Literacies Before Technologies

Making Digital Tools Matter for Middle Grades Learners

Troy Hicks and Jill Runstrom
Principles in Practice

The Principles in Practice imprint offers teachers concrete illustrations of effective classroom practices based in NCTE research briefs and policy statements. Each book discusses the research on a specific topic, links the research to an NCTE brief or policy statement, and then demonstrates how those principles come alive in practice: by showcasing actual classroom practices that demonstrate the policies in action; by talking about research in practical, teacher-friendly language; and by offering teachers possibilities for rethinking their own practices in light of the ideas presented in the books. Books within the imprint are grouped in strands, each strand focused on a significant topic of interest.

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Adolescents and Digital Literacies: Learning Alongside Our Students (2010) Sara Kajder
Adolescent Literacy and the Teaching of Reading: Lessons for Teachers of Literature (2010) Deborah Appleman
Rethinking the "Adolescent" in Adolescent Literacy (2017) Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides, Robert Petrone, and Mark A. Lewis

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Becoming Writers in the Elementary Classroom: Visions and Decisions (2011) Katie Van Sluys
Writing Instruction in the Culturally Relevant Classroom (2011) Maisha T. Winn and Latrise P. Johnson
Writing Can Change Everything: Middle Level Kids Writing Themselves into the World (2020) Shelbie Witte, editor
Growing Writers: Principles for High School Writers and Their Teachers (2021) Anne Elrod Whitney

Literacy Assessment Strand

Beyond Standardized Truth: Improving Teaching and Learning through Inquiry-Based Reading Assessment (2012) Scott Filkins
Reading Assessment: Artful Teachers, Successful Students (2013) Diane Stephens, editor

Literacies of the Disciplines Strand

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*Teaching Reading with YA Literature: Complex Texts, Complex Lives* (2016) Jennifer Buehler

**Teaching English Language Learners Strand**

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*Community Literacies en Confianza: Learning from Bilingual After-School Programs* (2017) Steven Alvarez


*Writing across Culture and Language: Inclusive Strategies for Working with ELL Writers in the ELA Classroom* (2017) Christina Ortmeier-Hooper

**Students' Rights to Read and Write Strand**

*Adventurous Thinking: Fostering Students' Rights to Read and Write in Secondary ELA Classrooms* (2019) Mollie V. Blackburn, editor

*In the Pursuit of Justice: Students' Rights to Read and Write in Elementary School* (2020) Mariana Souto-Manning, editor

*Already Readers and Writers: Honoring Students' Rights to Read and Write in the Middle Grade Classroom* (2020) Jennifer Ochoa, editor

**Children’s and YA Literature Strand**

*Challenging Traditional Classroom Spaces with YA Literature: Students in Community as Course Co-Designers* (2022) Ricki Ginsberg

**Technology in the Classroom Strand**

*Reimagining Literacies in the Digital Age: Multimodal Strategies to Teach with Technology* (2022) Pauline S. Schmidt and Matthew J. Kruger-Ross

*Literacies Before Technologies: Making Digital Tools Matter for Middle Grades Learners* (2023) Troy Hicks and Jill Runstrom
Literacies Before Technologies
Making Digital Tools Matter for Middle Grades Learners

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Dear Reader,

As a former high school teacher, I remember the frustration I felt when the gap between Research (and that is how I always thought of it: Research with a capital R) and my own practice seemed too wide to ever cross. So many research studies were easy to ignore, in part because they were so distant from my practice and in part because I had no one to help me see how that research would make sense in my everyday practice.

That gap informs the thinking behind this book imprint. Designed for busy teachers, Principles in Practice publishes books that look carefully at NCTE’s research reports and policy statements and puts those policies to the test in actual classrooms. The goal: to familiarize teachers with important teaching issues, the research behind those issues, and potential resources, and—most of all—make the research and policies come alive for teacher-readers.

This book is part of a strand that focuses on Technology in the Classroom. Each book in the strand highlights a different aspect of this important topic and is organized in a similar way: immersing you first in the research principles surrounding technology use (as laid out in NCTE’s Beliefs for Integrating Technology into the English Language Arts Classroom) and then taking you into actual classrooms, teacher discussions, and student work to see how the principles play out. Each book closes with a teacher-friendly annotated bibliography to offer you even more resources.

Good teaching is connected to strong research. We hope these books help you continue the good teaching that you’re doing, think hard about ways to adapt and adjust your practice, and grow even stronger and more confident in the vital work you do with kids every day.

Best of luck,

Cathy Fleischer
Imprint Editor
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Beliefs for Integrating Technology into the English Language Arts Classroom

*This statement, formerly known as Beliefs about Technology and the Preparation of English Teachers, was updated in October 2018 with the new title, Beliefs for Integrating Technology into the English Language Arts Classroom.*

*Originally developed in July 2005; revised by the ELATE Commission on Digital Literacy in Teacher Education (D-LITE), October 2018*

**Preamble**

What it means to communicate, create, and participate in society seems to change constantly as we increasingly rely on computers, smartphones, and the web to do so. Despite this change, the challenge that renews itself—for teachers, teacher educators, and researchers—is to be responsive to such changes in meaningful ways without abandoning the kinds of practices and principles that we as English educators have come to value and know to work.


With some members of that original working group, as well as with many colleagues who have emerged in our field since that time, we offer a layered framework to support colleagues in their efforts to confidently and creatively explore networked, ubiquitous technologies in a way that deepens and expands the core principles of practice that have emerged over the last century in English and literacy education.

We begin by articulating four belief statements, crafted by this working group, composed of teachers as well as teacher educators and researchers. Then, we unpack each of the four belief statements in the form of an accessible summary paragraph followed by specific suggestions for K–12 teachers, teacher educators, and researchers. We conclude each section with a sampling of related scholarship.

