



Digital Directions in Professional Development

Elyse Eidman-Aadahl and Cindy O'Donnell-Allen

Today's students come into elementary and middle school classrooms as active readers and creators of digital texts. Not only do they surf the Web and follow their favorites on YouTube, they tweet, remix, vlog, post, and are regular participants in a global, interconnected digital world. Teachers find themselves challenged and at times perplexed about how to develop their own technological know-how to keep pace with tech-savvy students. We invited Dr. Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, from the National Writing Project, and Dr. Cindy O'Donnell-Allen, from Colorado State University, to share their thoughts about how teachers can cultivate technological knowledge and practices as they design classrooms for digital learners.

Elyse Eidman-Aadahl directs National Programs and Site Development for the National Writing Project. She has been a high school and journalism teacher, a teacher education professor, and a teacher-researcher. Along with other national learning networks, she directs Digital Is, sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation Digital Media and Learning Initiative, and she founded, along with Christina Cantrill and Funny Monkey, the Digital Is community website: www.digitalis.nwp.org.

Cindy O'Donnell-Allen is an associate professor in the English department at Colorado State University, where she directs the CSU Writing

Project. She has worked on technology-related projects with teachers and students from elementary school through graduate school. Both her 2011 book, *Tough Talk, Tough Texts: Teaching English to Change the World*, and her 2006 book, *The Book Club Companion*, include chapters on multimodal assessment. Cindy taught high school English for 11 years and has been a part of the National Writing Project since 1991. Cindy served as co-chair of the NWP Teacher Inquiry Communities (TIC) Network and now manages TIC's social platform on NWP Connect (connect.nwp.org). She is also a member of the NWP leadership team for Literacy in the Common Core. You can read her blog at blogessor.wordpress.com and follow her on Twitter at [Cindy_OA](https://twitter.com/Cindy_OA).

This excerpted conversation was recorded on August 26, 2011, and has been edited for publication. The full conversation is available as a podcast (<http://www.ncte.org/journals/la/podcasts>).

LA: In this conversation, we'll focus on K–8 grades and how as educators we can think about giving teachers the support they need to teach learners in the 21st century. We'll open the discussion with this idea that students are somehow different now, that there is a digital generation—an iGeneration. Perhaps you could speak to that.



Elyse: I think that, of course, there are some big fundamental elements of human beings that don't change, so there are lots of elements of young kids today that are the same as young people over time. I don't want to make too much of this conversation that kids

today are different—there is much about youth that is unchanged. But in this visual era surrounded by media and information and being connected to the Internet and a million devices, we shouldn't be surprised to see some impact on young people and to have the sense that young people coming into our schools are, in some ways, different.

The kids we see coming into schools today are used to having agency in the world. They are used to pushing a button and having something happen. They are used to having a question and being able to get an answer to it really fast. They are used to multitasking several things at one time. I don't think these are necessarily bad things. We are in a conversation right now as a culture about the impact of this huge shift in the environment—the communications environment that we are in, the information environment—and a lot of people are worried about some downsides. There are also some pretty powerful ways that we might be expanding potential and expanding cognition at the same time. Young people are in the middle of it, so I think it is true that they do show up in schools behaving and thinking and moving at a pace that is different than kids 10 or 20 years ago.



Cindy: One of the things that I've noticed, for instance, is when my son does his homework now, he'll have the computer on, opened up to Microsoft Word where he is working on a paper. But he'll also have another screen that is allowing him to

Facebook, he's listening to his iPod at the same time, and he'll shift over and Google something for the research paper he is working on. So as Elyse said, that multitasking piece is already there, it is not something that kids need to be taught how to do. I think that technology has really changed how they interact with the world. But they still have that impulse to communicate with others, and that is very basic, that is part of being human.

So, you hear the phrase, "the more things change, the more they stay the same." I think that is true, but those lines between what we are asking them to do inside of school and outside of school have remained pretty strong. What I would like us to do is to think about how exciting it could be if we blurred those lines more frequently and more deliberately, perhaps more than they have been in earlier years when print-based texts were really ruling the world. We've always had technology with us—a pencil is technology, a pen is a kind of technology. Now we have this opportunity to look at other tools that technology provides and to think, "Wow, what can I do with a computer, with a digital camera, with a device that captures my voice that I wouldn't be able to do if I were just using pen and paper alone?"

