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In this September issue of *College English*, which appears at the start of the traditional academic year, it’s only fitting that we feature three articles that have at their core a concern for understanding and improving student writing and literacy practices both inside and outside of the classroom. Across these articles we learn about digital reading and writing habits, archival meaning-making in writing classrooms, and the positive and negative effects of single-measurement basic/developmental writing placements in college writing programs. What particularly excites me about this issue is our featured authors’ ability to present the best of what *CE* has traditionally offered over its long publication history: a mix of sound, engaged, and timely research that provides for readers both grounded theoretical arguments and innovative findings as well as an attention to the applicability of this research to the classroom. While not all work published in *CE* does (or must) focus on how scholarship translates into concomitant intellectual gains for our students, I find the work in these three featured articles especially fine models of how that connection might happen.

I also find that the work we present in this issue is constructed in response to questions that are potentially relevant to a very wide range of readers: What is the relationship between students’ literacy activity online and how that activity might be “translated” for first-year (and other) classrooms? What can we do to engage students in a deeper understanding of cultural and textual histories, and the archiving of those histories, as part of their growth as emerging researchers? And finally, what is the longer-term effect of standardized measurements on students’ performance in writing classes—especially when those measurements indicate a “lack” that a curricular placement is supposed to illuminate, enforce, or erase?

This issue opens with our *Emerging Voices* featured author, Rebecca Tarsa, and her article “Upvoting The Exordium: Literacy Practices of the Digital Interface,” which makes the case that digital interface theory can give us important information about how students engage in literacy-based activities in the composition classroom.
As Tarsa notes, “interface increases writing activity by easing the transition from consumption to production. . . By offering interactive tools and practices through which students can progress towards written participation at their own pace, interfaces in digital participation spaces are able to successfully engage a wide range of potential users” (7). Tarsa observes that while teachers of writing have long recognized that students most enjoy writing (and reading and participating in) what interests them, we know far less about how those interests are initially engaged and encouraged, particularly within digital spaces. She contends, “as a rhetorical mediator of every digital experience, interface is a logical starting point for examining what’s different about these contexts, what lets them turn interests of all strengths and sizes into writing activity” (15).

For her article, Tarsa studied thirty student writers enrolled in general education courses at her institution, learning that—among other things—initial design is of critical importance to these individuals, as is the level of engagement required to participate (or sign in to a site), and the transferability of a site between different technologies (laptop, phone, etc.). Ultimately, Tarsa contends, “Without the obstacle of [some] affordances, it’s possible [students] might have become contributors earlier on—rather than only when they encountered an exceptionally attractive opportunity” (21). In contrast, those sites that allow “quality affordances”—those that allow one to “upvote” content, for example—are more likely to be engaged by students. Tarsa notes, “All but one of the students who said they first made accounts with a participatory space in order to vote on content eventually went on to participate within those sites . . . Qualitative affordances helped to cancel out that deterring influence of entry ones by giving students an incentive to register, and thus clearing the way for them to capitalize on smaller and more spontaneous writing opportunities” (23).

Tarsa’s argument seeks to complicate our existing notions of why and how participants come to online spaces—for example, our assumption that such participation is based heavily on “shared affinity” (25). This work also provides a new way of looking at writing within social media, a critical consideration for writing teachers who are regularly assigning such activity in their classrooms, especially since, according to Tarsa’s research findings, “it seems likely that qualitative affordances ultimately create more writing than they quash . . . This suggests that in addition to serving as a source of motivation in of themselves . . . qualitative affordances in participatory spaces act as a stepping stone between observing and creating” (27). Tarsa ultimately suggests that even in courses where writing is not done in digital spaces, instructors can reduce entry affordances, and capitalize on quality affordances instead—primarily through more opportunities for reader response activity, in spaces outside the typical classroom discussion (where participation may be less desirable, for any number of reasons).

Moving from production and interaction within extra-institutional digital spaces
to production and interaction within the space of the archive, Pamela VanHaitsma’s “New Pedagogical Engagements with Archives: Student Inquiry and Composing in Digital Spaces,” serves as a fine companion to Tarsa’s research, as VanHaitsma’s work seeks to also understand how students may engage with online spaces in order to enhance their literacy skills and gain a larger understanding of how texts are shaped and memorialized within a culture. Like Tarsa, VanHaitsma aims to see how students encounter artifacts online and how that encounter can shape their own means of scholarly production and participation.

VanHaitsma argues that students encounter archives “virtually everywhere they turn,” including on social media; as such, “the archive is no longer a professional space solely for specialized scholarly research at protected sites; undergraduate students regularly engage with digital archives” (34). But VanHaitsma’s study ultimately focuses on the employment of digital archives in an institutional setting, as she is “interested in both what are more traditionally understood as archival collections of materials from the past, and how teacher-scholars engage undergraduates in digital archival practices that hold relevance for the students’ inquiry and composing in present-day spaces” (35). To that end, VanHaitsma’s research involves not just exposing students to online archives, but also asking these students to create their own archives of personal significance as part of a larger course directive.

Building on fellow scholars’ arguments about digital archive engagement as a way to build students’ skills in research methods as well as close reading and textual analysis, ultimately leading to a desired status similar to Daniel Anderson’s “prosumer” label (38), VanHaitsma’s project centers on two sections of her first-year composition course, previously taught at the University of Pittsburgh and carrying a gender studies theme. After students examined artifacts of letter writing—including manuals—from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as available through existing digital archives, VanHaitsma then asked these students to build a new, collective digital archive of their own, using found twenty-first-century materials on letter writing (specifically romantic letters and correspondence), for example “websites and print magazines including articles about dating and relationships as well as film clips modeling romantic communication,” which could include both pedagogical and nonpedagogical materials (43).

