptualization of literacy that is responsive to the ongoing changes in information and communication technologies that are part of everyday life. As we see it, digital literacy education involves a set of competencies connected to reading and authorship situated in a classroom culture of teaching practices that value, model, scaffold, and facilitate aspects of inquiry, analysis, collaboration, creation, reflection, and social action (Buckingham, 2007; Hobbs, 2010a; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004).

Our approach to digital literacy draws from a multidisciplinary lineage in education, communication, social sciences, and the humanities. Theoretically, our work builds on scholarship in education, media studies, and cultural studies, which conceptualizes learning as a process of inquiry and discovery (Bruner 1960; Dewey, 1900/2017) in which meaning making is an active process (Hall, 1980; Ogden & Richards, 1923/1989) that involves examining not only the form and content of messages but also the affordances and limitations of the

technologies used to create them (McLuhan, 1964). We see literacy practices as situated, contextual cultural practices (Vygotsky, 1978) that use multimodality (Kress, 2010) to activate multiple modes of knowing (Gardner, 1983). We further recognize that media and technology constitute a cultural environment and serve as the culture's primary storyteller (Jhally, 2009). Digital participation promotes personal and social reflection, personal autonomy, and collaboration (Ito et al., 2013; Jenkins, 2009). These outcomes support the practice of literacy by reshaping relationships between teacher and learners and between learners and their culture (Freire, 1970/2005).

Digital media offers transformative implications for pedagogical practices that put learners and teachers at the center of an increasingly networked social world (Aspen Institute Task Force on Learning and the Internet, 2014). Digital media makes it easy for learners to have choice and voice in ways that make student-directed learning a reality for every learner (Coiro, Kiili, & Castek, 2017). Thus, digital literacy embodies Dewey's (1900/2017) dream of learning as focused on real-world problem solving that awakens students to their democratic social responsibilities, learning for which knowledge and deliberative dialogue are used to understand and address problems we find in our neighborhoods, our communities, and in our world, helping to create a more just and equitable world.

## Motivations Matter

The first design feature of the SIDL focuses on reflection about one's motivations by essentially asking, *Why are you here?* When we first started using the term *digital literacy* to refer to our collaborative work in PD, we began by asking participants to define the term for themselves, asking, "What does digital literacy mean to you?" From this, we discovered that digital literacy was an umbrella concept: People define and articulate *digital literacy* in different ways, depending on their disciplinary background, identity, and life experiences. As a result, we decided that we did not need a single definition, as we could embrace a multivocal perspective on the topic.

Adult learners bring a variety of different motivations into play when participating in a PD learning community. When participants reflect on their own reasons for exploring the topic of digital literacy, it also helps clarify one's priorities. Respecting and honoring this diversity sets the stage for colearning to occur.

We have experienced this ourselves when it comes to defining digital literacy, as Julie's focus on online

reading comprehension and Renee's focus on media literacy education led us to different nuances in our understanding of these ideas. The scholarly community in digital literacy has long recognized the variety of different purposes, goals, and motivations (Alexander, Becker, Cummins, & Giesinger, 2017). Indeed, divergent perspectives on digital literacy are common. Various approaches to digital literacy have drawn on scholarship from semiotics and multimodality (Kress, 2010); interpretation, meaning making, and issues of representation (Hall, 1980); and the political economy of digital platforms in education and issues of data privacy (Bulger, 2016), to name just a few. We see such diversity as a significant source of strength for the long-term future of digital literacy.

So, rather than define *digital literacy* narrowly in terms of identifying skills, competencies, processes, or habits of mind, we begin the summer institute each year by asking participants to explain why they have chosen to attend. We discover that they have differing motivations and different reasons for embracing the term *digital literacy*. Because motivation situates human action in relation to lived experience and social context (Ryan & Stiller, 1991), we recognize that teachers' motivations for digital learning have a strong influence on their actual use of digital media and technology in schools. Teachers decide whether, what, and how technology gets used in classrooms (Conway & Zhao, 2001). When teachers are motivated, they make greater use of digital tools and technologies in their classrooms (Karsenti, Villeneuve, & Goyer, 2006).

