The terms themselves seemed to come out of nowhere—blog, vlog, mash-up, remix, amv, blogosphere, firewalls. Teachers who had spent time cultivating themselves as thoughtful readers and writers—who had, to use Ralph Fletcher’s (Straylight Media, 2002) delicious word, “marinated” themselves in quality literature as part of creating classrooms where students could flourish as authors—suddenly found themselves in a literacy landscape that seemed to remake its contents (and language) daily. It was no longer enough to figure out strategies for keeping pencils sharp and students immersed in their writing notebooks; teachers now had to think about battery life, wifi access, and questions about whom to friend (or not to friend) on their Facebook pages. And those questions were nothing compared to the deeper challenges of what it means to read and write in a multimodal, multimedia, hyperlinked, transparent world.

It has been, to say the least, an astonishing decade for language arts teachers. Part of the breathlessness can be traced to timing. The advent of digital technologies coinciding with the transition from one millennium to the next has made for an almost too-easy shift in rhetoric. Calls for “21st century education” for “21st century learners” are intended to inspire, but they threaten to eclipse the profound complexity of teaching and learning in today’s global, connected society. Since so much of the technological innovations of the recent past have centered around communications, language arts teachers find themselves in the midst of the nitty-gritty, doing the hard, grappling work of transformative change.

And change there has been. A decade ago in this journal, Pianfetti (2001) cited reports that while 72% of classrooms had Internet access, only 27% of teachers placed that technology in the hands of their students. Compare those numbers to a more recent US Department of Education study in which 97% of teachers reported having at least one computer in their room, and 54% noted they could bring in additional computers, such as laptop carts. Of these computers, over 93% had Internet access. Elementary school teachers reported that students used educational technology “sometimes or often” to:

- Prepare written text: 57%
- Create or use graphics or visual displays: 49%
- Learn or practice basic skills: 76%
- Conduct research: 64%
- Correspond with others: 26%
- Contribute to blogs or wikis: 7%
- Use social networking websites: 6%
- Develop and present multimedia presentations: 35%
- Create art, music, movies, or webcasts: 21%

(Gray, Thomas, & Lewis, 2010)

According to these statistics, over the past decade teachers and students alike have used educational technology in increasingly varied ways. As in any significant transformation, however, movement is ongoing. Fisher (2006) cautioned that when it comes to technology and education, much of what is described as transformational is actually “old hats in new boxes” (p. 294). Technological tools become...
a means for increasing efficiency or a different way of engaging students, but they are not employed in truly innovative ways. In a recent review of studies published in the last decade, Ertmer and Ottenbreit-Leftwich (2010) concluded that technology in K–12 settings has not been sufficiently used to support student-centered instruction. In such classrooms, it has been relegated, instead, to a content-delivery system or a tool by which students engage in traditional literacy-related activities, such as writing reports and locating information. One challenge for teachers, then, is to “use technology to facilitate meaningful learning, defined as that which enables students to construct deep and connected knowledge, which can be applied to real situations” (p. 257).

The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) has developed standards to assist educators as they reconceptualize schools in the digital age. The National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers (ISTE, 2008a) encourage teachers to foreground student innovation and creativity while also modeling how to work, learn, and be responsible as digital citizens. ISTE (2008b) augments this tall order in Essential Conditions, a document focusing on teacher professional development and leadership that extends beyond the school to include communities, stakeholders, and policy makers.

These challenges are being addressed by teachers as they envision ways in which technology can be used by their students—and themselves—for creative, generative purposes. For example, instead of using PowerPoints to organize class lectures, teachers are considering how PowerPoints, as well as other technological tools, can be used to aid student self-expression, knowledge production, and publication. They are tapping the affordances of the Internet to link students both locally and globally, increasing the potential for cross-cultural relationships and critical literacy. They are challenging the view that online participation is an out-of-school practice and are engaging students in conversations about the power that is circulated and the ethics that are part of the current global context. According to Fisher (2006), this shift in thinking pushes back against technological determinism, which sees technology itself as the driving force, and calls upon teachers to become active agents of change.

**In This Issue**

We have dedicated this issue to ways in which teachers are being change agents as they conceive of themselves as digital-age educators. We chose the theme “Professional Development in the Age of Nick.com”—a reference to a popular website indicative of so many websites where our students can visit daily to play interactive games, watch videos, find a kid-friendly recipe, see an interview with the first lady, and “chat” with each other. There is also access to information for teens, parents, and educators, all at the press of a button or the glide of a mouse. With this reality in mind, we conceptualized this themed issue by posing several questions: How are language arts teachers, both inservice and preservice, preparing themselves to guide students who no longer define reading as picking up a book, or writing as putting pen to paper? What kind of professional development—and maybe personal development—are teachers undergoing as they try to make sense of this transitional era in literacy education? What are educators doing, in groups or on their own, to (re)think literacy instruction in order to be successful teachers of students who are making the road by walking it? And, finally, how are we all as educators looking frankly at the changes resulting from 21st century technologies and embracing them as part of our teaching philosophies and actions?

The writers in this issue take up these questions in a variety of ways. Susi Bostock looks at her own first-grade classroom as Thirdspace (Soja, 1996), a site where teachers and students engage in power reversals so that teaching and learning become reciprocal processes. Bostock describes how she literally sat side-by-side with her students as they performed as digital text participants and guided her in developing her own technological prowess. As part of her ongoing learning, she designed a professional development course for other teachers in her district to share her students’ work and to begin a conversation about the value of building upon
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children’s out-of-school digital literacies as part of teachers’ professional growth.

Jamie Colwell, Amy Hutchison, and David Reinking discuss a project in a teacher preparation course in which teachers used a social networking site to blog about their readings of children’s and young adult literature. The reflective responses from the teachers about the blogging yielded interesting results: while the experience provided teachers with a strong sense of audience and reinforced ideas about literacy as a social activity, it also left them wanting more face-to-face interaction. The authors concluded that authentic, first-hand experiences with technology are important as teachers learn to integrate online contexts into their classrooms.

Audra K. Roach and Jessica J. Beck move out of the classroom to examine how Beck, a language arts teacher, used her own experiences with social media to conceptualize not only what it means to be a 21st century writer but also a teacher of 21st century writers. In a multivocal text that combines Beck’s reflections with Roach’s analysis, the authors explore how a teacher, “braving a literate life online,” used her insider knowledge of social media and new literacies to think about pedagogy. Together, they articulate their ideas about the promises, and sometimes the risks, that are part of developing one’s professional and writing selves online.

In addition to these articles, our regular columns and departments also turn an eye toward teacher professional development in the digital age. In Conversation Currents, Elyse Eidman-Aadahl and Cindy O’Donnell-Allen make connections across their own experiences as technology users, teachers, and researchers. Their powerful message of “teachers matter” emphasizes the critical role educators play in guiding students in rapidly changing educational contexts. In Research and Policy, Richard Beach discusses ways in which teachers can undergo professional development by collaborating with their peers—both locally and in other schools—to actively integrate technology into their teaching. In Professional Books, reviewers look at recent publications that offer teachers guidance on technology use in their classrooms, as well as current research that expands information about students as digital learners. Recognizing that the digital age also includes quality children’s books, the Children’s Literature Reviews department honors the winners of the 2011 Notable Children’s Books in Language Arts (NCBLA). In this issue, we also pay tribute to Jennifer L. Wilson, a vibrant member of our community and a coeditor for our Professional Book Reviews department who passed away last year.

With this issue of Language Arts, we highlight some of the innovative work being done by educators in a truly transformational time. We hope readers see it as a moment to pause, take a breath, and consider the exciting possibilities ahead of us all.

References