As you read, you will notice that the beliefs are interwoven and echo each other necessarily; they are recursive but not redundant. We anticipate that as you read, you will see ways that they complement (or even conflict with) each other in theory or practice. Our field is complex, as is human experience. Our goal is to offer the field something well researched, usable, and empowering. If any of those words occur to you while reading, we will have considered our task complete, for now.

All contributors have offered their time, talent, and energy. Without the people noted at this document’s conclusion, this simply would not have happened. Moreover, we thank our four external reviewers whose feedback was thorough and thoughtful, and contributed with expertise, collegiality, and aplomb.

Tom Liam Lynch, Pace University               Troy Hicks, Central Michigan University
Beliefs for Integrating Technology into the English Language Arts Classroom

1. **Literacy means literacies.** Literacy is more than reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing as traditionally defined. It is more useful to think of literacies, which are social practices that transcend individual modes of communication.

2. **Consider literacies before technologies.** New technologies should be considered only when it is clear how they can enhance, expand, and/or deepen engaging and sound practices related to literacies instruction.

3. **Technologies provide new ways to consume and produce texts.** What it means to consume and produce texts is changing as digital technologies offer new opportunities to read, write, listen, view, record, compose, and interact with both the texts themselves and with other people.

4. **Technologies and their associated literacies are not neutral.** While access to technology and the internet has the potential to lessen issues of inequity, they can also perpetuate and even accelerate discrimination based on gender, race, socioeconomic status, and other factors.

The Beliefs Expanded

**Belief 1: Literacy means literacies.**

*Literacy is more than reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing as traditionally defined. It is more useful to think of literacies, which are social practices that transcend individual modes of communication.*

In today’s world, it is insufficient to define literacy as only skills-based reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. Even though common standards documents, textbook series, and views on instruction may maintain the traditional definition of literacy as print-based, researchers are clear that it is more accurate to approach literacy as literacies or literacy practices. (We’ll use the former here.)

There are multiple ways people communicate in a variety of social contexts. What’s more, the way people communicate increasingly necessitates networked, technological mediation. To that end, relying exclusively on traditional definitions of literacy unnecessarily limits the ways students can communicate and the ways educators can imagine curriculum and pedagogy.

Understanding the complexities of literacies, we believe:

1. **K–12 English teachers, with their students, should**
   - engage literacies as social practices by sponsoring students in digital writing and connected reading to collaboratively construct knowledge, participate in immersive learning experiences, and reach out to their own community and a global audience.
   - encourage multimodal digital communication while modeling how to effectively compose images, presentations, graphics, or other media productions by combining video clips, images, sound, music, voice-overs, and other media.
   - promote digital citizenship by modeling and mentoring students’ use of devices, tools, social media, and apps to create media and interact with others.
   - develop information literacies to determine the validity and relevance of media for academic argument including varied sources (e.g., blogs, *Wikipedia*, online databases, YouTube, mainstream news sites, niche news sites).
• foster critical media literacies by engaging students in analysis of both commercial media corporations and social media by examining information-reporting strategies, advertising of products or experiences, and portrayals of individuals in terms of gender, race, socioeconomic status, physical and cognitive ability, and other factors.

2. English teacher educators, with preservice and inservice teachers, should
• critically evaluate a variety of texts (across genres and media) using a variety of theoretical perspectives (e.g., social semiotics, connectivism, constructivism, posthumanism).
• consider the influence of digital technologies/networks in English language arts (ELA) methods courses to help preservice and inservice teachers foster use of digital/multimodal/critical literacies to support their students’ learning.
• model classroom use of literacy practices for creating and critiquing texts as well as for engaging with digital and networked technologies.
• design assignments, activities, and assessments that encourage interdisciplinary thinking, community and civic engagement, and technological integration informed by theories relevant to ELA.

3. English and literacy researchers should
• study literacies as more than general reading and writing abilities and move toward an understanding of teaching and learning within expanded frames of literacies and literacy practices (e.g., new literacies, multiliteracies, and socially situated literacies).
• question how technologies shape and mediate literacy practices in different scenes and spaces for activating user agency and making change.
• examine to what degree access to and support of digital tools/technologies and instruction in schools reflects and/or perpetuates inequality.
• explore how students and/or teachers negotiate the use of various literacies for various purposes.
• make explicit the ways technologies and literacies intersect with various user identities and understandings about and across different disciplines.
• articulate how policies and financial support at various levels (local, state, and national) inform both the infrastructure and the capacities for intellectual freedom to engage with literacies in personally and socially transformative ways.

Some Related Scholarship
Beliefs for Integrating Technology into the English Language Arts Classroom


**Belief 2: Consider literacies before technologies.**

*New technologies should be considered only when it is clear how they can enhance, expand, and/or deepen engaging and sound practices related to literacies instruction.*

In news releases and on school websites, it is not uncommon for educators to promote new technologies that appear to be more engaging for students or efficient for teachers. Engagement and efficiency are worthwhile pursuits, but it is also necessary to ensure that any use of a new technology serves intentional and sound instructional practices. Further, educators must be mindful to experiment with new technologies before using them with students, and at scale, in order to avoid overshadowing sound instruction with technical troubleshooting.

Finally, many new technologies can be used both inside and outside school, so educators should gain a good understanding of both the instructional potential (e.g., accessing class materials from home) and problems (e.g., issues of data privacy or cyber-bullying) of any potential technology use. Technological decisions must be guided by our theoretical and practical understanding of literacies as social practices.

