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Learning about Circuitry with E-Textiles

KYLIE PEPPLER & DIANE GLOSSON

The relationship between various tools and the structuring of subject matter is central to many examinations of disciplinary learning. Papert (1980, p. 23), for one, called attention to the impact of specific tools (“objects to think with”) on the ways that we learn and perceive subject matter. Of potential interest to anyone working with e-textiles in educational settings is the impact that working with these tools has on our ontological understanding of robotics, computing and engineering, particularly in the ways that it contrasts with learning outcomes that derive from the use of more traditional tools (e.g., batteries, insulated wire, nails, thumbtacks, paper clips, bulbs, and so on). The historical prevalence of youths’ conceptual misunderstandings of simple circuitry from learning with these traditional materials (Evans, 1978; Tiberghien & Delacote, 1976) provides additional justification for this exploration. For instance, traditional circuitry toolkits possess numerous design elements that make invisible what makes them work (e.g., the connecting wires in an incandescent bulb disappear behind an electrical contact foot and metallic screw cap; insulated wires prevent crossed lines from shorting out). By contrast, e-textile toolkits reveal underlying electrical structures and processes in tangible and observable ways, allowing designers to investigate aspects of circuits and computational technologies that are otherwise invisible to the user (Buechley, 2010; Kafai & Peppler, in press). Furthermore, dramatically changing the nature of the tools used to explore circuitry concepts (e.g., fabrics, threads, and other soft materials) inspires youth to ask questions they otherwise wouldn’t have. Is cotton conductive? What makes energy pass through *this* material but not *that* one? Re-evaluating garments and textiles beyond their immediately practical or aesthetic functions encourages youth to think more deeply about the circuitry concepts at play and the qualities of the physical materials, themselves.

Seeking to explore whether the visibility inherent to these materials could prove significant for youths’ conceptual understanding of circuitry, we invited youth at a local Boys and Girls Club to design a host of e-textile projects and reflect upon their production practices in a 20-hour workshop. All the while, we observed and analyzed the youths’ projects and interactions in the process of creation for evidence of improved understanding of core circuitry concepts. Results indicate that youth participants

significantly gained in their understanding of multiple core circuitry concepts as well as their ability to diagram and create working circuits in parallel and series formations (Pepler & Glosson, 2012). This work seeks to provide a foundation for integrating e-textile materials into standards-based practices in formal education systems and to illustrate how this might be taught and assessed in the classroom.

Workshop Description

Our e-textile workshop was designed as part of the local Boys and Girls Club summer program. Seventeen youth, ages 7–12 years, participated in the entire twenty-hour, ten-session e-textile curriculum lasting for two hours per day over a two-week period. The e-textile workshop targeted five central concepts important to the study of circuitry but are more commonly taught using traditional materials: current *flow* (Osborne, 1981; Osborne, 1983; Shipstone, 1984), battery *polarity* (Osborne, 1983; Osborne et al., 1991; Shepardson & Moje, 1994; Asoko, 1996), circuit *connectivity* (Osborne, 1983; Asoko, 1996), and the diagramming of circuits in *series* (Osborne, 1983; Osborne et al., 1991) and *parallel* (Shepardson & Moje, 1994) formations which are further defined below:

1. Current *flow* is defined as the circular path electrons take around a circuit (Osborne, 1981). For e-textile projects, we assessed participants' ability to stitch loops with no redundant lines or instances of shorts (i.e., loose threads touch the opposite terminal line).
2. Battery *polarity* involves connecting battery terminals to the corresponding output terminals in a circuit (i.e., + to + and - to -). In the context of e-textiles, we assessed whether youth could orient the positive and negative terminals of circuit components correctly in relationship to the power source.
3. Circuit *connectivity* pertains to the joining of the battery, bulb and wires to form a working circuit (Osborne, 1983; Osborne, et al., 1991; Shepardson & Moje, 1994). In the absence of these materials, we adapted the term in our assessment of youths' e-textiles projects to define connectivity as the craft of the circuit. That is, the lines (i.e., conductive thread) had to securely connect one component to another with attention being paid to the particular points of conductivity (e.g., looping the conductive thread through the terminal hole for a strong connection).
4. A *series* circuit is one where electrical current flows sequentially through every component in the circuit. In a series circuit, any electron progresses through all components to form a single path, meaning that energy diminishes as it progresses through each component in the circuit (such as a string of light-emitting diodes [LEDs]).
5. In a *parallel* circuit, the electrical current divides into two or more paths before recombining to complete the circuit. Working with e-textiles, electrons in a parallel circuit go through two (or more) LEDs at the same time, meaning that the electron's energy given to each LED is identical.