Because discussions of digital literacy may sometimes omit consideration of the complex love/hate relationship that educators have in responding to the rise of mass media, popular culture, and digital media in society (Hobbs, 2017), we devised a strategy that helps put digital literacy center stage, one that involves reflection and dialogue on empowerment and protection in relation to one's motivations for digital literacy and digital learning.

Through our work at the SIDL, we have discovered that adults come to an interest in digital literacy with a complex and nuanced set of preexisting attitudes and beliefs about technology, media, education, and learning. Below are a few examples:

- Some educators, librarians, and parents see digital media's ubiquitous presence in the home as interfering with early childhood development, whereas others see digital media as a means to engage learners in developing skills that transfer between home and school.
- Some fear that digital devices are limiting practices of reading and writing, whereas others see it as extending and deepening these practices.
- Some fear that the social skills of children and young people are being compromised or shortchanged, whereas others see young people engaged in sophisticated social discourses that reflect and shape their personal and social identities.
- Some see the rise of so-called fake news as resulting from the lack of critical examination of the credibility of online information sources, whereas others see the value of blogs, videos, and other online information sources as vital resources for developing knowledge and skills.
- Some believe that social media, laptops, and cell phones are a significant distraction from student learning, whereas others recognize the value of using these devices to support academic work, build transferable career skills, and engage in social, civic, and political action.

Such diverse motivations for digital literacy are rooted in a dialectic of empowerment and protection (Hobbs, 2010a, 2010b). Most people have a complex mix of attitudes, including concerns about how digital media and technology introduce a variety of risks and potential harms to individuals or society, while also holding more positive beliefs about the value of digital media for learning purposes. Teacher motivations for digital learning have been identified using the dialectic of empowerment and protection in relation to six key theoretical frames, that is, attitudes toward (1) technology tools, genres, and formats; (2) message content and quality; (3) community connectedness; (4) texts and audiences; (5) media systems; and (6) learner-centered focus (Hobbs & Tuzel, 2017).

Over the years, the SIDL has attracted a diverse array of educators, librarians, school leaders, youth media professionals, and college faculty. Depending on their professional backgrounds, interests, and prior experiences, participants may have different perspectives about media systems and institutions, different levels of focus on the content or quality of digital texts, and more or less sensitivity toward learner needs.

For these reasons, at the opening session, we begin the program by inviting participants to reflect on the different digital learning motivation profiles shown in Figure 1, and then we build hands-on colearning experiences that help participants reflect on and become aware of their own motivations. Figure 1 provides

Figure 1  
Digital Learning Motivation Profiles



media education lab

## DIGITAL LEARNING MOTIVATIONS HOROSCOPE PROFILES

*Review the different motivations that inspire people to develop their expertise in digital and media literacy. Which of these profiles best fits your priorities?*

	<p><b>TRENDSSETTER</b> You're smart about pop culture and curious about kid culture. Maybe your own most-loved books, movies, websites and videogames aren't too far removed from that of your students. You are inquisitive about the trends and hot topics that make up a crucial component of the fabric of your students' everyday lives. You want school culture to connect to the popular culture that students know and value.</p>
	<p><b>TECHIE</b> You have a passionate curiosity about new digital tools and platforms and you like to be the first one to discover and use them. You experiment with how digital technologies can promote learning and you see much potential to engage students with learning through the use of apps, tools and digital platforms.</p>
	<p><b>WATCHDOG</b> You are a natural critical thinker, aware of how economic systems and institutions influence our everyday lives. You want your students and your peers to be more mindful of the ways that things are bought and sold. Who owns and controls the media content that we see, hear, read, and use? You feel responsible for giving your students a "wake-up call" about the economic and institutional inner-workings of the digital world that surrounds them.</p>
	<p><b>DEMYSTIFIER</b> As an educator, you "pull back the curtain" to help students see how all forms of information and knowledge are constructed. Your focus is on inquiry. You emphasize the practice of critical thinking, helping students ask good "how" and "why" questions as they learn to think for themselves</p>
	<p><b>TASTEMAKER</b> You want to broaden your students' horizons. You know that digital media can increase students' exposure to a wide variety of information, ideas, people and experiences that will deepen their understanding of history, the arts and sciences, culture and society. You know that a key component of students' future success in life will require them to draw from a variety of cultural sources, both classical and popular.</p>
	<p><b>ACTIVIST</b> You want to make society more just and equitable by promoting democratic participation and civic engagement. You use media and technology in the classroom as a catalyst for students to understand how they can have a voice in improving the quality of life in their communities and in the world.</p>