Understanding this need to focus on instructional strategies that promote mindful literacy practices when using technologies, we believe:

1. K–12 English teachers, with their students, should
   - identify the unique purposes, audiences, and contexts related to online/e-book reading as well as digital writing, moving beyond historical conceptions of literature and composition in more narrowly defined, text-centric ways.
   - explore an expanded definition of “text” in a digital world which includes alphabetic text as well as multimodal texts such as images, charts, videos, maps, and hypertexts.
   - discuss issues of intellectual property and licensing in the context of multimodal reading and writing, including concepts related to copyright, fair use, Creative Commons, and the public domain.
2. English teacher educators, with preservice and inservice teachers, should
• recognize the role of out-of-school literacies and consider the place of students’ own language uses in mediated spaces, including the use of abbreviations, acronyms, emojis, and other forms of “digitalk.”
• model instructional practices and engage in new literacies that teachers themselves will employ with their own K–12 students such as composing, publishing, and reflecting on a video documentary or digital story.
• focus on affordances and constraints of technologies that can be used for varied purposes (e.g., the use of a collaborative word processor for individual writing with peer feedback, for group brainstorming, or for whole-class content curation) over fixed uses of limited tools such as online quiz systems, basic reading comprehension tests, or grammar games.

3. English and literacy researchers should
• consider how existing paradigms such as New Literacy Studies, New Literacies, and the Pedagogy of Multiliteracies can help to understand how students themselves experience technology, as well as how to use technology to enhance student learning.
• develop research agendas that examine best practices in K–12 classrooms where teachers leverage the power of literacies and technologies to help foster student voice and activism.
• build on a rich ethnographic tradition in our field to discover how literacy practices—for teachers and for students—change across time, space, and location.
• focus on inquiry that balances the novelty of digital tools with the overarching importance of teaching and learning for deep meaning-making, substantive conversation, and critical thinking.

Some Related Scholarship
Belief 3: Technologies provide new ways to consume and produce texts.

What it means to consume and produce texts is changing as digital technologies offer new opportunities to read, write, listen, view, record, compose, and interact with both the texts themselves and with other people.

As digital technologies have become more ubiquitous, so too has the ability to consume and produce texts in exciting new ways. To be clear, some academic tasks do not change. Whether a text is a paper-based book or a film clip, what it means to create a strong thesis statement or to ask a critical question about the text remains consistent. Further, some principles of consumption and production transfer across different types of texts, like the idea that an author (or a filmmaker, or a website designer) intentionally composed their text using specific techniques.

However, some things do change. For example, students can collaborate virtually on their reading (e.g., annotating a shared text even when not in the same physical space) and their writing (e.g., using collaborative document applications to work remotely on a text at the same time). Educators should be always aware of the above dynamics and plan instruction accordingly.

Understanding that there are dynamic literacy practices at work in the consumption and production of texts, we believe:

1. K–12 English teachers, with their students, should
   - teach students the principles of design and composition, as well as theories connected to issues of power and representation in visual imagery, music, and sound.
   - introduce students to the idea of audience through authentic assignments that have shared purpose and reach beyond the classroom to other youth as well as across generations.
   - ask students to repurpose a variety of digital media (e.g., images, video, music, text) to create a multimodal mashup or explore other emerging media genres (e.g., digital storytelling, infographics, annotated visuals, screencasts) that reflect concepts in literature such as theme, character, and setting.
   - direct students to use a note-taking tool to post text and images connected to a piece of literature they are reading in the form of a character's diary or a reader response journal.
   - immerse students in the world of transmedia storytelling by having them trace the origin and evolution of a character, storyline, issue, or event across multiple online platforms including a photo essay, a timeline, and an interactive game.
   - invite students to investigate their stance on social issues through the multimodal inquiry methods involved in digital storytelling, documentary video, or podcasting.

2. English teacher educators, with preservice and inservice teachers, should
   - harness online platforms for collaborative writing to invite teacher candidates to examine the composing practices of students and create peer feedback partnerships.
   - read, annotate, and discuss both alphabetic and visual texts, leading to substantive discussion about issues of plot, theme, and character development.
   - explore how practicing teachers are facilitating multimodal composition and sharing student writing with audiences beyond the classroom.
   - encourage teacher candidates to design instruction that integrates digital composing and multimodalities with canonical literature.
3. English and literacy researchers should
   • examine the affordances and constraints of multimodal composition, points of tension with traditional academic literacies, and the role that teachers of writing play in assessment and evaluation of multimodal compositions.
   • describe and articulate ideas related to authentic writing experiences beyond the classroom, including a better account of audiences for whom students are writing and purposes other than academic argument.
   • explore what constitutes critical literacy—paying attention to the construction of individual and cultural identities—when composing multimodally with visuals, music, and sound.

Some Related Scholarship


Belief 4: Technologies and their associated literacies are not neutral.  
While access to technology and the internet has the potential to lessen issues of inequity, they can also perpetuate and even accelerate discrimination based on gender, race, socioeconomic status, and other factors.  

It is common to hear digital technologies discussed in positive, progressive, and expansive terms; those who speak with enthusiasm may be doing so without an awareness that technology can also deepen societal inequities. Students who have access to technology at home, for example, might appear to understand a subject presented with a digital device faster than those who do not have access to similar devices outside of school.  

As another example, some technologies that enable systems like “credit recovery courses” and remedial literacy software—which are frequently used more heavily in “struggling” schools that serve students who are poor and/or of color—can often reduce pedagogy to the mere coverage of shallow content and completion of basic assessments, rather than providing robust innovation for students to creatively represent their learning.  