That, I believe, is really, really exciting, and it's a way that teachers can realize they still matter in the world. We're the ones that have more experience than the kids do about issues like purpose and context and the content of what kids are trying to say and who their audience might be. We can help them think about the best genre to choose. Does it make sense to break out a pencil and paper? Does it make sense to go online and blog about whatever it is I want to say?

I think it's a cool thing for us as teachers to realize, too. We are still central. There are things that we know how to do, regardless of how many gadgets the kids know how to use that we aren't able to use at the moment. We still have the knowledge to help them say what they want to say in a way that is appropriate for whatever their message is.

Elyse: That is so true, Cindy. I think that going back to that same question of how kids have changed and how much have they changed—in

some ways, educators and teachers notice the change in young people because we are in an institution that really hasn't changed very much at all. If schools were changing along with this global transformation that we are in, we wouldn't be noticing and talking about how different kids are. We would simply be doing the work of reading, writing, and being in this visual world with them. But the gap of what can be done outside of schools and what can be done inside of schools may be bigger than at almost any other time and might be growing—especially in schools that aren't able to shift for a whole variety of reasons. The challenge really is to us as educators and adults and also as community members.

Cindy, you've been speaking to how teachers are still deeply needed, and they really are. One of the things that we see in so much research and survey results is that no matter how digitally able young people are, even up through college age, they are actually experts in a fairly narrow set of things. They may be constantly on Facebook, but ask them to work together to create a group Wiki to gather content on some important topic, and the Wiki is new to them. Or they may know the Wiki, but they have actually never designed a large publication site. There is a lot that even our fairly able and comfortable-in-digital-environments kids don't know.

For instance, take how to plan and design and monitor a collaborative publishing project. The smallest part of that is working in Wiki. The biggest part of that is the human interaction of what is this about, who is our audience, how do we organize our time and our efforts, what sources are credible and how do we understand credibility. Those are the kinds of things that teachers are still deeply relevant for. Kids don't learn those things just by participating in digital environments. They learn them by participating and reflecting on and being taught in digital environments.

Cindy: I think that is absolutely true. Right now, I am teaching a course on teaching writing, and for a class website, I did a search in Google images about kinds of things I could put on the site. Whenever I entered the word "writing" in Google images, all kinds of things popped up. It made me think, "There is the pen, there is the

paper, there is a hand that is writing." That's what may initially pop into our minds when we have that schemata for what writing looks like. But also there was a kid holding a cell phone and texting. It made me think, the very images that I am choosing to put on the site are communicating something about what writing is.

So kids are writing more than ever before by texting, by emailing—although my son is telling me that nobody emails anymore, that is quite passé—they're IMing, they're on Facebook. So they are writing a lot. They don't necessarily recognize that act as an act of writing. The very process in some ways has changed, and I think we need to help kids recognize what that means. We, as teachers, need to recognize what that means. Kids don't always make the best decisions about the form of communication they are choosing or the language register they are choosing to write in for a particular genre. They may think "one size fits all." They might use texting language, for instance, in a college classroom for something they are submitting to a teacher. That is not a good choice. We have to help them figure out what makes the most sense for the kind of writing they are doing, and the language they are using in a particular rhetorical situation.

To listen to the full conversation, please go to the podcast at <http://www.ncte.org/journals/la/podcasts>.

Elyse: Particularly going back to elementary and middle school, for a lot of teachers it is challenging to think about how digital media can come into and be used in those classrooms. But in those grades especially, we have had a whole movement about writing that feels very familiar and transfers beautifully into the digital environment. If you think of all the really great elementary grade teachers who have been trying to make sure, for example, that students don't think writing is just the little school writing that you do, that writing is really a way to learn and a way to have action in the world, or who have a fabulous writers workshop because they really want people to understand audience and issues like tone and stance. All of those things transfer completely into digital writing. They are all still relevant, and they are all still things to be worked on.

If we can avoid partitioning off digital writing as if it is something different, as if it is just about learning the digital tool, we can make everybody see that, in fact, digital is the way we write today. We are in a world where writing is increasingly in digital formats, shared globally, and multimodal. We just need to bring what we understand about writing into this digital world. Much of it is going to transfer.

