

# Same as It Ever Was: Enacting the Promise of Teaching, Writing, and New Media

*In surveying English Journal, the authors highlight voices from the past, of the present, and for the future to offer a vision of how teachers can prepare students to succeed as writers in the 21st century.*

**I**s it the English teacher's responsibility to train students to use technology that enriches the writing curriculum?" / "There is no need to stop studying written literature and to terminate our writing programs merely because we are now in an electronic age. . . . The twentieth-century teacher must not, as immature children do, discard all the possessions of his parents. He might find, however, that essays can be spoken (oral presentation in class or submitted on tape) and that students' efforts in short story and drama should be acceptable on celluloid (e.g., 8 mm. film) as well as on paper. The classroom, like the world of the 19\_\_s, should be a mosaic of printed and electronic experiences. Otherwise, the teacher is conducting a nineteenth-century classroom in the midst of a pulsating twentieth-century world."

Entering into a century of conversations from *English Journal*, we read, and reread, the words of many mentors, colleagues, and friends, discovering some voices we didn't know and rediscovering many voices we did. In looking at articles related to writing, technology, and multimedia—particular interests that we share—three themes emerged:

1. Given adequate support, all students can write and we should encourage them to be published writers.
2. Used purposefully, newer technologies and media can influence, support, and extend writing practices.

And, with a nod to David Byrne and the Talking Heads, from whom we repurpose the clas-

sic lyric from "Once in a Lifetime" for our title, a third, more disturbing one:

3. Despite all the cultural and technological changes in the types of texts we are able to produce and consume, and the revolutionary predictions we have made, not much has really changed in the teaching of English over the past 100 years.

The opening quotes blend the words of two voices from past issues of *EJ*, and we will leave them anonymous and timeless, for the moment, citing them before we end. For now, however, these voices create an important and interesting dissonance; why, in our current moment of rapid change, as we reflect on 100 years of teaching English, particularly writing, do the words of the past read as if written today?

In other words, we're so geared to look for change, we keep forgetting—to borrow from the oft-cited Ghandi quote—to be the change we're looking for. The paradox is evident in many moments, such as this one from 1978, in which Nancy Thompson suggested in her regular *EJ* column on multimedia that

[t]he teaching of language is still our basic concern, but the language of our culture has changed. We need to be open to new information so we can see the phenomenon of contemporary language, and not let the emphasis on the basics of the past (which we have assumed to be reading and writing) dim our view and deprive us of a comprehensive vision of our charge. To us falls the responsibility of helping young people learn how to communicate in our contemporary culture. (104)

Thus, the concerns of yesterday's English teachers are the concerns of today's and will, most likely, be tomorrow's. Like Thompson, we feel that the "language of our culture"—and the means for transmitting that language—has changed yet again, especially in the past five years with the increase in wireless Internet, mobile devices, and the ability to produce and consume all kinds of texts. What cannot be the same, however, is our reaction. We can no longer allow the teaching of English to be the same as it ever was. We need to move from promise to practice. And, to do so, we encourage you to act boldly, and to act now.

To clarify our three points, we survey *English Journal*, highlighting the voices from the past, of the present, and for the future. We offer a vision for how we, as teachers who are learning from the past and entering the second decade of the 21st century, can begin to make substantive changes to how we teach writing and, in turn, invite our students to collaborate and succeed as literate people in the world.

## Voices from the Past

As we look back through 100 years of *EJ*, we see major moves in the efforts to integrate technologies of the day and to position students as writers. From the beginning, NCTE members have tried to pin down the purpose(s) of language arts and its teaching. Stella S. Center, president of NCTE in 1932, said it well when she addressed the Council Convention in November of that year: "We look to teachers of English to awaken a responsiveness to the profounder meanings of life so that there will be aroused in the student genuine thoughts and feelings along with the desire to communicate them" (99).