Understanding the complexity of learning how to use technology, and one’s own social, political, and personal relationship to issues of gender, race, socioeconomic status, and other factors, we believe:  

1. K–12 English teachers, with their students, should  
   • promote and demonstrate critical thinking through discussion and identification of the rhetoric of written and digital materials (e.g., political propaganda and groupthink through social media posts and commentary).  
   • introduce research skills that complicate and expand upon the trends of online authorship and identity (e.g., censorship, fair use, privacy, and legalities).  
   • explore and measure the impact of a digital footprint on readers by analyzing different online identities (e.g., fanfiction, social media, professional websites).  
   • choose technology products and services with an intentional awareness toward equity, including the affordances and constraints evident in free/open source, freemium, and subscription-based offerings.  

2. English teacher educators, with preservice and inservice teachers, should  
   • demonstrate how inequality affects access to technology throughout communities (e.g. policies, funding, stereotyping).  
   • advocate for technology in marginalized communities through, for example, grant writing, community outreach programs, and family-oriented workshops.
• model research-driven practices and methods that integrate technology into the English language arts in ways that underscore the learning of conceptual, procedural, and attitudinal and/or value-based knowledge (e.g., lesson and curriculum planning).
• define and provide exemplars of technology use for educational equity that expand beyond gender, race, and socioeconomic status to include mental health, ableism, immigration status, exceptionality, and (dis)ability.

3. English and literacy researchers should
• design research studies that problematize popular assumptions about the nature of societal inequity, as well as issues of power and authority in knowledge production.
• introduce, examine, and question theoretical frameworks that provide principles and concepts which attempt to acknowledge and name inequality in society.
• build methodological frameworks that account for hidden issues of power and stance in research questions, methods, the role of researcher(s), and identification of findings.
• advocate for equitable solutions that employ technology in culturally responsive ways, drawing on students’ and teachers’ existing funds of knowledge related to literacy, learning, and using digital devices/networks.

Some Related Scholarship
Beliefs for Integrating Technology into the English Language Arts Classroom


Summary

In offering these four belief statements and numerous examples, the scholars and educators involved in writing this document recognize that we, too, are both informed—and limited—by our own experiences, assumptions, and daily literacy practices. It is our sincere hope that this substantially revised document can be a tool for opening up new conversations, opportunities for instruction, and lines of inquiry within the field of English language arts.

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Like you, we teach readers and writers and are compelled to continue thinking about the ways that technology has influenced our students’ literacies. When we consider all that we appreciate and enjoy about teaching, there is a common thread that ties us back to the influence of digital tools and the ways that we can bring them into our work with students, doing so in critical and creative ways. In short, we believe that literacy and technology are intertwined and that students can produce amazing work when given the chance.

The two of us have had the opportunity to collaborate many times over the past eight years. Through an initial introduction via mutual colleagues in 2014 and our continued work through affiliation with the Chippewa River Writing Project at Central Michigan University, the two of us have had numerous conversations about what it means to teach English language arts through many formal professional development events as well as countless emails, texts, and video chats. When the opportunity to write this Principles in Practice book arose, we looked at it as an opportunity to engage in even more teacher research, guided by Cathy Fleischer’s expertise in that field and her steady hand as an editor.

As we write this introduction, pulling together the individual chapters we’ve written—as well as the thoughtful vignettes from ten colleagues—into a coherent narrative, it is the end of the summer of 2021. As the Bob Dylan lyric goes, the times are still a-changing. The bulk of this book was composed during the 2020–2021 academic
year, then into the 2021–2022 year, a time that brought two significant changes for Jill’s work as a classroom teacher: the move to a new school and the constant threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a way of reflecting on this statement, in action, and thinking about implications for a “new normal,” the collaboration that the two of us (Troy and Jill) have had during this strange year has been amazing. We are grateful for the opportunity to share, for the voices of our colleagues in their vignettes, and Cathy’s continued guidance, and we hope that the book will be taken in the spirit it is offered: as a guide for other ELA teachers to articulate their own beliefs for integrating technology into their instruction. As we mention many tech tools, we have collected the links on a single page on Troy’s website, available at <hickstro.org/ncte-middle-grades-tech>. Readers can also access the page with the QR code here.

First, for Jill, the year of 2020 began with a mid-school year move from a middle level ELA position in a district that she had worked in for 27 years to a new opportunity to teach ninth graders at Skyline High School in Ann Arbor. These exciting changes prompted Jill to think about all the ways that she had integrated technology before and to adapt these ideas to ninth grade (or, in other words, the transitional year from middle grades to high school), combined with a school-wide emphasis on mastery learning. Throughout the 2020–2021 academic year, we met on a regular basis to discuss what was happening in Jill’s virtual classroom, to think through lesson ideas, and to write this manuscript. Thus, with Cathy’s encouragement to think about how we might stretch our examples to meet the needs of all students from grades 5–9, many of her examples are drawn from the “upper” levels of the middle grades, and—as we will describe in more detail below—we have brought in the voices of other ELA educators to share their perspectives, too.

Thus, the two of us worked together, meeting once a week via Zoom to talk through the changes that Jill was experiencing in remote teaching, how students were adapting to online lessons, and the ways in which she was trying to use technology critically and creatively. Like the majority of nearly 50 million other K–12 students in the United States and their teachers, this school year brought many changes and challenges for Jill and her students, too. Some of our sessions were more talk than writing, serving as an opportunity to debrief and brainstorm. Other sessions were more focused on the writing at hand, as we had each worked during the previous week to bring a draft of new material and then offer a response to one another during our Zoom calls. These meetings grew a little more sporadic over the summer and picked up again in the fall of 2021 as we completed the manuscript. Together, we worked to bring cohesion to the text—and our voice throughout—and to share exceptional samples of
Jill's students' work. As a note to our readers, we will often shift to first person singular in the book, where Jill's voice is foregrounded. We have done this—as well as added "Notes from Troy" in separate call outs—in order to maintain consistency for you as you read. That said, we were both actively involved in all aspects of writing and revising the main portions of the text.