(continued)

Figure 1  
Digital Learning Motivation Profiles (*continued*)

## DIGITAL LEARNING MOTIVATIONS HOROSCOPE PROFILES

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	<p><b>ALT</b> You are an inventive, perhaps “DIY” teacher. You’re always ready to challenge students with alternative ways of finding, using, thinking about, and creating media. Whether you use open source or remix content or encourage students to start alternative clubs, or simply introduce students to information that’s off the beaten path, you broaden students’ understanding of the many learning resources that are available at the library and online</p>
	<p><b>MOTIVATOR</b> You are an inspiration and a catalyst for your students’ creative energy. Students who have never felt comfortable speaking up in class, participating in activities, or contributing to class dialogue find it easier to speak their mind when you engage with them. You see your role as helping students be the best they can be.</p>
	<p><b>SPIRIT GUIDE</b> You are a <i>listener</i>. You care about the social and emotional well-being of your students, and do everything you can to help students understand themselves and their lives. You recognize that media and technology may affect how students deal with relationships that help them manage the highs and lows of life.</p>
	<p><b>PROFESSIONAL</b> You have high standards for your students’ work, and you may be seen as the go-to media professional in your school. You know how to push your students to understand and emulate the conventions that are important to being taken seriously as a creative author, artist, writer or media professional. You may co-produce with your students or bring other authors, professionals or media-makers into your classroom to enrich the learning experience.</p>
	<p><b>PROFESSOR</b> You balance your interest in media and technology with a deep connection to academic content and standards. You want to be sure that media and technology are not used merely as bells-and-whistles, but to advance specific content knowledge and skills.</p>
	<p><b>TEACHER 2.0</b> You understand that participation in digital media and learning cultures requires flexibility to new formats, modes of expression, and participation in and out of school. You value media and technology tools for their power in helping people connect with others to tell and share their stories.</p>

**You can take an online quiz which will diagnose your digital learning motivations profile and offer you customized data for reflecting on your motivations**

[www.quiz.discovermedialiteracy.com](http://www.quiz.discovermedialiteracy.com)

[www.mediaeducationlab.com](http://www.mediaeducationlab.com)

Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

descriptions of the 12 motivational profiles included in the Digital Learning Motivation Quiz. Users can self-diagnose the profiles they believe best represent them or go online to take a 48-item quiz (<https://www.setyourmotivation.com/>) to deepen reflection on motivations and receive customized feedback for reflection.

Right from the start, we ask participants to discuss their existing beliefs and identify the conceptual themes of most importance to them. As participants identify the motivations that align with their beliefs and values, they get acquainted with other participants who share some of the same values. Then, each participant meets someone who has a different primary motivation to discuss their different perspectives. Pragmatically, this process facilitates the meet-and-greet process and helps participants appreciate the diversity of perspectives and motivations among both the participants and the faculty.

During the week, we have observed that participants get used to asking, “Why are you using this digital tool?” They also seem to gain more precision in talking about why they are using other resources, texts, technologies, and platforms. The Digital Learning Motivation Profiles list provides participants with a vocabulary (rooted in the idea of a horoscope) that supports reflection on and social interaction around the different motivations of educators across the K–20 spectrum in both formal and informal contexts. We suspect that this activity may also enhance the quality of peer-to-peer collaboration.

One of the reasons why we came to care about identifying and valuing differences in the differential motivations of adult learners enrolled in the SIDL is because we recognized differences in our own motivations as faculty collaborators. Among the 12 digital learning motivations profiles shown in Figure 1, Julie might be identified as a professor because of her intentional strategy of using digital texts in ways that align lessons with a clear connection to academic standards and learning outcomes. With her students, Julie is also a spirit guide because of her sensitivity to student–teacher relationships and the socioemotional dimensions of student engagement. Renee might be best identified as a demystifier because, when it comes to digital learning, she focuses on helping learners explore *how* and *why* questions that examine the constructed nature of media messages, especially in relation to the political economy of mass media and popular culture. Renee might also be identified as an activist because of her enduring passion for fostering democratic participation through social action and her interest in students’ voices as a catalyst for improving their communities and the world. Our productive collaboration

has been fueled by the power of two, which has enabled us to appreciate both the similarities and the differences in our respective approaches to the topic, both as researchers and as teachers (Hobbs & Coiro, 2016).