We were reminded that the tools we use to express our ideas and convey meaning have rarely been stable. We paged through articles espousing the expressive and revolutionary capacities of the typewriter, the radio, microfilm, movies and television, and in the past few decades, the computer, the Internet, and mobile devices. And, in opening new writing territories and literacies, the ever-expanding toolset is paired with the need for unpacking and exploration, for writers who are also "critical listeners, alert and challenging" (Center 99). We've been encouraged to be critical in thought and ac-

tion, both with our words and with the tools we use to produce and share them.

As early as 1939, Walter Ginsberg implored us to consider "the technological advances already affecting the great expressional and interpretational areas of life with which our English teaching is concerned," especially in the way that they open "new spheres of experiences" (439). Ginsberg highlights the motion picture as "a veritable literature of its own," and he also recognizes it as a medium that makes "books spring to life for the first time in the student's experience" (440). In addition, Ginsberg also mentions other technologies advancing English teaching, including the radio, the transcriptions of valuable broadcasts, the Shakespeare play recordings by Orson Welles and his Mercury Theater group, the school laboratory recordings of students' speech, the apparatus used in diagnosis and education of students with reading disabilities, facsimile broadcasting (i.e., picture and text materials faithfully reproduced over the air), and the proximity of television for home and school use (442–43). Ginsberg reserved his greatest enthusiasm for the newest innovation of his day: "An entire book in microfilm literally can be carried in that much-stuffed vest pocket!" (445).

These new media were about both putting texts into the hands of the students and making it possible for far more of them to work as readers and, equally important, as writers. Early calls about content-creation were steeped in thinking about implications for writing curricula. Frances Grinstead elaborates on how students perceive themselves, or not, as writers:

The young people we are teaching to write are likely to think of "writers" as a class apart from themselves. The term "writer" or "author" immediately puts a man or woman on a pedestal. The first thing that must be proved to the student is that human beings are writers. (387)

As transformational as that shift might have been, Grinstead's advice was cautious, recognizing that any change in curricula be rooted in the "known" and that valued practices are "slow and laborious for everyone, but entirely necessary" (389). What emerges is a slow dance, one where teacher-authors in *EJ* dare to look ahead toward bold changes in writing instruction and the integration of media

and technology, yet quickly return to what is known. Despite the energy behind each new idea

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for reading and writing, listening and speaking, viewing and producing visual texts, we are met in 1952 with William D. Boutwell's assertion, "The answer to the question, 'What are English classes doing about these . . . powerful media?' is clear. The answer is, 'Practically nothing'" (134).

Sadly, it seems that the more our *EJ* authors focused on working with students

as writers and integrated newer technologies, not much changed. We hear a call for action and change again, in 1975, when Nancy Cromer claims:

New ideas about the new electric media and its importance in education have been explored in the English profession for a long time, as far back as the early 1900's as a perusal of old *English Journals* will show. The interest in media has intensified since the 1950's and 60's when we became conscious of our media environment. But actual practice in the English classroom hasn't begun to catch up with what we know about the new media communications. (68)

Across the range of technologies and tools that appear in the last 100 years of *EJ*, perhaps the introduction of the computer into the English classroom is met with the loudest celebration, and the most widespread criticism. Where students were already coming into classrooms with literacy experiences that required "plugging in" (Krekeler 57), the computer was paired with the shift in writing pedagogy, leading Margaret M. Withey, in 1983, to observe that "real writing means focusing on process rather than product and making use of both the new writing models and the new technology" (24). The computer, itself, presented potential, given that

the use of computers to help teach writing includes their capacities for generating, storing, and revising texts, for allowing groups of people easy access to each other's work, and for allowing us to examine various stages in the composing process without taking the work out of the students' hands. (Marcus 99)

These words ring true today in an era of blogs, wikis, and collaborative word processing, and the same enthusiasm for computers was present for microfiche, film, and the typewriter. But words are not enough, as the promise of new technologies hasn't pervaded our teaching practices. Past *EJ* authors, like many of us, we suppose, got excited about the next new technology and, paradoxically, forgot to somehow translate the new technology into consistent classroom practice. Going a step further to recognize that "increasing dependence on the machine is a new dependence, which can't be entirely good" (115), Charles Moran, in 1983, revealed that, even with new technology, we could still teach writing poorly.