This change in teaching context in January 2020 was quite a bit for Jill, as it would be for any of us. Still, it paled in comparison to what she—indeed, all of us—would soon experience, a change that requires a little more exploration before digging into the heart of our work. Our contributors, too, were invited to write brief vignettes that recognized the complexities of their own current teaching and learning contexts, and some of them do explicitly reference work during remote teaching in 2020 and 2021. We thank them for their contributions and will introduce them throughout the book.

To provide some additional context for our work together—as well as Jill's work in a new district, with new colleagues—we begin with a brief explanation of her work with other Skyline HS teachers.

Curriculum, Collaboration, and Change: A Glimpse into the Work of Skyline HS’s English Department

As noted above, we now move into the first-person singular with Jill's voice reflecting on her students, her teaching, and the changes she has made to more intentionally integrate technology into her instruction over the past year.

January of 2020 was an exciting time for me. After living and teaching in northern Michigan for 27 years, my family and I were ready for a change. While it is a bit unorthodox for someone to uproot herself after teaching many years in one school district, I always wanted to have the experience of teaching in a larger district, with more resources, and a community rich in diversity to tap into when needed. Ann Arbor doesn't disappoint in any of these categories. Ann Arbor, Michigan, is home to the University of Michigan and is located just southwest of Detroit. According to US News' ratings of best high schools, Skyline High School is ranked number one among public high schools in Ann Arbor and 18th in Michigan. Skyline’s student-teacher ratio is 18:1 and it serves a population of 1451 students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The total teaching staff is 84 with an English department of 15 teachers. The school year is divided into three 12-week trimesters where students take five classes each. Finally, Skyline High School is a “mastery learning” school—based on the ideas originally proposed by Benjamin Bloom (Guskey, 2010)—imbued with formative assessments
where students are required to meet the curriculum’s mastery standards at a level of eighty percent or higher. Students are engaged in project-based learning that gives them choice and voice in their demonstration of the curriculum’s mastery standards.

The English curriculum is divided into grade level offerings that require students to take English for two of the three trimesters each year: English A and English B. Both English sections at each grade level have three units apiece:

- **English A**—Close Reading, Creative and Narrative Writing, Research to Inform and Explain
- **English B**—Literary Analysis, Argument Writing, Speaking and Listening

These unit topics remain the same for grades 6–12, and the complexity and rigor spirals up recursively as students work through the secondary grades.

English teachers at Skyline typically do not have the same teaching assignment year after year. Teachers are placed in classes according to learning communities within the school. This can result in teaching a new grade level or class each year. For example, I primarily teach ninth grade, but that is not a given. I have also been assigned English 10 and 11, creative writing, and a support class for struggling students called Academic Literacy. Because teachers’ assignments can shift, the culture among all teachers at Skyline High School is collaborative. It is common for a teacher to share a whole trimester of course materials with a colleague; this team spirit is simply a part of what we do.

When faced with the long-term assignment of teaching remotely, the district created “teacher learning networks,” or TLNs, for all content areas and divided them into grade levels. If a teacher’s assignment encompassed more than one grade level, then they would attend the TLN where the most students were affected. This allowed the district to deliver information and new initiatives—for instance, remote teaching support and Schoology course design for all teachers, as well as subject-specific initiatives like literature circles in English—through smaller groups in the context of the subject taught. Skyline’s English department also encouraged this same grade level TLN concept within our school, which placed me with three other teachers who primarily taught ninth grade: Alaina Feliks, Serena Kessler, and Amanda McMurray.

As the year progressed, and as readers will see in this book, my team and I discovered that teaching online is very different from face-to-face instruction. Moreover, if students were to have an engaging learning experience, we had to share the workload. We planned units and lessons together and divided the workload by week. Each of us would volunteer to plan a week’s lessons and materials, spacing them so we had a breather before the next one. This provided a break of a week or two between building lessons in order to catch up on feedback and grading (and maybe even to make dinner one night instead of ordering takeout!). Prepping and teaching online were both grueling until we fell into the rhythm of the work. We became a tight-knit group—
providing support to each other along the way in whatever form that took: technology help, emotional support, as well as curricular ideas. These women are no longer just my colleagues; they are all my good friends, and I thank them for their collaborative, generous spirits.

This led to another change in our schooling routines: our year was divided into semesters instead of trimesters, and so we had to rethink the timing of units as well as the number of lessons we could feasibly teach within a block schedule. The decision to go to a semester block schedule was made at the district level, so all the high schools in Ann Arbor Public Schools adopted the following schedule:

- School started at 8:30 am each day and students virtually attended 3 classes per day for 105 minutes each, up until the release time of 3:30 pm.
- Students attended class hours 1, 3, and 5 on Monday and Thursday and class hours 2, 4, and 6 on Tuesday and Friday; lessons on these days were synchronous, requiring students to log into Zoom at the assigned class time.
- Wednesday was asynchronous—teachers would plan a lesson that students could complete on their own. Most of the time, my group planned the asynchronous lessons with a Hyperdoc-style template provided by the district. We relied heavily on videos—both our own screencast creations as well as other materials we found on the internet—to help students complete the work assigned.

So many changes in one school year was a test for all of us. There were many new skills I needed, as did my students. I feel like a really important lesson has surfaced: teachers are in partnership with their students, and the process of learning requires teacher-student collaboration instead of a top-down approach. The whole idea of being the guide on the side instead of the sage on the stage was something I always believed, but the 2020–2021 school year made it a requirement.

