Lessons From History: Teaching With Technology in 100 Years of *English Journal*

If you've been reading the pages of *English Journal* recently, you've seen many calls for teachers to move beyond print literacy to engage students in composing and analyzing the emerging media of our time: digital videos (Ranker; Staples), podcasts (Goodson and Skillen), video games (Adams; Jolley), and Facebook (Kitsis), to name but a few. Faced with these steady calls to keep up with new media developments, we English teachers often find ourselves longing for a simpler time when books reigned supreme and “English was English.” Yet, if we look back at the past 100 years of *English Journal*, we can remind ourselves that English teachers have long been adapting their curricula and methods to incorporate the visual and auditory media of their time. As is often the case, the past we romanticize doesn’t always look the way we imagine it.

In 1931, for example, Ruth Batten recounted her struggle with a group of seemingly "stupid and lazy" students who refused to write conventional essays until she hit upon the idea of asking them to collaboratively produce a radio program for broadcast to a real audience; once the students were composing in a new media form that was personally meaningful to them, Batten noted with delight that they took agency for their learning and drafted high quality scripts (160). In 1937, Louise Whitehead reported that students in her class greatly enjoyed making a film adaptation of *David Copperfield*, finding that they developed a richer, more engaged appreciation of the book as a result. Based on this experience, Whitehead argued that English teachers are now living “in a visual age” and must adapt their methods to keep up with the times (317). Although many *English Journal* authors in the 1930s were enthusiastic about teaching film and radio in the English class, numerous authors warily emphasized the need for English teachers to carefully guide students’ media use. Indeed, one author, Joseph Mersand, highlighted the importance of judicious selection of radio programs by recounting the case of a Toledo junior high student who “shot his principal under the influence of the radio programs to which he was listening” (Mersand 469). One imagines that if Mr. Mersand were writing today, he might be decrying the pernicious effects of violent video games,
while Ms. Whitehead might be engaging students in using iMovie to create video versions of books on the Common Core reading list. As English teachers confront the challenges of the contemporary digital moment, we contend that there are many lessons to be learned from both the inspiring innovations and the limiting pitfalls of past English teachers’ approaches to teaching ‘new’ media.

A little over a year ago, the two of us set out to explore issues of English Journal from 1912 to 2012, specifically looking for articles that involved the introduction of “new” technologies of communication in the English classroom. We eventually discovered and systematically coded 787 articles about new communication media in English Journal over a 100-year span. We located articles about new media in all but two years of the journal’s history (it appears that authors in 1920 and 1921 were uniquely traditionalist). Through this research, we’ve come to realize that the oft-heralded golden age when English was just limited to print books never really existed—or if it did, it was very long ago.

**Methods, Or, How We Found All These Articles and Made Sense of Them**

Although some scholars have drawn on the English Journal archive to write histories of technological approaches to teaching English (Hicks et al; Jones; Palmeri; White), these histories rely on close readings of a small number of articles. By contrast, our approach uses a method called “distant reading” (Moretti; Mueller) that can enable us to gain a more expansive understanding of how English teachers have engaged with technology over time. More directly, our research approach has been inspired by Faust and Dressman’s insightful analytic coding of 93 years of English Journal articles about poetry. Adapting Faust and Dressman’s approach for gathering and analyzing data, we reviewed titles for all articles over 100 years of English Journal, selecting those that explicitly mentioned media or technology in the title while also reviewing articles with ambiguous titles that might allude to our subject. At the outset, we developed a coding scheme for analyzing what kinds of technology the articles discussed, what arguments the authors made about technology, and what instructional goals informed their uses of technology.
Early in the process, we initially refined our coding scheme by reading and coding the same sample years, afterwards discussing how we arrived at certain decisions and developing a shared understanding of our coding criteria. We then read and coded alternate years, periodically reviewing and conferring about each other’s coding. What follows are graphical representations of five of the key lessons we learned from our time investigating the *English Journal* archives.

**Lesson One: English Has Always Been About More than Books**

[insert figure 1]

**Figure 1: Number of Articles by Type of Media**

When we look back at the history of *English Journal*, we can see that the field has long engaged with types and forms of media beyond the print book. As we explored this 100-year span, we coded 117 articles about audio media (radio, phonographs, audio tape recorders etc.), 311 articles about moving image media (film, television, and video), and 198 articles about computer media (PCs, word processors, laptops). As early as 1913, English teachers were adapting their pedagogy to the new medium of silent film, striving, as Robert W. Neal so bitingly put it, to make “the devil useful.” In the 1930s alone, *English Journal* featured 28 articles about teaching with radio and 32 about teaching with film. Starting in the early 80s, the computer emerged as a sustained presence in the journal. Yet despite this large body of work on media pedagogy, English teachers too often continue to be stereotyped as conservative traditionalists committed solely to musty books and antique inkwells. We hope that our historical recovery work can help us challenge these narrow misconceptions about what our field entails, and help empower teachers to think of novel ways of integrating media-based assignments into their classrooms.