These circuitry concepts were explored in a series of three projects selected by the youth participants over the course of the 10 sessions, of which two are presented here: an introductory simple circuit quilt square and a programmable wristband with persistence-of-vision (POV) tracking. Taking place in an informal environment, participants' creative production with these tools was largely defined by free exploration and experimentation; direct instruction was limited to three brief presentations, and youth often turned to peer or mentor support for advice and inspiration on their individual projects.

Below, we address the science concepts manifested in two of the youths' e-textile projects—the quilt square and the POV bracelet—as well as what the youths' projects revealed about their understandings of current flow, circuit connectivity, battery polarity, and series vs. parallel circuits. Throughout, we augment these findings with vignettes of how these understandings were cultivated through moment-to-moment interactions with the tools, peers and workshop mentors.

Learning about Simple Circuits: Simple Circuit Quilt Square

The quilt square project provided an introduction to designing simple circuit forms, as well as an opportunity for youth to play with the new materials—threading a self-threading needle, sewing with conductive thread, practicing making secure knots—and reflect on the basic requirements of creating a complete simple circuit with an illuminated LED.

Each square consisted of a 12 x 12 inch swatch of fabric upon which each youth stitched a closed circuit using one LED, a battery, a switch (button or slide), and conductive thread. Before the youth began their projects, we asked them to draw circuit diagrams in order for us to assess their preexisting understanding of current flow, connections and polarity. In this first drawing, the youth attempted to diagram a simple working circuit using pencil and custom LilyPad component stickers [Editors' note: "LilyPad" here refers to the LilyPad Arduino kit, "the first construction kit to make e-textile construction accessible to non-engineers" (Buechley, et al., 2013, p. 12)]. Once their diagrams were complete, the youth then adapted their drawing to their quilting square. However, once engaged with the physical materials, initial misunderstandings of circuitry in the abstract came to the fore. The evidence that these misunderstandings had been amended through the experience of