Just the new technology skills required of teachers and students to manage our daily work alone required a different kind of collaboration. When I couldn't figure something out, I would ask the students what they saw on their computer screens and, many times, I turned over the reins to a tech-savvy student. The student shared their screen with the class to demo the skill or view the screen in a manner that I didn't have as the teacher. This is one small example of how structural changes in schooling pushed us into productive partnership with our students. They felt the freedom to tell me where there were gaps in the lesson or if I placed something in the Schoology course that was difficult to find. We were learning more than just our curriculum in the moments that required it, and students gave me feedback on my online teaching, in real time, and that really helped.

Maybe part of this is my own comfort level with being vulnerable, but I really liked those moments where we were all teaching each other and learning together.
Staying Home, Staying Safe, and Going Remote

With the closures of spring 2020 and the continued changes as schools began again in the fall, we knew we were writing this book in a moment unlike any other in our educational careers. Thus, throughout the text, you will find threads of pandemic pedagogy sewn within narratives and examples of our teaching. But, as we’ve learned as schools have returned to the “new normal” in the fall of 2021 (interrupted by numerous synchronous and asynchronous instructional days that were necessitated by viral outbreaks and substitute shortages, among other unexpected occurrences), the ways of teaching we learned during that time will continue to impact our approaches to teaching, in general, and specifically teaching with technology (as we talk about more throughout the book). So, even though many of the examples come from the time of synchronous and asynchronous online teaching, we were striving to make sure that we were writing about technology and teaching in ways that reflect the best practices for ELA instruction at any time, now and in the future.

None of us could have fully imagined the ways that “emergency remote teaching” (Hodges et al., 2020) that began in the spring of 2020 would impact teaching and learning over the long haul. Hodges et al. characterizes this kind of teaching as

[A] temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered

Notes from Troy

Here, and throughout the book, Troy offers some additional ideas in these “Notes from Troy” sidebars.

Knowing that Jill—like tens of thousands of other educators around the world—was continuing to adapt and change throughout 2020–2021 to teaching contexts that seemed unimaginable reminds me that educators are a resilient bunch. That said, I am also mindful that the stresses were greater on some communities and individuals, especially teachers who work with students who are disproportionately affected by childhood trauma, poverty, racism, and a variety of other factors. Yes, we all experience different stresses in different ways, yet working with Jill reminded me that—even in well-resourced communities—the challenges of remote teaching and learning were exceptional.

Whatever “lessons learned” we take from this era that then encourage the use of technology to support ELA learning in the future, we also know that this moment in our history took its toll on our students, families, and communities. For many reasons, we must always remember those family members and friends that we lost, even as we look ahead to new opportunities for teaching with technology in the future.
face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses and that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated. (para. 13)

In contrast to the kinds of online experiences that have been carefully designed and implemented in a strategic manner—whether in a hybrid or fully online setting, and whether completely synchronous or with some asynchronous components—“emergency remote teaching” was only ever meant to be a temporary solution. That said, depending on the teaching context in which our readers find themselves, we know that many K–12 ELA teachers and teacher educators may still be balancing the challenges of remote teaching and learning, even if the immediate “emergency” is over and a more nuanced, clearly defined definition of “remote” is still elusive.

To that end, both of us have been conscious of the varying and complex teaching contexts that will likely be in place for years to come and how the position statement, while not designed for this moment in time, can still serve us well in considering the role of technology in the ELA classroom.

Notes from Troy

Throughout the year, as Jill and I collaborated on (and commiserated about) the many changes and challenges she was facing, I was also reminded of the dozens of other teachers with whom I was working in graduate coursework, professional development sessions, and our Chippewa River Writing Project. Now a documented phenomenon, the kinds of burnout that teachers experienced in the 2020–2021 academic year were a combination of many factors, and more than I could name here.

Connecting to the note above, I offer one more time that the challenges that emerged with remote teaching and learning came at great cost: lives lost, harm to mental and physical health, personal finances, and more. We need teacher leaders who can guide and mentor both their own students as well as their colleagues, especially those new to the profession.

This book, then, is a response to an era of technology-infused (though often forced) teaching and learning that, I hope, serves as a roadmap to the work ahead for all ELA teachers and teacher leaders while also recognizing the sacrifices that many of us have made.

Examining Our Beliefs about the Integration of Technology into ELA Instruction

And, with that, we transition from this preface into a closer look at the position statement, *Beliefs for Integrating Technology into the English Language Arts Classroom* (ELATE Commission on Digital Literacy in Teacher Education, 2018) that is the basis of this book. Troy was one of the co-chairs leading work on revision of the statement, in
partnership with Tom Liam Lynch, who together led nearly two dozen other English educators through a process of writing and revision over two years (Zucker & Hicks, 2019). In doing so, the committee worked diligently to outline a forward-looking agenda, one in which we would more intentionally integrate technology into our literacy instruction.

From there, in Chapter 2, we unpack the BIT-ELA position statement, delving a bit more into the particular context in which we have written it during two years of continued uncertainty yet with an eye toward the future of ELA instruction. In the process of thinking through BIT-ELA, we also explore the way that Jill has shifted toward the use of digital writers’ notebooks.

In Chapter 3, “Close Reading,” we dig into techniques and tools for looking carefully at texts. Though the debate about what constitutes “close reading” still goes on, ideas in this chapter will explore what happens when students are engaged both on page and on screen, using digital tools to complement and extend their reading experiences. With ideas for exploring both multimodal and alphabetic texts through the lens of close reading, we will consider ways that students are invited to ask questions and annotate texts.