Cindy: Elyse, just to build on what *hasn't* gone away, I would say that so many of the traditional tools and the new tools can be combined. One of the things that our writing project did this summer was to work with a group of teachers on teaching with technology, and in the afternoon we worked with a bunch of English Language Learners on implementing that technology immediately. The kids were actually making digital stories, and what they started off with was creating a storyboard—so there was an image piece there—but they were writing. They were planning what they wanted to do with a pencil and paper and then thinking about those words that they were creating connected to the image. It was part of the prewriting piece in the writing process that we are all so familiar with.

The next thing they had to do is what real writers do every day, which is to make decisions about what came next for them. So, they recorded their voice because they were telling a story, they took particular kinds of pictures, and they combined the print, the image, the voice, all together to compose a digital story. There was an awful lot that felt really familiar to the teachers we were working with, which allayed some fears that they might have had about what it was going to look like with kids in the classroom. “Oh! Kids are going through the writing process. I know how to do that.” “Oh! They are creating some images and they are thinking about how things work together.”

The really fantastic thing for teachers to see, and it always inspires me whenever I am working with kids, too, is the revision piece that we have often struggled with so much as teachers. Kids just say, “Oh my gosh, you are going to make me revise this piece AGAIN?” But the revision piece was absolutely effortless. The kids knew that they were going to share these digital stories with a wider audience, and they wanted

to get it right. They wanted to revise their work. We would hear them saying things aloud like, “You know, I don't really like how that sounds, so I think I am going to record my voice again.” So, again, the writing process was central, but they were just combining some traditional tools and some new tools together in a way that created the kind of product that they wanted to share with others in the end.

Elyse: One of the things that I think is so exciting about this moment in time is that there is actually a new opportunity for us to craft a much more ambitious vision of what we would use reading and writing for. We can be in contact with people around the globe. We can put ourselves in positions of tremendous ambition. There are dozens of citizen's science projects where we can use our reading and writing to actually contribute to ongoing science or social science questions and knowledge-making around the world. We can use tools to map and understand our neighborhood and identify issues that we'd want to work on and use these tools to build some collaborative discussion or action or movement as a class. We can do so many things “for real.” The exciting thing to me is that reading and writing, as well as speaking and listening, can now be put in a real context of human behavior and action. The kinds of things that can happen in classrooms take a dramatic leap.

I was saying before that this is a generation with agency. They are used to pushing a button and having something happen; when they interact with something, when they interact with the world, something happens. Schools in many places feel to kids like places where things don't change much. Now, we actually put tools where things really happen in the hands of young people. Teachers can think now more ambitiously about their own exciting goals for learning, for their content, and for things that they'd want to do together.

Cindy: “Authentic learning” or “authentic writing” really is authentic now. I think that is exciting. The other opportunity that I think is fabulous for us as teachers, if we'll let ourselves go there, is the great opportunity for us to be real learners. Sometimes there is that temptation for us to be the authority in the classroom, that we have to know everything there is about using this piece of technology before trying it out with

kids because something might go wrong. Well, something might go wrong, and you have to be ok with that. You won't know what to do, but you will figure it out. Kids will be pretty forgiving of you if they can see you in the role of learner. That is one of the greatest things we can do as teachers—to model the risk taking, the real hard work and perseverance that is actually there when we allow ourselves to learn. They can see us as models of that immediately in front of the classroom.

Elyse: You know, a decade or so ago, we were talking a lot about *digital natives* and *digital immigrants*, talking about our students as digital natives and teachers as digital immigrants . . . or not even yet digital immigrants! There has been a lot of push-back and critique of that image for a variety of reasons, but one reason is that we, as educators, are actually surprisingly digitally literate in our own lives. What you learn about digital environments by being a participant in Facebook is not the same as thinking about how you would use Facebook to teach something, but you are developing a comfort and a feel for how platforms work. Things are getting easier. We're developing capacities that transfer increasingly across environments. We're actually way smarter about all of this than we were a decade or 15 years ago.

The thing is, we don't always tap that knowledge when we come into the classroom. We don't often credit ourselves with how digitally able we are as teachers. We need to give ourselves a license to play with that stuff. I'd love to see many more professional development contexts where, as teachers, we're allowed to just do that—play—in these environments to see how they work, what it is like to work in them.