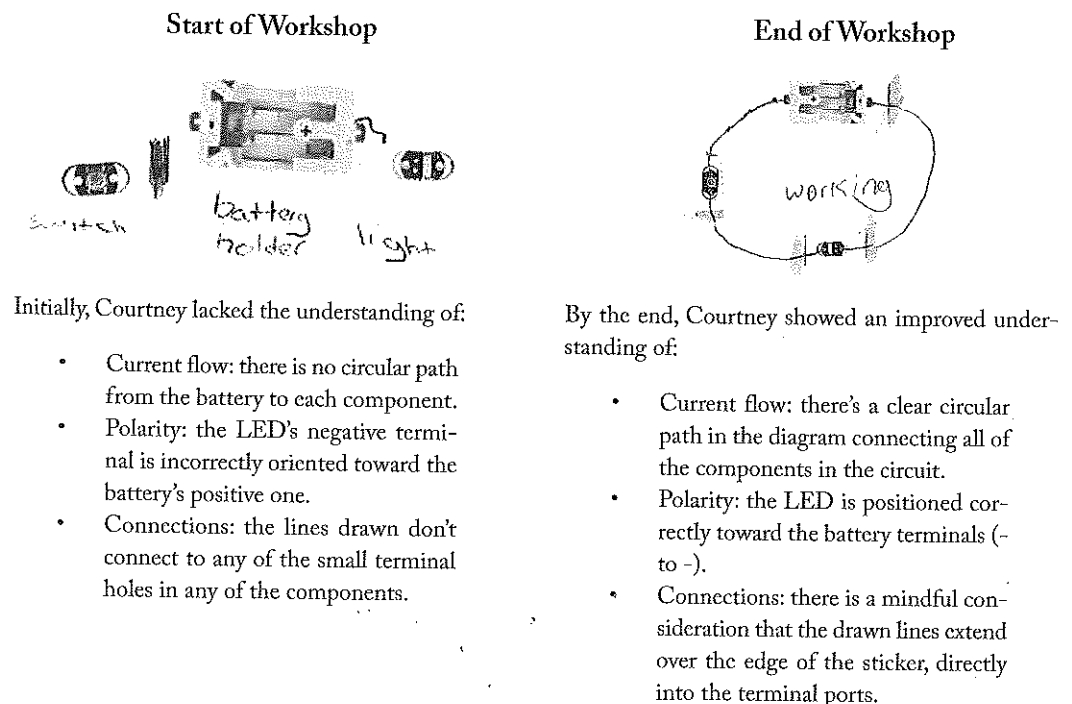


Figure 7.1: Courtney's circuit drawings at the start and end of the workshop.

working with the e-textile materials was abundantly clear when compared with the hand-drawn circuit diagrams the youth made later in the workshop. Through projects like these, the youth revealed significant gains not only in their ability to diagram a working circuit, but also in their demonstrated understandings of current flow, connectivity and polarity (Peppler & Glosson, 2012). Figure 7.1 provides an illustrative example of how one youth's circuitry understandings developed over the course of working with the e-textile materials.

As illustrated here, 10-year-old Courtney in her first drawing appeared to understand the need for three parts to a circuit—switch, battery holder and LED—in the (unprompted) labeling of the parts and that a connection needed to be made from the battery holder to the LED. However, she lacked the understanding of current flow (circuit path), polarity and the importance of solid connections of conductive thread to the conductive holes. This would have been immediately evident when she first attempted to realize this drawing using the physical materials. By contrast, Courtney in her later diagram showed an understanding of a working circuit including the current flow, connections and polarity.

To see this understanding developing in the moment-to-moment interactions over the course of the workshop, we recorded and analyzed conversations taking place between the youth, their peers and the research team that touched upon the key circuitry concepts at play in these projects. The following excerpt is from a conversation between a researcher and an 8-year-old boy working on his quilt square about the importance of tracking polarity in the context of e-textiles:

- Researcher: So you want to do the same thing to the LED that you did. . .
- Ryan: No, I mean...where is this one (*pointing to the switch part sticker*)?
- Researcher: I'll get that one for you in a second (*gestures towards parts table*) but first go through the LED.
- Ryan: (*positions LED to sew*)
- Researcher: You are about to make a fatal mistake. (*Points towards Ryan*) What is it?
- Ryan: The plus is going to the minus.
- Researcher: Yes! So you want to switch this (LED) around (*gestures in a circle*). Now plus is going to plus.

In this early example with sewing the quilt squares, the youth had already learned that the plus terminal of the battery needed to be connected to the plus terminal in the LED with conductive thread or an electrical short would occur. So when the researcher warned Ryan of a "fatal mistake" as he was about to sew the negative terminal connecting it to the positive battery terminal, polarity was one of the first things Ryan checked for. His response could have been due to a phrase that was used extensively by the staff and the youth: "plus to plus and minus to minus" (i.e., the positive terminal in the battery should connect to the positive terminal in the LED, just as the negative terminal in the battery should connect to the negative terminal of the LED). We believe this mantra may have contributed to the significant gains in the youths' understanding of polarity as reflected in the pre- and post-test diagram assessments.

