"Beliefs for Integrating Technology into the English Language Arts Classroom": Reflections from Scholars in the Field

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We currently serve as co-chairs of the Commission on Digital Literacies and Teacher Education (D-LITE; http://www2.ncte.org/groups/elate/elate-commissions/), a working group within the National Council of Teachers of English's (NCTE; http://www2.ncte.org/) English Language Arts Teacher Educators (ELATE; http://www2.ncte.org/groups/elate/) group. Among our many recent projects, 22 members of the D-LITE Commission worked collaboratively on a position statement entitled "Beliefs for Integrating Technology into the English Language Arts Classroom" (Lynch et al., 2018), an updated version of a piece originally published in *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education*, "Beliefs About Technology and the Preparation of English Teachers: Beginning the Conversation" (Swenson, Rozema, Young, McGrail, & Whitin, 2005).

Also featured in this issue is an article about the process of creating the position statement entitled, "23 Months x 22 Scholars: Collaboration, Negotiation, and the Revision of a Position Statement on Technology in English Language Arts" (Zucker & Hicks, this issue).

On Sunday, September 15, 2019, at 8 p.m. ET, the ELATE D-LITE commission will hold an hour-long #NCTEchat about the 2018 "Beliefs for Integrating Technology into the English Language Arts Classroom" with hosts Troy Hicks (@hickstro), Tom Liam Lynch (@tomliamlynch), Nicole Damico (@nicolerdamico), and Lauren Zucker (@LGZreader).

As a way to situate the newly revised position statement, we invited responses from scholars in the field. What follows are a pair of scholarly reflections: the former from Alvermann, who agreed to review it with fresh eyes ("ELA Educators Tell It Like It Is — Always!"), and the latter from McGrail and Young, who worked on both the original statement in 2005 and the 2018 update ("Then, Now, and Onward: Reflections on the Origins of the 2005 CEE Beliefs about Technology and the Preparation of English Teachers").

What we have come to understand as we tackle this undertaking is just how important it is for a field to continually evaluate and collaborate on its understanding of how technologies impact the work that we do every day both to support new and practicing teachers and to ultimately provide the best learning opportunities for students. This includes establishing clear, adaptable recommendations for how we might approach the use of digital technologies for teaching and learning across contexts: for K-12 teachers, for teacher educators, and for researchers.

The ideas presented here are, as Alvermann reminds us, are "continually at work." We wish to extend our gratitude to the educators and reviewers involved in all stages of this project.

Nicole Damico & Lauren Zucker
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ELA Educators Tell It Like It Is—Always!

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English language arts educators have ways with words (thank you, Shirley Brice Heath) that put them out front and visible in addressing issues vitally important for teaching in "post-truth" media contexts—especially those in which "objective facts are less influential

in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2016). The implications of post-truth discourse for ELA educators and the students whom they teach form the core of my current research interests. Thus, when Nicole Damico and Lauren Zucker invited me to express my opinion on the significance and value of NCTE's new Beliefs Statement, I readily accepted.

Pedagogically and philosophically, I am drawn to research that explores the complexities of why we, as ELA educators, "do" critical literacy instruction and the assumptions underlying what we do and to what extent that doing affects the students we teach. For me, learning and instructing are reciprocal practices. Neither comes first in terms of sorting and ordering; nor do the two comprise separate knowledge systems. More remix (an alternate version) than mashup (a blending of two or more elements), the two reciprocal practices by which I live and work occupy a large share of my waking hours. It is fitting, then, that they figure prominently in my reflections on all four beliefs.

1. Literacy means literacies.

In a critique of the autonomous model of literacy instruction — a view that defined reading and writing as neutral processes in the United States and elsewhere prior to the last decade of the 20th century—Brian Street (1995) drew from his anthropological fieldwork on literacy in Iran during the 1970s to construct what he called his ideological model. Briefly, his model holds that all reading and writing practices are embedded in larger sociopolitical relations of power. Over time, the notion of literacy with a big "L" and single "y" gave way to the plural from, literacies. And with that change came the notion of *new literacies* — a concept that sometimes draws negative critiques when Lankshear and Knobel's (2011) astute observation is overlooked: that is, the *new* in new literacies will be with us for some time to come. Not *new* as in a replacement metaphor, but new in that technological, social, cultural, economic, intellectual, and institutional changes are continually at work, even as I write this reflection on the new NCTE Beliefs Statement.