## Collaborative Inquiry Learning

The second design feature of the SIDL centers on inquiry and collaborative learning. Digital media offers important, transformative implications for pedagogical practices that put learners and teachers at the center of an increasingly networked social world (Aspen Institute Task Force on Learning and the Internet, 2014), which is one reason why digital literacy is empowering. For example, the many digital platforms available now offer users many choices of information and entertainment, many different forms of expression and creativity, and many different opportunities for social interaction and engagement. The varied platforms provide rich opportunities for freedom, autonomy, and exploration for learners.

Digital literacy learning experiences also build people’s confidence. Learners increase agency through voice and choice when they get more frequent opportunities to ask their own questions, choose their own texts, or select from a wide range of topics. Students advance agency with more time to talk through their interpretations and share meanings together. By choosing how to creatively express ideas and create media, as well as explore different ways of taking social action, learners may explore their identities as citizens who can improve their communities and society.

We have found that educators need to directly experience collaboration and inquiry as a process of messy engagement and problem solving to appreciate the cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions of digital literacy as they consider how to best support their own students (Hobbs, 2017).

Because inquiry and collaborative learning are key design features of the SIDL, participants are encouraged to work collaboratively on a Design Studio project. Participants have approximately 10 hours during the week to develop the project with a peer. To support the teachers, librarians, and college faculty who attend the SIDL, we developed the personal digital inquiry model of digital and media literacy, which offers substantial opportunities to increase voice and choice for both teachers and learners. Figure 2 shows the visual model that we developed to describe this learning experience. In Design Studio, participants experience collaborative inquiry as they wonder and discover, collaborate and discuss, create and take action, and analyze and reflect.

Figure 2  
Personal Digital Inquiry Model



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

They access, analyze, create, reflect, and take action using the power of communication and information. For educators to develop competencies in teaching digital literacy, they must first experience this process as learners themselves.

We feel that it is important to emphasize that Design Studio, with its collaborative peer-to-peer learning approach, is not a supplement or a mere element of the program; this feature is baked into the fundamental elements of the program design (Hobbs & Coiro, 2016). Participants access ideas and information from short workshops that feature new digital platforms, texts, and technologies to stimulate their thinking and skills. Then, participants use time in Design Studio to synthesize and apply information from among the many different hands-on learning experiences and conversations they have had during the week. By working with a partner, the complexity of the work is multiplied, and the importance of choice, strategy, and sequence becomes more important. By working with a partner in Design Studio, participants spend a lot of time talking about the decisions they make as educators.

As a result of directly experiencing inquiry and collaboration as a learning process, many participants have been inspired to take on the challenges of inquiry and collaboration in their workplaces, schools, and communities. Previous participants have documented their implementation of their Design Studio projects in their schools and communities. Some have described

how they used collaboration and inquiry to make substantive change in their own schools and communities on the SIDL blog, “From PD to Practice,” which was developed by Stephanie Branson, Kara Clayton, and Amanda Murphy. The blog is available at <https://digiuri.wordpress.com/blog/>.

The opportunity to publish and share curricular and creative work further helps shift participant mindsets toward leadership, which we have formally aimed to develop through the Graduate Certificate in Digital Literacy, a 12-credit graduate certificate program that builds on the SIDL and helps advance leadership competencies. When adult learners directly encounter (and not just learn about) digital literacy pedagogies, a deeper sense of agency and a heightened sense of personal and social accountability may develop. With appropriate leadership skills in place and a supportive organizational climate, many educators can take a leadership role in how digital literacy instructional practices become normative within a school building or community.

## Digital Literacy and Personalized Learning

The third design feature of the SIDL emerged in relation to the political and economic context in which the topic of digital literacy has developed in the education marketplace. School districts around the world are facing many pressures to go digital. At this historical moment, the rise of the concept of digital literacy must be understood in relation to those many venture capitalists who have invested more than \$2.3 billion in educational technology companies since 2010, with over \$1 billion raised in 2016 alone (Wan, 2016). The concept of digital literacy has been supported by educational technology experts and venture capitalists, and this momentum is fueled by the infusion of one-to-one laptop implementation in school districts, along with the increasing ubiquity of digital devices at home, work, and school. Teacher education is often the last priority.