After the workshop, the completed "e-Quilt," comprising 16 working circuits designed and created by participating youth, was highlighted and displayed at the Boys and Girls Club annual art exhibition at the local City Hall, which was attended by the mayor, community members, Boys and Girls Club staff, the youth artists and their family and friends. At the exhibition, workshop participants

anxiously searched for their circuits to light, shared stories with their parents about the making of their quilt square and were excited to locate their friends' circuits, as well. The e-Quilt project provided not only a valuable showcase for the Boys and Girls Club to highlight what learning opportunities the Club can offer youth in the community, but the exhibition provided youth with an occasion to introduce their artistic and scientific skills to their broader community.

Learning about Series and Parallel Circuits: Persistence of Vision (POV) Wristband

The LilyPad POV wristband is a wearable version of a persistence of vision (POV) display; POV is the illusion that an image continues to persist even though part of the image has changed. The LilyPad POV wristband or bracelet can be thought of as a digital version of the old-fashioned zoetrope used for simple animation. The zoetrope is a cylinder with static images pasted on the inside. Each image is a slight modification of the previous image. By cutting slits in the cylinder and spinning it, the viewer effectively sees motion. The POV bracelet creates words by rapidly alternating patterns of LEDs stitched in a row. When youth sweep their arms horizontally, the flashing LEDs appear to spell a visible word in the air.

Workshop youth stitched LEDs into their bracelets in a parallel circuit configuration to enable each LED to be lit separately through LilyPad Arduino programming. In order for each LED to be programmed separately, the positive LED terminal holes were connected to individual LilyPad petals (i.e., terminal holes) and the negative LED terminals were stitched as one line into the negative petal of the LilyPad Arduino (which they also stitched into their bracelets) (see Figure 7.2). Youth worked with a computer programmer to convert text into Arduino code that could be uploaded to the LilyPad board. Constraints of time and a primary emphasis on the basics of circuitry in this workshop prohibited us from dedicating more time to the youths' learning of programming concepts. However, we hope that some initial transparency into the process of computer programming will provide youth with a foundation for future explorations with creative computation, which we have explored more fully in our later workshops (for more, see Buechley et al., 2013).

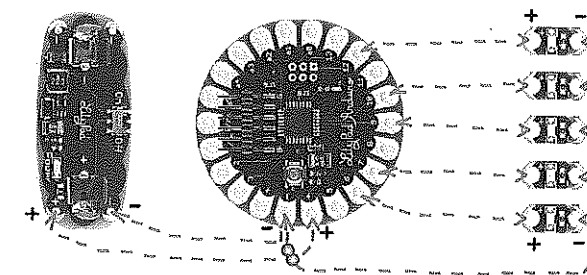
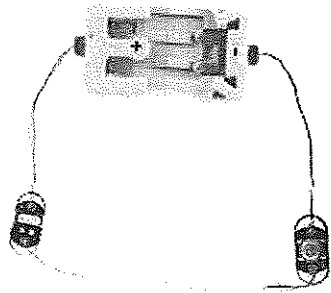


Figure 7.2: Diagram of the POV wristband design.

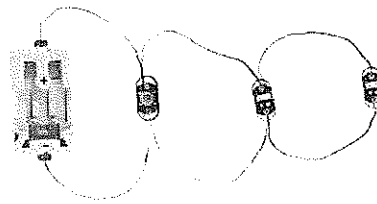
During the electricity lesson, parallel circuits were explained in terms of not only the LED's being in parallel form (placed next to one another) but also how this placement allowed for the LEDs to produce a brighter light. It was explained as "in a parallel circuit, an electron goes through EITHER one LED or the other" while the series circuit electrons had to progress through both LEDs, losing energy along the way and thus producing a dimmer light as the series progressed. Similar to the circuit diagrams that youth drew before and after their quilt square projects, we asked youth to draw a parallel circuit diagram before and after the POV bracelet activity. The following (Figure 7.3) is an illustrative example of Jovita's understanding of a parallel circuit as drawn in her circuit diagrams at the start and end of the workshop.

Start of Workshop



Jovita's drawing shows an understanding of polarity and current flow (circuit path for a series circuit) however, lacks understanding of the importance of connections of conductive thread and incorrectly places the LEDs in a series as opposed to the requested parallel circuit form.