Five years after Street's (1995) critique of the autonomous model of literacy and within a decade of Gee's (1996) seminal book, *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourse*, the New London Group (2000) published its treatise on multiliteracies. This group, named after the town in which they met (New London, New Hampshire) consisted of ELA scholars (e.g., Courtney Cazden, Allan Luke, and James Gee) who drew attention to the need for integrating various communication modes (linguistic, visual, aural, and kinesthetic) into contemporary literacies instruction.

The broadening of the term literacy has resulted in a proliferation of near-synonyms that are proving problematic. For instance, the term *multiliteracies* is often conflated with multimodal reading and writing, digital literacies, and multiple literacies. Distinguishing the differences among these terms (see Alvermann, 2017b) could potentially lessen misinterpretations of research about new literacies, especially when findings invite a too-easy dismissal by teachers, school administrators, teacher educators, researchers, funding agencies, policy makers, and the general public.

2. Consider literacies before technologies.

In the context of transnationalism, defined broadly by Britannica.com as economic, political, and cultural processes that extend beyond the boundaries of nation-states, the tendency is to equate new literacies with technology. At best, this association is questionable; at worst, it is misleading. The "technical stuff" (e.g., digital remixing, podcasting, blogging, and tweeting) pales in importance when compared to "new ethos

stuff" such as collaborative problem solving, social networking, multimodal composing, and competitive video gaming in online spaces (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011).

In those spaces micro- and macro-aggressions can go unchecked to the point bullying becomes a life and death matter (Alvermann, 2017a). In such instances, critical literacies instruction, while not a panacea, is a necessity. Without it, today's youth are left defenseless as media messages rife with sexual and ethno-racial slurs swirl about them.

Literacies before technologies is an NTCE Beliefs Statement that speaks directly to English language arts educators who have tremendous responsibility for teaching youth how to reflect critically on their own assumptions that may be historically rooted in social inequities. One approach I have used successfully is an adaptation of Boler's (1999) pedagogy of discomfort. It calls for a metaperspective on how one's emotions (fear, frustration, anger, and disappointment) can be ethically mediated through small-group discussions that leave room for personal skepticism. In the context of post-truth media messages, leaving room for doubt is an asset (Alvermann, 2019).

3. Technologies provide new ways to consume and produce texts.

Viewed through Goldhaber's (1997) theorized attention economy, attention rather than information is in short supply (thus, in high demand). Networked digital technologies ensure that online text production of "virtual knowledge-artifacts…is conditional upon user attention" (de Castell & Jenson, 2004, p. 381). De Castell and Jenson contended that "new multimodal technologies of representation … actually consolidate, extend, and improve upon [one's] literate capabilities" (p. 392). Those who have high-speed access to virtual artifacts consumed, produced, and distributed online using clicks, likes, views, followers, and shares have an advantage. Minus high-speed access, however, these forms of click-bait capital are, for all practical purposes, useless.

Restrictive access to digital technologies severely limits the outside influences that youth living in poverty need if they are to critique social and economic inequities. Without such knowledge, they stand little chance of designing their own social futures. In other words, technologies that have the potential to provide new ways of consuming and producing texts often work against the very groups who could benefit the most.

When reviews of research take into account lived experiences of youth caught up in digital divides (e.g., Rowsell, Morrell, & Alvermann, 2017), then relationships between the so-called haves and have-nots begin to correlate with the cans and cannots (Dolan, 2016). Instances such as these cry out for teaching and researching critical literacies in post-truth media contexts.

