From the Editors

We were thrilled to be approached by Toby, Katherine, and Pauline to coedit an issue focused on arts and literacies in the English classroom. As the influence of standardized testing threatens to narrow our practice to measurable skills, reasserting the promise and possibility that the arts bring to human development is essential. We are delighted to share the fruits of this collaboration and hope that you will be inspired, as we are, by this special issue.

—Julie Gorlewski and David Gorlewski

Celebrating the Arts in English Classrooms

Toby Emert, Katherine Macro, and Pauline Skowron Schmidt

Today, more than ever before, the arts, multimodality, and the new literacies play important roles in the teaching and research of the English language arts. This attention is significant and timely as it reflects a growing shift in how literacy is being defined and what it means to be literate in the 21st century.

—Purpose Statement, NCTE’s Commission on Arts and Literacies

In a 2006 report on how the arts contribute to student academic success, the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies cited a poll about the attitudes of Americans toward arts education. When asked to share an opinion about the statement “The arts are vital to providing a well-rounded education,” 93 percent of the respondents said they agreed (Ruppert). Numerous studies highlighting the connections between study of the arts and student achievement substantiate this belief. The arts’ emphasis on experimentation, collaboration, imagination, and productivity invite students to problem-solve actively and creatively, a skill that has been identified as especially consequential for 21st-century literacy. The evidence is clear: the arts positively influence reading and language skills, critical thinking, social skills, motivation, and the school environment.

Despite this overwhelming evidence, the literacy community has been sluggish in its embrace of the arts. We live in an arts-drenched world, surrounded by images, movement, verbal and nonverbal messages, and video; but the field of English education has traditionally focused on modes of text-based forms of representation and is only beginning to recognize the importance of arts-based pedagogies, which are naturally multimodal, inquiry-based, and interpretive.

NCTE’s Conference on English Education’s Commission on Arts and Literacies, whose mission includes advancing teaching, research, and theory on the arts and new literacies, collaborated with the editors of English Journal to curate this issue of the journal. The articles you’ll read here spotlight teaching practices, lessons, and classroom research that explore the impact of including creative arts in the ELA curriculum. In early conversations about the issue, members of the commission discussed the importance of acknowledging the efforts of the many English teachers who understand the viability of arts-based instructional activities to engage and provoke their students, as well as the need to focus more direct attention on the potential value of the arts for teachers who feel less confident about incorporating art forms in their instruction. As
one of the commission members noted about her own teaching experience, “There is opportunity for growth in students and teachers alike when pedagogy is infused with arts-based methods. The arts create an opportunity for students to learn in more active, more engaged ways and in ways that allow them to explore who they are and their place in the world.”

The articles featured in this issue illustrate a variety of approaches English teachers have devised to include visual art, theater, dance, creative writing, and music in their lessons. Across the United States, teachers are employing imaginative strategies to assist students as they interpret literature, engage with informational texts, and undertake writing projects. This issue of English Journal celebrates those teachers’ efforts and, simultaneously, serves as an invitation for other educators to emulate and adapt the ideas in these accounts of teaching practice that honor the human impulse to express, make, and create.

Works Cited


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Call for Applications: Editor of English Journal

NCTE is seeking the next editor of English Journal. The term of the present coeditors, David Gorlewski and Julie Gorlewski, will end in July 2018. Interested persons should send a letter of application to be received no later than August 26, 2016. Letters should include the applicant’s vision for the journal and be accompanied by the applicant’s vita, one sample of published writing (article or book chapter), and two letters specifying financial support from appropriate administrators at the applicant’s institution. Applicants are urged to explore with their administrators the feasibility of assuming the responsibilities of a journal editor. Classroom teachers are both eligible and encouraged to apply. Finalists will be interviewed at the NCTE Annual Convention in Atlanta in November 2016. The applicant appointed by the NCTE Executive Committee will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue in September 2018. The appointment is for five years. Applications should be submitted in PDF form via email to kaustin@ncte.org; please include “English Journal Editor Application” in the subject line. Direct queries to Kurt Austin, NCTE Senior Developer for Publications, at the email address above or call 217-328-3870, extension 3619.