These circumstances have had an impact on our work. Although we are highly supportive of digital innovation in the educational technology sector, we reject efforts that deprofessionalize teachers through blended learning programs in which learning practices and content are embedded in and delivered through software algorithms. We believe that teachers are best suited to offer adaptive learning to students; we are concerned about the scope of the hype and the lack of research in the many claims made about personalized learning through technology, digital content, and software tools.

Too many schools have embraced a device-oriented approach to technology integration. In some schools, digital platforms have become glorified worksheet delivery systems. Our concerns about this have led us toward a distinct stance in relation to personalized learning, a term sometimes used to describe technology-enabled learning with varying degrees of tailoring or customization of a learning experience through platform software or apps. The customization occurs through the use of big data, which captures student keystroke data and uses programming algorithms to propose new tasks. At the present time, little independent research has been conducted to demonstrate the value of such technology-driven personalization for learners. As Bulger (2016) pointed out, there are no established standards for describing or evaluating the extent to which a learning experience is personalized.

Rather than retraining teachers to monitor the process of students moving through a series of digital playlists and administer online assessments, the SIDL is designed to foster teacher agency so educators gain confidence in designing their own lesson plans and instructional units for inquiry-based digital learning. We see teachers as eminently capable of supporting and scaffolding student learning through inquiry and collaboration. Learners, at any age, are eminently capable of creating media to express and demonstrate their knowledge and skills. We also see both teachers and learners as civic actors, willing to use the power of communication and information to advocate for the social and political change they value most.

It is important to approach digital media platforms, texts, and technologies with curiosity. We invite educators to identify the potential useful qualities and the unintended consequences and ideologies that are embedded in all digital media. Informed skepticism about the wonders of educational technology is needed now more than ever. For these reasons, our pragmatic focus on teacher agency and PD may help us better understand how educators take responsibility to intentionally design robust learning environments for inquiry-based learning in digital literacy.

In this article, we explained how the SIDL prioritizes (a) reflection on one's motivations for advancing digital literacy, (b) practices of inquiry and collaborative learning, and (c) the exploration of how educators and learners (not machines) personalize learning. We invite you to consider applying these design features of the SIDL to any of the PD programs that you create, implement, and assess.

Undoubtedly, digital literacy is a moving target for everyone in the education sector and will continue to

## TAKE ACTION!

1. Reflect on your own motivations and those of the people you work with. Review the Digital Learning Motivations Profiles list in Figure 1 to consider which profiles best match your passions, interests, and concerns. Take the online quiz to get more feedback on your motivation profile. Consider how your motivations affect the choices you make about what and how you teach and how you learn. How may diverse motivations among a team or unit enhance high-quality learning opportunities?
2. Consider how you experience and enact choice and voice. Then, consider how you and your students experience agency. To what extent do you (and your students) have opportunities to do the following:
  - Choose what instructional materials to use in class
  - Choose what topics to focus on in class
  - Document students' learning using a range of digital media forms and tools
3. Discuss how educational technology and corporate interests are defining personalized learning: What are the consequences of embracing a device-oriented approach to technology integration? For example, how may the use of digital playlists foster teacher agency? What might be some unintended negative consequences?

evolve in the years to come. Before we reach our 10th birthday as codirectors of the SIDL, further work will be needed as we drill down to understand some of the many complex dimensions of this work. However, as the concept of digital literacy continues to evolve, we hope that its roots in literacy remain strong, for we believe that the sharing of meaning through symbolic expression is a fundamentally human way of learning for a lifetime.

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## MORE TO EXPLORE

- Grandparents of Media Literacy: <https://www.grandparentsofmedialiteracy.com/> (Discover the multidisciplinary roots of digital and media literacy education by learning more about the scholars and writers whose ideas influenced the field in this crowdsourced, interactive gallery.)
- Powerful Voices for Kids: <http://www.discovermedialiteracy.com/> (View examples of elementary-level media literacy learning experiences that align with different motivational profiles, and see how educators' choices in the classroom are shaped by their motivations.)