4. Technologies and their associated literacies are not neutral.

As an ELA teacher educator and researcher working in what has been labeled post-truth media contexts, I am hopeful NCTE's fourth belief statement will ensure that critical literacies instruction occupies a prominent place in school curricula as well as in university degree programs, credentialing agencies' policies, and calls for future research proposals. The reasoning behind my optimism is threefold. First, social media sites are not going away — at least not any time soon. The U.S. Supreme Court has referred to them as the modern-day public square.

Second, research shows that teaching critical inquiry is particularly important for emergent bilingual learners. To overlook this group's need for instruction in analyzing social media

sites for words, images, sounds, and gestures that could possibly influence how their peers and others perceive them is to invite a culture of acquiescence and potentially inhibited identities (Alvermann, 2017a).

Finally, the fact that technologies and their associated literacies are not net-neutral reminds me once again of a proverb commonly attributed to both Hopi Native Americans and Plato; specifically, "Those who tell stories, rule the world." For some, that rule is troubled and relatively short. For others, it can be long, enjoyable, and amiably shared via online social media texts — provided, of course, their content is mediated by teachers and students who appreciate the value of critical inquiry in post-truth media contexts. With NCTE and D-LITE behind the Beliefs Statement, I sense the proverb's message is in good hands.

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Then, Now, and Onward: Reflections on the Origins of the 2005 CEE Beliefs about Technology and the Preparation of English Teachers

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History and Conceptualization

The early 2000s saw major technological advancements, such as the launching of YouTube, Google maps, high speed Internet, and Open Office, among others (Computer History, 2005). These technologies – as well as other innovations and technology tools of this era, such as camera phones, Twitter, text messaging for mobile phones, Google Search, wikis, blogs, file-sharing, the Amazon Kindle, video gaming, and video conferencing (Heussner, 2009) – had begun to profoundly affect (in good and bad ways) all aspects of human activity, including reading, writing, text construction and distribution, creating new avenues for communication, inquiry, and collaboration in our society and in the classroom and beyond.

Metaphorically speaking, we were at the frontier of the social networking revolution, witnessing changing cyberspace, widespread meme diffusion, and reconstituted social relationships and power dynamics, hoping to find the way through these technological and social developments to our own vision of the future for the English language arts discipline. Although the task seemed enormous, almost unachievable, it was intellectually and pedagogically inspiring.

The 2005 NCTE CEE Leadership and Policy Summit was, in effect, a response to this call. The summit was held at Georgia State University and included over 70 CEE members across the United States who were recognized as past, present, or future leaders in the field. The focus of the summit was to think through the opportunities and the challenges facing the preparation and professional development of English language arts pre- and in-service teachers and teacher educators.

With this focus in mind, the goal of the summit was to assemble a collective knowledge base and a series of written position papers to guide future policy efforts of English teacher preparation and development in the U.S. for the 21st century. To facilitate these efforts, the larger base of participants were broken down into small groups according to areas of expertise, with the directive to draft a position paper featuring belief statements related to their particular focus area.

We were participants in the Multimodal Literacies and Digital Technologies Thematic Strand Group where we were charged to answer the following question: "What do we know and believe about multimodal literacies and digital technologies in English education?" In a sense, we were asked to re-envision the next chapter in the history of the English language arts discipline.

Janet Swenson and Ewa McGrail served as leaders of the Multimodal Literacies and Digital Technologies strand. Other members of the group on site in Atlanta included Robert

Rozema and Phyllis Whitin; together, we drafted, crafted, and revised an initial beliefs statement that was first co-published online by both the English Language Arts Education section of *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education (CITE Journal)* and CEE (see Swenson, Rozema, Young, McGrail, & Whitin, 2005).

As part of the rationale for this tentative beliefs document being published in the *CITE Journal*, the participants and authors in the CEE Summit multimodal literacies and digital technologies strand invited short responses to the initial publication in the form of commentaries, which were published in the subsequent issue of the *CITE Journal* (see Drucker, 2006; Hicks, 2006; Kajder, 2006; and Myers, 2006).