Cindy: Just doing some of the things that Elyse mentioned has had implications for me as a teacher educator, and I really think it does have implications for what professional development can look like around technology. The most effective professional development that we've seen in our writing project does exactly what Elyse was speaking about. It involves some play with the technology, some curricular integration or adaptation, the opportunity to immediately apply that with kids, and then to reflect. That reflective piece is huge—to think about the tool that you

chose, how it actually worked in practice, and what it means for me the next time I work with students.

Elyse: The reflective piece is so important in professional development in general. I think a lot of people probably know the site *Digital Is*, which is a NWP [National Writing Project] website where teachers from all grade levels are reflecting on integrating digital tools and digital writing into their teaching. It is not really a “how-to” site, it is really a reflection site, and it is interesting to see across the board the great diversity of things writing teachers are coming up with and the recurring problems they are trying to solve. They tend not to be technology problems; they tend to be the deep problems of teaching and learning that we would want to be talking about together.

Again, we've been talking about tools and technology and digital writing. We're going through this huge transformation in the tools we are using to inscribe and communicate and publish to each other. So, it is not surprising that we are focusing a lot on this transformation. But these deep human issues and practices of working together to learn, to be—these are things that are actually at the center of what we are doing. We are all going to get better at the tools stuff. We are all going to adjust at some point to this transformation that we are in. We can start thinking about the teaching and learning problems more. That's where thinking about our profession and digital writing has to go. We have to focus on the teaching and learning in a world where digital just is. That's why the title of the website is *Digital Is*—it just is. We have to stop talking about it, thinking about it, and move on into it. *Be* the 21st century.

Cindy: We keep talking about preparing kids for the 21st century and actually, it *is* the 21st century. So at some point, we have to embrace that and just do it.

LA: We only have a couple more minutes. Do you have any closing thoughts or ideas that you would like to leave for teachers?

Elyse: In addition to educating ourselves so we can do a better job with our young people, we have to think about our communities, as well—families, parents, the folks that are in administrators' positions that are often talking to

those families and parents. Communities are going through great transformations around digital teaching and learning. It is not always a comfortable space for families. I think that especially for educators grades K–8, this is important. We have to reach out to our communities, reach out to our families, and think about making sure that this new world is comfortable for them while we are thinking about making it comfortable for our young people.

Cindy: I guess my last words would just be reiterating something that has been a thread throughout this whole conversation. That is that we have to remember, despite the fears that we might have with using digital technology at times, that teachers still matter. We are the lead learners in the classroom. We have to really continue to embrace that role because, for me, that is really the most exciting part of all of this—getting to learn right alongside our kids.

Call for Nominations: James Moffett Award

NCTE's Conference on English Education offers this grant to support teacher projects inspired by the scholarship of James Moffett. Each proposed project must display an explicit connection to the work of James Moffett and should both enhance the applicant's teaching by serving as a source of professional development and be of interest and value to other educators. All K–12 classroom educators who teach at least three hours or three classes per day are eligible to apply for the grant. Proposals on which two or more K–12 classroom educators have collaborated are also welcome.

Applications for the Moffett Award must include:

- A cover page with the applicant's name, work and home telephone numbers and addresses, email address, a brief profile of the applicant's current school and students, and a brief teaching history (when and where the applicant has taught).
- A proposal (not more than 5 pages, double-spaced, 12-point font) that includes an introduction and rationale for the work (What is the problem or question to be studied? How might such a project influence the project teacher's practice and potentially the practice of other teachers? Why is such a project important?); a description of the explicit connection to the work of James Moffett; initial objectives for the project (realizing these might shift during the project); a clear, focused project description that includes a timeline (What will be done? When? How? By whom?); a method of evaluating the project (What indicators might reviewers note that suggest the work was valuable to the applicant and to other teachers?); and a narrative budget (How will the money be spent?).
- A letter of support from someone familiar with the applicant's teaching and perceived ability to implement and assess the proposed project.

Moffett Award winners receive a certificate designating the individual as the 2012 recipient of the CEE Moffett Award and a monetary award (up to \$1,000) to be used toward implementation of the proposed project.

Submit proposals to CEE Moffett Award, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1010 or cee@ncte.org, Attn: CEE Administrative Liaison. Proposals must be postmarked by **May 1, 2012**. Proposals will be judged on such criteria as the strength of the connection to James Moffett's scholarship and the perceived value and feasibility of the project.