End of Workshop



Jovita's diagram shows an understanding of polarity, connections, and current flow as well as correct placement of the LEDs in a parallel formation.

Figure 7.3: Jovita's circuit diagrams, drawn at the start and end of the workshop.

In the pre-test, 10-year-old Jovita appears to understand polarity and current flow for a series circuit, yet lacks the ability to place the LEDs in a parallel configuration in her diagram (e.g., all the LEDs are, instead, aligned in a series). The post-test, by contrast, correctly places the LEDs parallel with one another. However, the placement of the switch (opposite to both of the battery holder's terminals) allows the LEDs to stay lit continuously until the switch is pushed. This is in effect the opposite of the solution to the prompt where the push button switch would turn on the circuit. While not incorrect, *per se*, it is a rather peculiar design.

In the following, two researchers engage a small group in a conversation about 10-year-old Dalmar's POV wristband, calling specific attention to the workings of parallel versus series circuits:

Researcher 1: The one on the left is called series, why do you think it's called "series"?

Dalmar: Because they [the LEDs] are by each other.

Researcher 1: And why do you think the other one is called "parallel"?

Dalmar: Because they are parallel to each other.

Researcher 2: Yes, exactly. So it's easy to tell the difference, right? Series and parallel. OK, so this is how all electronics works...when you put an electron in the battery, it wants to go to the other side of the battery, right?

Dylan (age 8): Yeah.

Researcher 2: It's attracted to the other side. So it will go through these LEDs to get to the other side (*points to series circuit diagram on the laptop screen*). Now with a series circuit the electron loses some energy in going from this side of the battery to the other side of the battery. And in a series circuit it loses half of its energy on one LED and half of it on the other one...But in a parallel circuit (*points to the parallel circuit diagram on the laptop screen*) the electron either goes through one LED or it goes through the other LED. So the electron gives all of its energy to one LED or the other LED. So how do you think this is going to affect the brightness of the LED? You guys found this out yesterday, you did this parallel versus series.

Shawnte (age 9): Hook it up to some wires.

Researcher 2: Which one was brighter? Parallel or series?

Many Youth: Parallel.

Researcher 2: Right, right. Because of this (*points to the parallel diagram*). The electron goes across the LED and it gives all of its energy to the LED, while in the series it divides energy between the two LEDs. That's why it's dimmer in series. So which one do you guys want to use?

Many Youth: Parallel.

This exchange between the youth and the researchers took place the day after the youth had played in small groups while building series and parallel circuits. During that playtime, the youth were left to explore the connections while using multiple LEDs in making both series and parallel forms. The exchange captured above calls attention to two things: (1) the youth could apply the definitions of series and parallel circuits correctly, and (2) the youth had learned the implications of these designs for the circuits (i.e., that parallel circuits produced brighter LEDs while series circuits produced dimmer ones with the battery power available).

Moving beyond the Club

Beyond learning about circuitry, the real promise of e-textile artifacts is their capacity to follow youth into their peer and family settings, potentially transforming their identities in these social circles and sparking relevant conversations. Demonstrating the power that physical artifacts can have to cultivate these conversations, we present a sample exchange between two workshop participants, 8-year-old Ryan, 10-year-old Noah, and Ryan's mother at the end of the workshop:

Mother: What is "L.D."?

Ryan: L.E.D.—it's a special type of light. And, guess what? In Chicago there is a museum with 4,000 LED lights on one dress.

