Next Practices with Digital Tools and Social Media

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When we developed the idea of a “What’s Next?” series that would anchor the May issues of our editorship of Voices, we were intrigued with the idea that this call could serve as both a celebration of the newly emerging practices in our field and a view toward where we were headed. Our goal was both to excite and incite our pedagogical imaginations, especially as we bring one school year to a close and look eagerly to what the next one invites. The series started in Volume 24 with our exploration of “What’s Next in the Teaching of Reading.” You’re holding the second installment in your hands now—or, perhaps more aptly, you’re reading from your screen.

An issue that explores “What’s Next?” in our work with digital tools and social media sits right in that space between what we are coming to know and the certainty that our toolset and practices will continue to shift and change as they have in our teaching and our field for the past decade and a half. It is still new for us to be thinking about the ways in which digital tools and social media allow us to participate and collaborate in bold new ways, allowing our middle level students’ voices to do meaningful work within and beyond our classroom walls. It is also still new for us to think about the many authentic audiences that our students can access (and mobilize) with a keystroke. This issue is rich with articles that explore those spaces and keep reminding us of the possibility and necessity of this work.

NCTE has issued bold statements that help us see our responsibilities and role in this work as we read and write and learn alongside our students. With digital tools and social media, teaching English must invite students to create, communicate, and negotiate meaning in multimodal, connected, and participatory spaces. This isn’t about doing a “technology lesson.” Instead, it is work situated in building cultures in our classrooms where students turn to digital tools and social media alongside print-based work, choosing the spaces and media that best fit their message, audience, and intention.

That said, we can’t talk about this work without talking about access and without thinking critically about a digital divide that is as much about connecting kids to digital tools as it is connecting students and purposeful, mindful work with those tools. It shouldn’t be new or bold to say that every middle school student needs the opportunity to create, write, play, and critically evaluate digital texts—and yet it is. In too many contexts, we pull lower achieving students into computer-based programs for the purpose of remediation, limiting their time with digital tools to the keying in of responses to prepackaged curricula designed to boost test performance while providing those students who thrive in school with access to rich connective and
multimodal digital reading and writing opportunities. Instead of limiting digital experiences or seeing them as "enrichment," we need to deem them essential and necessary for all students. In part, this comes if we stop thinking about teaching with technology and start thinking about students as creators of multimodal texts. But even that isn’t enough. It is no longer optional for students in our English classrooms to learn alongside us through opportunities where we engage them as critical, thoughtful, and reflective creators, consumers, and participants in connected communities. We need to be asking who gets to participate. And, we need to set our sights on what impact that participation by all learners can have.

The “What’s Next” in this issue begins there, as Troy Hicks leads the call with a piece that looks back at where we have been in teaching digital writing and argues that there is urgent work to be done. Then, Cornelius Minor, Lakisha Howell, and Arlene Casimir-Siar challenge us to take that work into every classroom, calling for imaginative inclusive classroom work that lever digital tools to help students do work that matters, positioning them to change our communities.

The issue is rich with pedagogical ideas and classroom examples that challenge us to collaborate purposefully, critically consider the digital texts we encounter, and engage students in transformative literacy work. Jennifer Dail and Anete Vásquez help us unpack Google Drive as a space for supporting critical literacy literature circles. James Chisholm and Kathryn Whitmore challenge our thinking about modes of assessment through a framework of visual learning analysis. Summer Pennelle and Bryan Fede offer curriculum that melds critical literacy and critical mathematics study in fostering social justice. And Raven Bishop and Erin Counihan guide us through a series of performance tasks tied to literacy practices they identify as emerging and essential.

As is the case with every issue of Voices, our columnists both anchor and elevate our thinking on the theme, exploring connections inside and beyond our classrooms. Linda Rief works with student Sam Fremin to share a slice of her journey in learning to teach with digital tools and the necessity of learning alongside our students in this work. Lisa Scherff helps us explore research on the impact of digital tools on classroom learning. Our friends in the Nerdy Book Club offer up teacher-tested tools that they have found to have the most impact with the students they serve (and in supporting their own learning). And Chris Lehman introduces us to early-career teachers who help us think about the role of digital tools and social media in a literacy teacher’s pedagogy.