These archives, however, were not ends in themselves; they were also the means to help students to generate essays for the course that critically reflected on the aggregate materials archived and what they meant in historical and cultural context. One interesting outcome was that “as students wrote essays about the technological and generic shifts evident when comparing their online archive to nineteenth-century materials, they did not, alternately, romanticize the practice of letter writing. . . students complicated one-sided narratives of nostalgia as much as they did those of technological progress” (47). In sum, “Students. . . participated in the sort of scholarly
inquiry that teacher-scholars have emphasized as a potential for pedagogical engagements with brick-and-mortar archives, but in ways both enabled by and attentive to student composing in and about present-day digital archives and spaces” (48).

Ultimately, VanHaitsma concludes that scholar-teachers who do archival work are often motivated “by a desire to share those materials with students and an eagerness to have students learn from our archives” which can lead these teachers to “arrive in the classroom with preconceived ideas about the materials, about how and why to write about and engage with them” (50). VanHaitsma’s pedagogy invites students to take up meaning-making of their own, as they compose, rather than become experts in, archival repositories as relevant to their own cultural surroundings. This is a very different and important emphasis on the use of historical research in the undergraduate classroom than that which often graces the pages of our field journals.

Thinking about how to take something familiar to readers of CE—like public digital spaces and student online literacy practices or archival research in the writing classroom—and look at it from a different and even provocative angle is also the aim of our third and final featured article in this issue, co-authored by Holly Hassel and Joanne Baird Giordano. In “The Blurry Borders of College Writing: Remediation and the Assessment of Student Readiness,” Hassel and Giordano propose that in first-year writing, it is problematic to “determine where ‘remediation’ starts and ‘degree-credit’ begins, with the assumption that this is a clear boundary with universally shared definitions,” particularly when so many institutions rely on a single measurement to make that placement determination (57).

Using a corpus of 359 pieces of writing from 54 students at their own institution (The University of Wisconsin Marathon County, a two-year campus of the University of Wisconsin State System) derived from an original analysis of the intake data for 911 incoming students across two years of admissions, the authors argue that “standardized placement test data for these participating students showed that the two sets of test scores (the ACT and the Wisconsin English Placement Test) misplaced students at nearly the same rate, although in different ways” (58) and, thus, are unreliable as either independent or comparative measurements. Moreover, they argue that the larger boundaries between “college-ready and not-college-ready” are “blurry,” and therefore “multiple-measures placement” is critical in all colleges and universities, but particularly in open-admissions institutions such as their own, where students arrive with a variety of factors that may influence their actual ability versus their recommended placements stemming from a standardized test (58).

As Hassel and Giordano acknowledge, previous scholarship in composition studies has highlighted the failures of single measurements of writing; their study additionally uncovers, on a local level, that for UW-Marathon students, the standardized tests offered to determine initial writing course placement had six contextual limitations. Specifically, the tests failed to: “Assess rhetorical knowledge; Assess knowledge
of the writing process; Demonstrate proficiency in the ability to produce ‘error-free prose’; Measure experience with academic writing; Assess critical reading skills (for some students); and Provide specific insight into students’ individual learning needs” (66). Among Hassel and Giordano’s final recommendations, based on this study, is to continue to allow campuses to “provid[e] development coursework for students who truly need it” (77) and for institutions to sustain a “placement process that respects and reflects all of our nation’s students’ rights to be treated with potentiality, and . . . assessment measures that recognize that potential” (77).

Hassel and Giordano’s study is a fine example of how local case studies can make more visible the accepted findings of our field scholarship on placement and assessment. It is also an example of how two-year college students (and faculty and administrators, as Hassel and Giordano note) often get lost in these broad conversations about placement and assessment—due to their status as open-admissions students who in some circles of higher education are not recognized as being “college-ready” at all. Hassel and Giordano thus provide an important snapshot of what national trends in testing are doing to real college students, in real time. I hope their study will lead to similar studies on other campuses, so that a greater case might be made for a more equal representation and evaluation of student writing needs across, among other settings, large state university systems that range from flagship elite to two-year open admissions.

Finally, as is often the structure of our CE issues, we close with a review essay by Lori Ostergaard, who reminds readers early in the review’s pages that “[c]urrent historical research is shifting its gaze away from meta-level studies of the field that examine the discipline’s history on the national level toward archival histories and case studies of underrepresented individuals, groups, and movements” that aim to “shine a light on the darkened corners of our past [and] . . . provide alternative or parallel narratives of the field’s development” while also “hint[ing] at the expanse of rhetorical and disciplinary history yet to be uncovered. (82). With this observational frame in mind, Ostergaard launches into a rich and detailed review of three recent books on the history of localized populations—specifically, nineteenth-century women physicians (by Carolyn Skinner), Moonlight Schools and Americanization Programs (by Samantha NeCamp), and Southern public colleges for women (by David Gold and Catherine Hobbs). As Ostergaard argues, each of these three books adds to our field literature on the idea of microhistories; on histories of rhetoric and public voice; on the “education and professional preparation” of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century women (93); and on race and racism during this same time period (94). Ostergaard’s review is an informative and thoughtful piece with which to round out our September offerings, and hopefully to offer help to readers—historians and nonhistorians alike—as they decide where and how to add to their professional libraries as the fall semester begins.