- Mother: What is the idea behind this? (*gesturing towards the square*)...that this works, how?
- Ryan: It's the plus...I mean. That here's the plus (*points*) it goes to plus (*points*) and through the minus. (*To Noah*) How does that work (*pointing to switch*)?
- Noah: It doesn't matter which way that goes.
- Ryan: Oh, it doesn't?
- Noah: No.
- Ryan: Then it goes through that (*points to switch*) and then minus goes to minus.
- Mother: So, this is minus?
- Ryan: And it doesn't really matter what side this is on (*points to switch*).
- Mother: How does this [project] work? (*Passes Noah the 3V battery*).
- Noah: Yeah (*takes the battery*).
- Ryan: You have to put this [battery] on the conductive tape (*points*).
- Noah: Yeah.
- Mother: Where is the tape? Is it conductive tape? (*Looking closer at the project*).
- Ryan: Yeah, that means it has electricity through it and we have electricity through us.
- Mother: We have electricity...through us?
- Ryan: Electricity is basically electrons and protons.
- Mother: Ohhh.
- Noah: Actually we have a small amount of [it]...Your brain takes 100 watts to work.
- Mother: Ohhh.

The conversation highlights the opportunities for Ryan and Noah to display what they learned, facilitated and illustrated by the presence of tangible, mobile artifacts. As shown here, several of these circuitry concepts were new to the Ryan's mother (at least in this physical incarnation), and the youths' ability to take these projects home with them increased the likelihood that these STEM-related [i.e., Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics] conversations could continue with other family members and peers, and in the other spaces in their lives.

As it turns out, new conversations were sparked back at home through the youths' experiences with e-textiles, though they weren't limited to science content. Another youth's mother reported back the following day that her 7-year-old son had taken notice "as if for the first time" the cross-stitching work she had on display at home, having a newfound respect for her crafting techniques. She reported that Caleb had exclaimed, "Ooh, Mom, your stitching is so good here! It's nice and even." Caleb's mother later explained to us that, having all boys, she never anticipated that she could have these types of conversations with her kids. Conversations such as these underscore the ability for artifacts that sit at the intersection of high and low tech to spur meaningful conversations among family members.

Discussion

From the marked shifts in the workshop participants' circuit diagrams, as well as their ability to create a variety of functioning circuits using the e-textile toolkits, we gather that the youth learned at least five traditional circuitry concepts—current flow, battery polarity, circuit connectivity, and diagramming circuits in a series—within the context of e-textiles throughout the workshop. The diagramming-plus-"hands-on" components of each workshop activity mirror several of the pedagogical methods that employ more traditional toolkits, and some of the intermediate results—the youths' exuberance at having the bulb in their circuit illuminate, or the need for youth to reassess their diagram if their physical circuit failed to work, for example—were shared across both approaches. However, the learning outcomes of the e-textile workshop, where participants significantly gained in their understanding of all five targeted circuitry concepts (Peppler & Glosson, 2012), stand in contrast to the difficult learning curve and frequent lingering misconceptions promoted by the instruction of circuitry through more traditional kits as described in numerous studies (Osborne, 1983; Shipstone, 1984; Osborne et al., 1991; Shepardson & Moje, 1994; Asoko, 1996). We believe that the e-textile materials, themselves, may be largely responsible for this difference in outcomes.

What makes these materials so different with regard to youths' learning trajectories? Until further research is conducted, we can only speculate, though we have a number of hypotheses based on our observations:

1. E-textile tools are "unforgiving." Coated wires, magnets and snaps to easily affix lines and components together are design elements of traditional toolkits intended to prevent mistakes, and consequently have some inevitable trade-offs for how electricity operates. The materials explored here, by comparison, did not put in place such safeguards, so youth were put in positions to make mistakes through which they could learn about polarity, shorted circuits and other concepts in the process of troubleshooting. By enabling such opportunities to happen, these tools may afford greater visibility into what makes one circuit work and not another.
2. E-textile projects provide opportunities for embodied learning of circuitry. Working with e-textiles or traditional circuitry toolkits provided tangible, hands-on experiences with building a circuit in both cases. However, youth must invest substantially more time in an e-textile project to create a functioning circuit (whereas this could be done in about two minutes using a kit consisting of magnets and snaps seen in many youth science exhibits). From our observations, we found that deeper, continuous engagement with the e-textiles materials over a longer period of time led the youth into deeper and more sustained reflection than what could have been achieved in only a few minutes. In this regard, the speed in which one arrives at an answer may not necessarily be the one that produces the richest learning outcomes.
3. E-textile projects encourage youth to see familiar phenomena in unfamiliar ways. Youth have close relationships with their clothing, as the various types of materials that adorn their persons are seen, touched and manipulated daily. However, youth don't associate fabric materials or threads as something conductive. Seeing the qualities of these soft materials in unexpected ways enables youth to forge new connections; both because they have previous familiarity with clothing, but also because they haven't thought about the qualities of conductive materials, more broadly, as a way of sorting the world.

