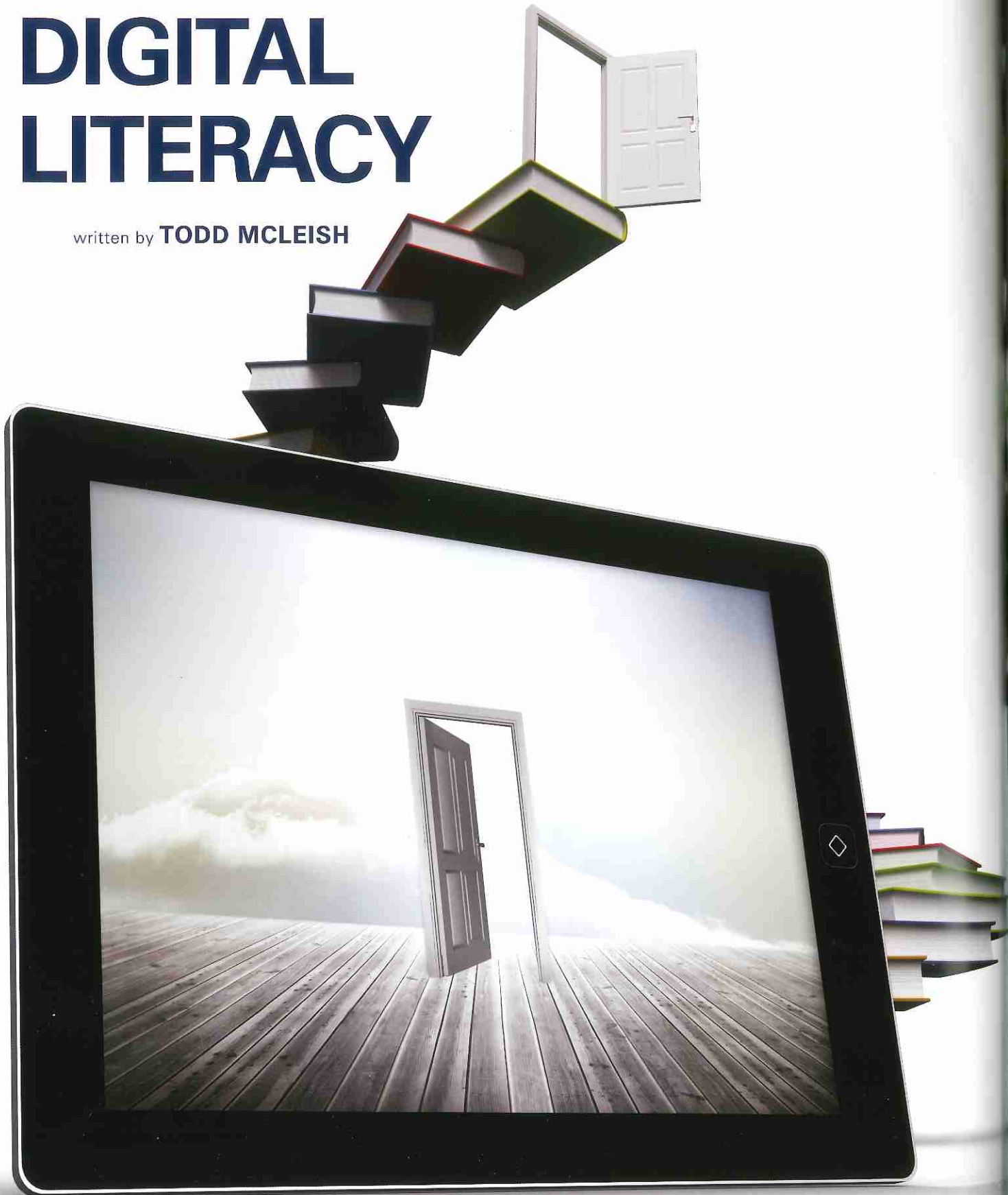



# Building

# DIGITAL LITERACY

written by **TODD MCLEISH**



A portrait of Julie Coiro, a woman with short, curly brown hair and glasses, smiling. She is wearing a black long-sleeved top over a purple patterned dress, a necklace, and a watch. Her arms are crossed.

# Digital literacy is a *moving* target.

Julie Coiro

Associate Professor  
Education

**In a world of fake news and alternative facts, it is crucial that people learn to use the Internet and other digital media sources effectively and reliably.**

Associate Professor Julie Coiro says the concept of digital literacy is a moving target. What it is, how it should be taught, and how it should be measured remain open questions in many people's minds. At the University of Rhode Island's School of Education, Coiro, a reading comprehension expert, argues that reading and writing on the Internet differ from reading and writing on paper.