We also noted a shift in the ways in which *EJ* writers spoke about the literacies or skills that new technologies opened. Where early talk was skill-centered (i.e., speaking of knowing how to type or insert microfiche into a reader), articles in the late 1980s and early 1990s began to present more sophisticated literacy practices that were made possible by the digital landscape both outside and inside our English classrooms. This is a positive step, and to that end, Carol A. Pope, in 1993, drew on several media documentaries and commission reports to identify five areas of proficiency that those who join the world of work will need in the 21st century: "the ability to communicate and work collaboratively," "the ability to work effectively in a multicultural society and work force," "the ability to adapt," "the ability to think critically," and "the ability to use available technology" (38).

Writing was, and remains, important. Technology integration, when done well, can be useful. And yet *EJ* writers seem continually to look to the future for the answers to questions raised about bringing new tools and possibilities into the classroom. They assume changes would emerge down the road, perhaps when technology becomes more ubiquitous, or at the dawn of the 21st century.

## Voices of the Present

Since 2000, there have been three special issues of *EJ* focused on the challenges of teaching in the 21st century or with technology: September 2000: "Teaching Writing in the Twenty-First Century"; November 2000: "Technology and the English Class"; and September 2007: "New Literacies."

Also of note, the November 2004 issue, “Subversive English,” includes an article, “CyberEnglish,” in which four coauthors claim that they integrate “computer technology that allows students to exercise their voices and choices and become scholars rather than students” (Hogue et al. 70).

It is fitting, in many ways, that each of these issues were published near the beginning of a new school year, and that we were still questioning what these tools could do for our writers, as well as for our teaching. For instance, Virginia R. Monseau opens the November 2000 issue with a reminder that, for anyone born after a technology is invented, it isn't really technology:

For the most part, our students have never known a time without computers, cell phones, video games, voice mail, and the myriad other technological wonders available to them. They approach these inventions fearlessly, confident that they can master their use and eager to conquer the challenges they present. And they delight in teaching us adults what they know—sometimes to our embarrassment and chagrin. For many of our students, technology is a savior—putting them in control, allowing them to do the teaching for a change, and providing them with unlimited access to a world of information. (15)

Yet, in this same issue, Stephen Tchudi asks us to take heed: “As we embrace the new technology, it is important for us to look at the tradeoffs: to see what the technology allows us to do; what it makes us do against our will; how it frees us to do new things; but also how it limits our choices” (33). He continues, extolling again the importance of critical thinking when it comes to emerging technologies and new media:

The role of criticizing media is not a task we can afford to relegate to “media experts” or “communications theorists.” As quaint and old-fashioned as it might sound, it's your neighborhood English teacher, the person whose title conjures up images of dying media like “books,” who is in the best position to create smart and educated users of the media. (33)

Monseau highlights the potential that newer technologies have for extending learning while, in the same issue, Tchudi forces us to think critically about how these technologies can impact teach-

ing and learning. In “Composition for the Twenty-First Century,” Gregory Shafer identifies the goal of every 21st-century teacher as forging “a truly democratic, collaborative environment—one in which learning emanates from various voices and is always in flux. This kind of power sharing frightens many but, in the end, represents the only true way to cultivate lifelong, active learning” (32). While Shafer's take on composing in the new century is astute in terms of realigning the student and teacher relationship, interestingly enough, he does not acknowledge the role that new literacies and digital technologies play in further complicating and potentially advancing the English classroom as we go forward. Yet, Nancy G. Patterson notes how hypertext changed the reading and writing experience:

In order for readers to challenge most forms of text, they must delay the exhibition of their challenge. Hypertext readers, however, can challenge a text immediately, or as immediately as the reader can write a response and link that response to the author's text. This ability to insert text within a larger domain places the reader and the writer in a kind of dialogue that cannot happen as easily in the world of paper and ink. (77–78)

Text, namely hypertext, affords students new possibilities as readers and writers. We recognize that there are disparities in all contexts, especially at the turn of the 21st century, in terms of access to computers and high-speed Internet. Yet, again, we see the paradox of promise and practice.