Our investigation into e-textile creation as a potential vehicle for learning circuits acknowledges that the tools we use and make available play a formidable role in shaping our conceptual understandings, and, moreover, that new tools can bring clarity to concepts that are often challenging. As shown here, e-textile projects can successfully engage youth in core science content, subject matter that has been difficult in prior approaches to make conceptual sense to youth. The workshop youths' aforementioned gains as well as their ability to explain their understandings to peers and parents demonstrate that e-textiles can offer an alternative and efficacious introduction to electronics.

Workshops such as the one described here demonstrate that classroom teachers can leverage e-textiles for efficacious science content learning. Further research into how to best translate these types of informal workshop environments into classroom pedagogy is still required. Workshop models that occur within the school day are one potential answer (see Buechley, et al., 2013 for more on this). Furthermore, while this study focused on simple working circuits and five core circuitry concepts, future research studies could include adding directional flow to the current model, as well as more advanced constructions to complex circuitry.

Acknowledgments

This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 0855886 awarded to Kylie A. Peppler. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

Note

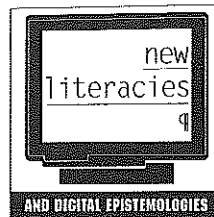
- * This chapter was originally published as: Peppler, K., & Glosso, D. (2013). Learning about Circuitry with E-textiles in After-School Settings. In Buechley, L., Peppler, K., Eisenberg, M., & Kafai, Y. (Eds.), *Textile Messages: Dispatches from the World of E-Textiles and Education*. New York: Peter Lang.

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PART 3

New Literacies and Teachers' Personal and Professional Learning



Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel
General Editors

Vol. 66

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a new literacies reader

EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Edited by Colin Lankshear & Michele Knobel



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A new literacies reader: Educational perspectives /
edited by Colin Lankshear, Michele Knobel.
pages cm. — (New literacies and digital epistemologies; vol. 66)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Internet literacy. 2. Computer literacy. 3. Information literacy.

I. Lankshear, Colin. II. Knobel, Michele.

TK5105.875.I57N4876 004—dc23 2013003345

ISBN 978-1-4331-2280-4 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-4331-2279-8 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-4539-1094-8 (e-book)

ISSN 1523-9543

Bibliographic information published by Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the "Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie"; detailed bibliographic data is available
on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de/>.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability
of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity
of the Council of Library Resources.



© 2013 Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York
29 Broadway, 18th floor, New York, NY 10006
www.peterlang.com

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Printed in the United States of America

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Acknowledgments

Our thanks go Chris Myers and colleagues at Peter Lang for the opportunity to put together a collection based on books published in our *New Literacies and Digital Epistemologies* series that samples the range of recent and current work within the loosely scribed field of “new literacies” research and scholarship. We would especially like to thank Bernie Shade for her unstinting good cheer and helpfulness in her role as production manager.

This collection represents the strong international mix that characterizes the books in the series and we wish to thank our authors for so willingly consenting to having their work republished in this collection.

We especially want to thank Jillian Walmach and Beverly Plein for their unstinting formatting and proof reading assistance. Both went above and beyond in helping us produce this Reader from a collection of files to a tight timeline.

Finally, we wish to convey our thanks to the many readers who have supported this series and helped us sustain it through a decade. We greatly appreciate your interest in the series and support for it. In this regard our thanks extend to the many librarians who order new books for their institutional stock and to colleagues who have found a place for various books in their course reading. Your support has been crucial to the series’ sustainability and we thank you very much.