The commentary feature provided for an online interactive medium to develop an ongoing, peer-reviewed dialogue that, in this case, informed the revision of this tentative beliefs statement about technology and the preparation of English language arts teachers, leading to an updated version that later appeared in *English Education* (see Swenson, Young, McGrail, Rozema, & Whitin, 2006).

The Organization and Writing Process

Our belief statement modeled the existing NCTE Writing Beliefs format and consisted of the four broad areas of focus:

1. Newer Interactive Technologies,
2. Digital Technologies, Reader and Text,
3. Technology and the Composing Process, and
4. Issues of Equity and Access.

As Janet Swenson summarized in our work-in-progress notes from September 2005, the purpose of the document was to "provide a brief, accessible representation of our beliefs about the influence that newer technologies had had, were having, or could have had on English language arts/literacy teaching, learning, and/or practice with implications for teacher initial and on-going preparation" (Personal communication, September 9, 2009). Given this purpose, the document was a deep first dive into the field rather than an attempt to be comprehensive.

In terms of the writing process, the group members either individually or in pairs crafted the beliefs that addressed these four areas. The writers shared their drafts for feedback within the small group (i.e., those members who participated in the summit in Atlanta) and then with the larger group (all members of the Multimodal and Digital Technologies strand). The summit chairs, Dana Fox and Suzanne Miller also provided feedback on the final draft.

Janet Swenson, Ewa McGrail, and Carl Young organized the group, kept track of the timeline, set the group goals, managed the writing process, and kept records from face-to-face meetings in Atlanta and online meetings after the summit. Final editing of the beliefs statement involved incorporating suggestions from the readers and ensuring format compliance and adherence to style guidelines for works cited.

Our collaborative composing process allowed us to leverage the digital technologies and composing strategies we were asked to develop belief statements for at the time. We were able to include the members of our small group who could not attend the summit face-to-face as virtual partners, many of whom either provided feedback on the working drafts along the way or served as authors of the commentaries in response to the first iteration of

the Beliefs statement and whose ideas, in turn, informed the revised version that appeared later in *English Education.*

Type of collaborative composing and online publishing experience is much more common now. Yet, at the time it was new and in many ways revolutionary to have this many scholars weighing in on such an important vision, all leveraging newer ideas and digital tools to do so, and preparing multiple major publications in such a short period of time.

"Talking Back" to What We Have Now

The audience for the 2005 Belief statement was much broader than the one envisioned for the revised belief statement in 2018. Specifically, the audience for the 2005 document included not only ELA teacher educators and teachers, but also policy makers, legislators, colleagues from other content areas, as well as the general public. With such a broad audience in mind, several revisions were necessary in order to keep a central focus and a unified voice throughout the document. The 2018 Beliefs document targets a much more focused audience, which is primarily ELA and literacy teacher educators and teachers. Both documents reach out to these audiences at all levels of instruction.

In the 2005 Beliefs document, we had to define the terms we used extensively, as they represented relatively new ideas brought about by groundbreaking technological innovations and were not as universally known or commonly understood as they are today. We did that in a Wikipedia style annotation format.

With so many terms and concepts that had to be defined in a single document, it was hard to be clear and yet at the same time be able to preserve the rhetorical structure that was central to the points that we were advancing in the position statement. The 2018 Beliefs document does not define terms in this way because the innovations and tools that it references are mentioned in context or are merely improved or updated versions of the already existing or familiar technologies which are, in effect, ubiquitous today.

In the 2005 statement, the issues related to diversity were discussed against a more expansive backdrop of the social, cultural, political, and economic forces than they are presented within the revised 2018 document. The 2018 Beliefs document focuses on fewer issues (inequity and discrimination) and discusses them based on the personal experience and from the relationships frame of reference than from the manifold societal forces perspective.

Going forward, we see the revised *Beliefs for Integrating Technology into the English Language Arts Classroom* as an important guiding force for ELA and literacy teachers, teacher educators, and researchers to capture the context of integrating digital technologies and frame the future of its impact on the field.

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