Jumping ahead to 2007, in her editorial for the themed issue, Louann Reid invites us to think about both the technologies and the literacies. “Using a technology is not all that makes a literacy new” (15), she states, and she then goes on to describe the work of Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (5), who

push us to consider not only new technologies but also how new literacies “mobilize very different kinds of values and priorities and sensibilities than the literacies we are familiar with. The significance of the new technical stuff has mainly to do with how it enables people to build and participate in literacy practices that involve different kinds of values, sensibilities, norms and procedures and so on from those that characterize conventional literacies.” (7)

This issue then brings many more voices to the conversation about “new literacies.” In their article, “Finding Space and Time for the Visual in K–12 Literacy Instruction,” Dawnene D. Hassett and Melissa B. Schieble advocate for “updating our reading cueing systems to encompass a greater scope” (67) to help students navigate what Gunther Kress has termed the “world shown” indicative of composition in our current media age in addition to the “world told” of more traditional writing practices (Kress 1). Again, we’re able to recognize and identify some of the impact newer technologies have had on the reading and writing processes, but these observations fall short of affecting practice in a widespread manner.

Mere tools aren’t enough to achieve the type of change required. Instead, the tools are simply a way of channeling existing motivation. In 2007, Allen Webb reminds us,

Teaching the “new literacies” involves not only learning about and taking advantage of new materials, . . . but also helping students learn to think carefully and critically about what they read, mass media reports as well as literature. In this sense, teaching digital texts as part of the new literacies offers us not so much a revolution as an evolution. We should be applying what we know about good

English teaching, about close reading and cultural studies, to these new materials and, at the same time, as we extend the texts under consideration, evolving our methods and approaches. (88)

And the power of hypertext is befuddled by the constraints of print. Again, we see evidence of these new literacies—as Knobel and Lankshear call them “participatory, collaborative, and distributed” (9)—playing out in the social lives of our students. Inviting our students to be writers matters. Harnessing the potential for new media and technology

matters. But the evolution Webb describes, as others did before him, does not seem to be unfolding in the classroom.

The changes described by our colleagues in the early days of the 21st century do matter. They mat-

ter a great deal because, quite simply, the technology has evolved to a point where social practices—ours and, more importantly, our students’—are changing in ways that we cannot hide from in school. The fact that we (and our students) are now able to hold a device in our pockets that allows us to read and annotate an original text, stream (on demand) multiple film adaptations of the text, look at the SparkNotes about the text, and find essays about the text from online paper mills—all at the flick of a finger—is significant.

Or, at least, it *feels* significant.

Or perhaps we want to make it significant, because this is where, and when, we are looking ahead to the next future.

As Ginsberg reminds us in 1939, however, “As with so many things that are new, the idea is old” (446), and as such, the challenge still becomes translating the promise of these new technologies and the ideas they inspire for adapting our approach to teaching into sustained practice. Not a passive evolution, but actionable steps that reflect the change in social practices and learning that our students, albeit outside of traditional school settings, are engaging in on a regular basis today. And were yesterday. And will be tomorrow.

So, this moment—of texting, of cloud computing, of smaller and smaller gadgets—feels significant to us. Just as it felt significant to Ginsberg that students would carry microfiche collections of text with them. Just as multimedia felt significant to Thompson in 1978, and computers to Withey in 1983. Yet, we can’t rely on significance alone. There is still this divide between the intensity of students’ interactions with technologies outside of school and the limitations of their experiences with technologies in school. With this challenge in mind, we turn our attention to action—to the compelling work that we must begin today.

## Work for Today

When Kathleen Blake Yancey addressed NCTE as president in 2008, nearly 80 years after Stella Center did, she, too, acknowledged that the landscape for our field was different: “Today, in the 21st century, people write as never before” (327). But, then again, we always wrote as never before. Things have always been different for the time in which teach-

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ers found themselves. They will continue to be. We must embrace that.