She defines online reading comprehension as an inquiry process that involves identifying important problems and using search engines to locate relevant information. Online readers also must evaluate for accuracy and reliability, synthesize information across text, images, videos and social media, and determine how to communicate digitally to others.

"Most of the early work I did was helping the reading community understand that what was then considered computer skills was actually a reading issue. It's not just something for the computer teacher to understand," says Coiro, who has taught in preschool, elementary and middle schools and served as a consultant on literacy and technology while earning her doctorate at the University of Connecticut. "All my work since then has focused on helping teachers, administrators and parents understand why we need digital literacy and figuring out how to help educators teach it and assess it in meaningful ways."

From 2009 to 2014, she served as co-principal investigator on the Online Reading Comprehension Assessment project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, which aimed to develop three formats of valid and reliable assessments of online reading comprehension. In 2016, she began a new project funded by the National Assessment of Educational Progress's Survey Assessments Innovation Lab focused on measuring the quality of online reading and collaboration as students engage in online inquiry with a partner.





The URI Summer Institute in Digital Literacy



“We’ve learned how to teach digital literacy, but we still don’t have a way to measure it, to show people that we’ve made progress,” she explains. “I hope to use assessments, to provide teachers with daily feedback about how their students are doing, how their teaching is making a difference, and what they should be focusing on next.”

Her research resulted in a book, *Planning for Personal Digital Inquiry in Grades K-5*, to be published in 2019, that provides a framework for how teachers might use technology to their students’ advantage in inquiry-based learning. The framework comprises four overlapping phases of inquiry: wonder and discover, collaborate and discuss, create and take action, and analyze and reflect.

“It seeks to help teachers understand how to build a culture of inquiry in their classroom and school, to identify what purposeful role digital technologies should play,” Coiro says. “Where in the classroom do you create opportunities for learners to wonder and discover? Where in the learning space can students collaborate and discuss – with or without technology – or turn their knowledge into action, or reflect on what impact it has?”

“When I go into classrooms, even where teachers don’t have technology, if these opportunities for inquiry are happening, then often there’s room for magic to happen,” she adds. “But if these things aren’t in place and you put technology in and nothing great is happening, it’s probably because some of these core elements are missing.”


Coiro’s research and her personal digital inquiry framework were incorporated into The Summer Institute in Digital Literacy, which she and URI Professor Renee Hobbs established six years ago. A collaboration between the University’s Alan Shawn Feinstein College of Education and Professional Studies and the Harrington School of Communication and Media, the Summer Institute started as a week-long digital literacy workshop for classroom teachers seeking to explore how digital media is changing the teaching and learning landscape. It has evolved into a program that attracts teachers, administrators, library media specialists and others from around the world, many of whom return year after year to expand their understanding and share their own experiences.

“We make a big deal at the Summer Institute to remind teachers that it’s not really about the computer,” Coiro says. “Teaching and learning is mostly about people, their relationships and building new ideas together. Sometimes the computer gets in the way; sometimes it helps.”

In 2014, the Summer Institute spawned a 12-credit graduate certificate program, graduate certificate program that has begun to attract prospective graduate students to enroll at the University.

“Sometimes we think that if we just change the teacher or the test or the principal or throw a little money their way, it’s all going to quickly result in better schools,” says Coiro. “But teachers know they need professional development, they need time and a safe space to try things out, they need research to say what’s going





Everything is  
about literacy;  
everything is  
about reading  
and learning.

to work, they need assessments for demonstrating progress to others. This Summer Institute is informed by research in each of these areas, and it gets educators pretty revved up.”

For Coiro, the most important lesson stems from the idea that everything revolves around literacy; everything is about reading and learning.

“Whether it’s high-level thinking, deep conversation, or reflection, it’s all reading. It’s all about meaning making, how people make sense of things,” she says. “Learners are responsible for actively making sense of what they read and experience as opposed to just passively receiving information.”

She notes that online reading comprehension isn’t just an issue for English and language arts teachers. “Literacy looks different in science and math and social studies classes, but to me it’s all meaning making. It’s generating conversations, asking questions, sharing new ideas, and then asking more questions.”

“It seeks to help teachers understand how to build a culture of inquiry in their classroom and school, to identify what purposeful role digital technologies should play.”

- Julie Coiro