We want to extend a special thanks to Cathy Fleisher who completes her four-part series on Everyday Advocacy in this issue. Her voice has guided us and her teaching has led us to action.

The articles in this issue are steeped in the possibility that thoughtful and authentic teaching with digital tools and social media invites while reminding us of the necessity that these practices engage and evoke the voices and meaning of each of our students. They are as much about what’s now as what’s next, but they also challenge us to pedagogies that will stretch us as teachers who create, consume, make, play, and produce alongside the learners with whom we explore.

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**Voices from the Middle** editors are looking for compelling digital images to feature on our four journal covers during each of our volume years. We are looking for color photos that highlight our classrooms, our students, and the unique and important work that we do as middle level teachers.

**Images should align with the themes for each issue and deadlines are the same.**

Photos should be at least 300 DPI, in either jpg or tiff formats. Published photos will be full color. Please do not submit previously published photos.

If you choose to include people in your submission, you are responsible for obtaining the necessary releases from all of the individuals depicted (and parent/guardians, where appropriate) and must be able to provide copies of those releases prior to publication. For more information, contact voices@ncte.org.
Arlène Casmir-Siar is an elementary educator and staff developer at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her experiences range from teaching kindergarten to eighth grade as a lead teacher in NYC and New Orleans. She has a special interest in integrating literacy, restorative justice, and trauma-sensitive practices to co-create beautiful learning spaces with her schools, teachers, and students. Arlène supports schools in NYC, Georgia, Louisiana, California, Canada, and beyond.

Troy Hicks is a professor of Literacy and Technology at Central Michigan University and focuses his work on the teaching of writing, literacy and technology, and teacher education and professional development. He also directs CMU’s Chippewa River Writing Project. A former middle school teacher, he collaborates with K–12 colleagues and explores how they implement newer literacies in their classrooms. A prolific author, Troy’s most recent books include Argument in the Real World (Heinemann, 2017) with Kristen Turner and From Texting to Teaching (Routledge/Eye on Education, 2017) with Jeremy Hyler.

Kisha Howell is an upper-grade elementary educator, staff developer, and doctoral student at Teachers College. She began her teaching experience as an inclusive classroom teacher, specifically focusing on culturally relevant pedagogy and amplifying student voice. A major goal of her work is to curate spaces where teachers and students across the United States can unapologetically discover and cultivate their own identities as readers and writers. As a staff developer and graduate student, Kisha uses her love of picture books and talk to encourage critical conversations in schools.

Wendy Mass is the New York Times bestselling author of fourteen novels for young people including A Mango-Shaped Space (which was awarded the Schneider Family Book Award by the ALA), the Twice Upon a Time fairy-tale series, 11 Birthdays, The Candymakers, and 13 Gifts. Her latest books are Space Taxi: Archie Takes Flight and Pi in the Sky. Her recent collaboration with Rebecca Stead, Bob, will be released in May 2018.

Rebecca Stead has written four novels for young people: When You Reach Me (a New York Times bestseller and winner of the Newbery Medal and the Boston Globe/Horn Book Award for Fiction); Liar & Spy (winner of the Guardian Prize for Children’s Fiction and a New York Times Book Review Notable Book for Children); First Light (a Junior Library Guild Selection and a New York Public Library Best Book for Teens); and, most recently, Goodbye Stranger (a New York Times bestseller and New York Times Book Review Notable Book for Children). Her recent collaboration with Wendy Mass, Bob, will be released in May 2018.

Cornelius Minor works with teachers, school leaders, and leaders of community-based organizations to support deep and wide literacy reform in cities (and sometimes villages) across the globe. Whether working with teachers and young people in Singapore, Seattle, or New York City, Cornelius always uses his love for technology, hip-hop, and social media to recruit students’ engagement in reading and writing and teachers’ engagement in communities of practice. As a staff developer, Cornelius draws not only on his years teaching middle school in the Bronx and Brooklyn, but also on time spent skateboarding, shooting hoops, and working with young people.