We must do so even in the face of competing visions for what reading, writing, and technology integration might be. Consider the following examples from some of our work in the field: (1) Recently, a high school English department was engaged in curriculum reform around Common Core State Standards and what literature anthologies to buy. They already had piles of old anthologies, filled with many of the same stories. While writing a \$100,000 budget proposal for new literature anthologies, the chair had just had a \$50,000 grant proposal for tablet computers—a device that could have brought access to all those anthologized stories, as well as other digital reading and writing tools, at a fraction of the cost, in a school that already has wifi throughout—rejected! (2) In another school, teachers exploring the idea of purchasing devices for all students, thus going to a 1:1 model of technology integration, were concerned that all the students be given devices, but there was no clear vision of what those devices would be used for, or more importantly, what those students would create with them. Without a compelling vision of what would change in the school as a result of the purchase of costly technology, why spend the money? Don't get sucked into the allure of the device. Instead, focus on the important human work of making meaning and creating texts worth spending time on.

If we had but one sentiment to share with readers of this article, this would most likely be it: Stop waiting for the technology of tomorrow to compel you to do the work of today.

Take a moment to pause and reread the combined opening quote. The first question, posed in 1998 by Nancy Traubitz, asks about our responsibility as English teachers (75), to which we respond with a resounding, yes. Yes, indeed, it is our responsibility to thoughtfully integrate technology in the writing curriculum. The follow-up quote comes from Ted Palmer, in a 1969 article titled “The Gadfly and the Dinosaur,” in which he reflects on the classroom of the 1960s and laments the fact that many teachers are not bringing in new modes and media of expression to create a “pulsating twentieth-century world” (71).

We must discuss how to move forward with one another and with our students as well in an on-

going conversation that does not get stalled when we face challenges to technology integration, but that inspires innovative problem-solving and creative solutions. Let's fully embrace the playground of words and texts and ideas and the tools available to create and share them as our domain as language artists. Let's not be afraid to build learning experiences that don't always go exactly according to plan, but instead involve some element of flexibility while striving for innovation. Let's involve students in the inquiry process with us as we shape more dynamic and engaging learning experiences.

Let's stop waiting for the next wave of technology—whatever it may be—until we do the hard and important work of shepherding writing and writers in the time we live in today. Embrace the technologies that our students use, even when our administrators ban them. Invite students to collaborate using technologies that will be helpful in their lives, even if they are filtered at your school. Work with others in your community to help students write, serve, and learn. And, share your practice with others—blog, tweet, and video your experiences in contributing to this mosaic we craft together—so that we may have a stronger sense of the potential of our collective efforts and more examples that document how we are truly enacting the promise of teaching English over the next 100 years.

We have the opportunity to learn from the history of *English Journal* authors, to see what they've noted, and to understand that we, right now, can make important changes. We want to embrace these changes today, not tomorrow, so together our teaching can move beyond the sameness to become more than it ever was. 

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## Call for Manuscripts

*The English Record* is accepting submissions for its next issue. Please send to editor Karen Stearns ([karen.stearns@cortland.edu](mailto:karen.stearns@cortland.edu)).

**Theme: Teachers on Teachers**—This issue encourages submissions on teachers who have made the difference in our lives, have influenced our vocation, and/or have modeled a life in words, a life we have all chosen. Issue will include articles that focus on research on teachers, that feature significant teachers in our collective histories, and that explore the lives of teachers who have left their mark on our profession across centuries. **Deadline: March 1, 2012.**

Copy should be submitted single-spaced in Times New Roman, 12 pt font. APA style applies. Please include a short blurb about yourself for contributors' notes. Send questions, and/or submissions to [karen.stearns@cortland.edu](mailto:karen.stearns@cortland.edu). *The English Record* is a refereed journal supported by the NYS English Council, an affiliate of NCTE. Members receive the journal as part of their membership. To become a member please go to <http://www.nysecteach.org/nysec/index.php>.