Then, in Chapter 4, we explore expository writing through the “Research, Inform, Explain” unit. The term “fake news” has become fraught with multiple interpretations yet highlights a problem from decades, even centuries, past that has included propaganda and misinformation. As we consider the ways our students must engage in inquiry, and work to create clear, concise summaries of what they have found, the skills for research that require digital literacies remain pertinent. As one example, Jill documents her experience teaching students the process of “lateral reading” (McGrew et al., 2019), leading them ultimately to the production of an infographic as a companion to their research paper.

Next, we return to a cornerstone practice in the teaching of English: literary analysis. Chapter 5 reminds us that literary analysis of both classic and contemporary texts will remain a key part of what happens in our classrooms. Learning how to analyze and critique works of fiction, drama, and poetry helps build additional skills as well as foster an appreciation of the art form. With texts that are “born digital” that warrant interpretation, as well as a full range of digital tools that can be used to discuss literary works, we know that literary analysis remains an important part of ELA.

Remote learning required Jill to think differently about teaching the skills of analysis. She had to replace the face-to-face lessons of the classroom with something new, asking students to work through analyzing a series of texts within the structure of a “Hyperdoc” (Highfill et al., 2016), which we explore in more detail.

Chapter 6 outlines another major genre explored in Jill’s classroom: argument. In an age where social media dominates our daily literacy practices, we need to help students develop skills for both traditional, academic argumentation, as well as to
explore new modes of expression in which they can make their case through images, videos, infographics, maps, and other unique forms of expression. Building on ideas from the NWP’s College, Career, and Community Writers Program—or C3WP (National Writing Project, n.d.a.)—this chapter encourages teachers to explore arguments in terms of dialogue, not just a lop-sided debate. Here, Jill outlines two lessons for strengthening students’ argument writing skills with a twist on the process using various forms of public service announcements as a summative assessment.

Finally, in Chapter 7, we conclude our journey through one year of Jill’s teaching—and the BIT-ELA statements—and consider next steps in hybrid or blended learning by reiterating key themes, including those of communication and collaboration, creation and exploration, inquiry and equity. Also, we speculate a bit, based on one year’s worth of experience. If we believe that screens are not the best way to learn for most students, at least not all the time, then what kinds/forms of hybrid school will emerge?

In our minds, teachers will shift their thinking of how to deliver their curriculum by adding another layer of nuance that we want to explore in more detail: planning for what Renee Hobbs and Julie Coiro describe as “real time” and “any time” learning (Coiro & Hobbs, 2021).

And, as we’ve mentioned, readers will find additional ideas from other middle level educators throughout the book through brief vignettes, expanding the reach of this book into other contexts beyond Jill’s classroom. With the introduction of this first vignette in the section below, we pause for just a moment to provide the background for their inclusion in the manuscript. In the fall of 2020, Troy sent invitations to several colleagues and encouraged them to contribute reflections on a teaching practice that highlighted an element of the Beliefs for Integrating Technology into the English Language Arts Classroom, giving us a glimpse into their classrooms. Ten of our colleagues took up the invitation, and we thank them for their contributions.

And, with that, we welcome the first voice of a colleague, Jenny Sanford, an ELA teacher at Springport Middle School in a rural/suburban region in Michigan’s lower peninsula, who offers us insights on the many ways that she kept her students connected, mostly through what she describes as “In-Person/Virtual Collaborative Book Clubs.”

From the Classroom: “In-Person/Virtual Collaborative Book Clubs” by Jenny Sanford

Jenny Sanford is a 6th–8th grade ELA teacher at Springport Middle School. She attained a master’s degree in Literacy Instruction from Michigan State University, which included the completion of a K–12 Reading Specialist certification. Jenny holds several leadership positions within her district, sitting on both the district and building leadership teams, as well as functioning as the K–12 ELA PLC leader.
Recently, Jenny served on the statewide team that developed the newly revised Michigan Middle School English Language Arts Units. She is also the Adolescent Literacy co-chair on the Michigan Reading Association board and is the president of the South Central Michigan Reading Council.

In my district this past year, our secondary teachers served both in-person and virtual students. Our virtual students completed their studies asynchronously through videos, lessons, assignments, and assessments posted in Google Classroom, aside from Wednesdays when in-person students were virtual and virtual students were synchronous, Zooming with all of their classroom teachers on a schedule. I came to realize that there was exceeding isolation in this situation for my virtual students. It was reflecting on this realization that drew me to looking for a way to bring both groups of students together, to give them the opportunity to form a community of learners. This is how I came to the idea of creating In-Person/Virtual Collaborative Book Clubs.

Book clubs remain a regular staple in my classroom. In our middle school, we teach our book clubs around genres to ensure that all students encounter as many kinds of literature as possible in their three years of middle school. This school year, my seventh graders completed three book clubs around the following genres and topics: legend, WWII (both historical fiction and narrative nonfiction), and mystery. The WWII unit was taught as an interdisciplinary unit with seventh grade social studies.

As the 2020–2021 year necessitated, much of this book club work took place in a digital space. To begin, all students completed a virtual book pass in the form of a Google Slides presentation in which each book received its own slide with a picture of the book, a synopsis of the plot, and a link to a book trailer (please see the "WWII Book Club Virtual Book Pass" links on the book’s companion website). At the end of the slide show, students completed a Google Form indicating the books in which they were most interested. I then grouped students in heterogeneous teams of in-person and virtual students. Additionally, I used a read aloud as an anchor text (please see "The Diary of Anne Frank Listening Guide" link on the book’s companion website). This allowed me to delve into genre elements and reading comprehension concepts the students were working on in their book club texts. For the virtual students, I recorded videos in which I read the anchor text aloud and hyperlinked the videos to a Google Doc laid out as a table with the date of the recording, the chapter/section recorded, and the link to the recording (please see "The House with a Clock in Its Walls Read Aloud Links" link on the book’s companion website).

I created a Zoom schedule for meetings, and students began their book club conversations. The first few meetings were clumsy, as would be expected. Students needed scaffolding and support to use the tools effectively. Students had to learn, as the first literacy practice in the NCTE Beliefs document states, to “engage as social practices . . . collaboratively construct[ing] knowledge, participat[ing] in immersive learning experiences.”
Even with practice, learning to interact across Zoom was a challenge. Some virtual students struggled through connectivity issues that resulted in video or audio not working properly. Some virtual students had difficulty feeling included by the in-person students. Both groups required support and instruction on how to engage across a computer screen. Together we needed to “question how technologies shape and mediate literacy practices” and “explore how [we] negotiate the use of . . . literacies.” We had to ask how Zoom was holding us back and how we could use it more effectively.

Most of all, each group of students needed to learn how to be empathetic to the other group of students. It was important for the virtual kids to realize why it was difficult for in-person students to include them in discussion, and the in-person kids needed to learn how isolating it is to sit by yourself on the other side of a screen from a group of people. Once they placed themselves in the other's shoes and received scaffolded support to address these issues, it was much easier for them to work together and the conversations flowed more freely. For instance, one virtual student sent me an email after her first book club meeting stating that her team members were excluding her from the meeting and treating her very rudely. Upon investigation, I learned that the in-person portion of her group felt distant from her because she kept her camera off and rarely talked during meetings. The in-person students needed support in how to include her in the discussion in a way that was inviting, not demanding. The virtual student needed encouragement to take the chance to have her camera on so that her teammates could feel more connected to her during the meetings. Once each side was able to understand the other’s perspective, their group was able to function more effectively.

For the unit assessments, Google Forms was the platform I chose to create a pretest and post-test for students to measure the unit objectives. Using Google Forms to test students is very efficient. Grading tests in ELA can be challenging because open-ended responses have to be viewed by the teacher to be graded. Because Forms produces a spreadsheet of responses, I was able to grade from the spreadsheet and even color-code responses (green for correct, yellow for partially correct, and red for incorrect) to use the pre/post data for my own data conference with my principal at the end of the year. Students took the same Form test but in two separate forms, by making a copy of the pretest for the post test, so that I would have two different spreadsheets for comparison.

I was happy to see that, on the end-of-the-year survey, many virtual and in-person students alike indicated that the book clubs were among their favorite units of the year. Some virtual students noted that book clubs made them feel connected to other students in school. As I move into the new school year, virtual book clubs will likely become a thing of the past, yet there were some important lessons that came out of this experience for both the kids and me. Working with other people can be messy but worthwhile. If we are willing to listen to others, there is so much we can learn from them.
Chapter 1

Final Thoughts on an Unusual Year with the BIT-ELA Principles in Mind

As we close this introduction and begin to think about the position statement in more detail, we are reminded that English teachers have been taking on the task of integrating technology and media in their classroom for decades. While some efforts have been more successful than others, we are also reminded of the idea from NCTE’s Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age that “[a]s society and technology change, so [too] does literacy” (2019a). Our students may be able to navigate Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok more efficiently than we ever could, yet this does not mean that they always bring a critical and creative sensibility to their uses of technology and, as the definition’s framework calls us to do, we must teach our students how to utilize these tools in meaningful, substantive ways. Our work as ELA educators will continue to evolve, and yet the need for our work is equally as important now as it was over 100 years ago when NCTE members first began this ongoing journey to better prepare our students for literate lives beyond school.

To guide further discussion and exploration, we encourage teachers to think about the following:

- In what ways are you currently using technology to support reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and visually representing in your middle level ELA classroom?
• What teaching practices, especially with technology, have remained relatively constant for you over the years? What has changed? What might you be ready to change considering the BIT-ELA statement and what you have read so far?

• Reflecting on the effects of remote teaching and learning, whether just a few weeks or an entire school year, what teaching practices have been most useful for you? What do you want to carry forward—and enhance—as you think about digital writing, connected reading, and other technology-enabled literacies?

Also, as we head into chapters with samples of student work, a quick note here on style. When we use student work, please know that minor typos that do not affect the overall meaning of their writing have been revised for clarity.
This practical book explores applications of NCTE’s *Beliefs for Integrating Technology into the English Language Arts Classroom* position statement in middle grades classrooms. It follows a year in the life of Runstrom’s ninth-grade English classroom amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the many changes that remote learning necessitated. With specific lesson ideas and examples of student work, the book brings the entire Beliefs statement to life while also foregrounding the primary goal that we should consider “literacies before technologies,” creating rich opportunities for reading and writing, enhanced with digital tools.

Part of the *Principles in Practice* imprint, this book includes chapters and vignettes that explore:

- How remote technologies can enhance classroom-based ELA instruction
- Lessons and technologies for close and critical reading for literary analysis
- Recommendations for teaching writing to inform and argue
- Considerations for remote and hybrid learning

The authors’ insights and recommendations will help you use technology to enhance your ELA teaching across remote, hybrid, and in-person settings.

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**Jill Runstrom**, MEd, teaches English at Skyline High School in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Jill credits her work with the Chippewa River Writing Project for the many professional opportunities that have enriched her career. Runstrom served on the steering committee for the 4T Conference on Digital Writing, was awarded a fellowship at the Olga Lengyel Institute for Holocaust Studies and Human Rights in New York City, served on the teacher advisory board at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills, Michigan, and has presented numerous times at the NCTE Annual Convention.