**Lesson Two: “New Media” Has Long Been Connected to Student Engagement**

[insert figure 2]
Figure 2. Common Arguments/Attitudes Concerning New Media

When we began this project, we imagined we would find many denunciations of how new media were harming traditional reading and writing, or “alphabetic literacy,” as we term it. Surprisingly, we found only 53 articles (approximately 6.7%) that emphasized the harmful effects of new media on students’ reading and writing, while we found 461 articles (approximately 59%) that explicitly emphasized how working with new media could improve students’ alphabetic literacy. In particular, teachers valued new media because they viewed it as more engaging for students (491 articles). Whether they were having students listen to Shakespeare on the radio (Carney) or make their own film adaptations of the poem, “Lady of the Lake” (Hodge), *English Journal* authors regularly asserted that new media could be a tool to reinvigorate student engagement with print texts. In addition to seeing new media as a boon for the teaching of reading, teachers also emphasized how media assignments could motivate student writing by enabling them to compose for audiences beyond the classroom—whether it be writing and performing radio news broadcasts (Tyler) or circulating writing to peers via a computer network (Holvig).

Although an aversion to print reading is often seen as a problem unique to the digital generation, it turns out that teachers have been worrying about students’ supposedly waning interest in books for over 100 years. And, throughout the past century, English teachers have been harnessing students’ interest in new media as a way to enhance their engagement with print texts. So when you find yourself asking students to perform a Romeo and Juliet scene on digital video or to create a persuasive audio public service announcement, you can take comfort that you are part of a long tradition of English teachers who’ve been adapting their pedagogies to students’ ‘new media’ interests. And, when you find yourself worrying that the novel is going to die a death by a thousand text messages, it is important to recognize that new media need not be a threat to old media in a zero-sum game; rather, English teachers can help students draw connections among—and take pleasure in—multiple media forms interacting with one another.
Lesson Three: There is a Long History of Media Production as Part of English Teaching

[insert figure 3]

**Figure 3.** Production vs. Reception

English teachers have long been engaging students in *producing* media as well as analyzing it. Our coding scheme distinguished between whether an article emphasized media production or reception primarily. For example, an article on teaching students to view a film or read a website would be coded as reception whereas students making a film or composing a website would be classified as production; in some cases, we classified an activity as media production if students were making something like a radio or TV broadcast even if they were not using professional tools. For example, students performing a radio play script while sitting behind a curtain would count as production (Cothrin), as would students creating an actual radio program for live broadcast (Tyler).

We had initially anticipated that reception would far outpace production as a pedagogical goal, largely owing to factors such as limited access to technology, steep learning curves, or curricular guidelines favoring the development of traditional literacy skills. We were surprised, however, to discover the degree to which teachers designed assignments that involved composing with new media. In fact, aside from a few sporadic years, we find that production has otherwise enjoyed a near-continuous place in our history of teaching with new media, even at times outpacing reception. While English teachers who experiment with new media today often must defend against the charge that they are departing from their traditional area of expertise, this history can empower us to demonstrate that our field has a substantial tradition of teaching media production—in other words, we have long recognized that students will best be able to critically analyze media if they gain experience making it.
Lesson Four: Moments When Media are "New" Present Opportunities for Innovation

[insert figure 4]

Figure 4. Moving Image and Audio Production vs. Reception Over Time

Emerging media forms often open up spaces to experiment in the classroom, especially in the early stages. We found that radio and film production was heavily foregrounded in the 1930s when these media were relatively new, but as the century progressed, teachers increasingly positioned radio and film primarily as texts for analysis. There was a smaller uptick in moving image production in the 70s and 80s, when new and more inexpensive film and video cameras came on the scene, but we still have not seen a return to the audio and visual production heyday of the 30s (although, as we discuss in the following section, the computer is increasingly becoming a tool for this type of production in the classroom). This history reminds us that those moments when media are new present opportunities for innovation—opportunities for productively rethinking what the work of the English class entails. But, as media become more familiar and pervasive, there is a risk that we will forget these innovative media production pedagogies and return to positioning students solely as media consumers. In our current moment of great technological change, we have a unique chance to rethink what it means to teach English, but our challenge will be to sustain these curricular changes over the long haul, resisting the forces of conservatism that seek to “force the new media to do the work of the old” (McLuhan & Fiore 81).

Lesson Five: The Computer Has Been a Game Changer

[insert figure 5]

Figure 5: Computer Media Articles by Year

After some initial excitement in the 60s about how computers might become tools for grading (Daigon) or teaching literature (Stowe & Maggio), English Journal turned away from computers until the early 80s, when compact word processors and personal computers began to proliferate. From this point on, English teachers emphasized the computer as a tool for student-
centered production: out of 198 total articles focusing on the computer, 151 emphasized production, while only 46 emphasize reception (one lone article, which offered advice on buying a microcomputer, did not exhibit an obvious pedagogical emphasis). In particular, teachers embraced computers as a tool for writing instruction. Although there was some talk of using computers to help students with grammar (Shuman), many of the computer articles emphasized process-based writing activities such as inventing ideas, peer response, revision, and distributing to audiences (Hawisher; Holvig; Kinkead; Lake). In this way, we can see that the computer (alongside writing process research) contributed to a powerful shift in the field placing the students’ own writing at the center of the English course.

Because early personal computers had relatively limited image and audio editing capacity, the focus has largely been on composing alphabetic texts. It was only in recent years that teachers began thinking of the computer as a device for teaching multimodal composing (e.g. visually enhanced websites, podcasts, videos). Whereas initial bursts of interest in film and radio production waned relatively quickly, the computer has been positioned as a key production device in English classrooms for over 30 years, with an even greater emphasis over time on students composing visual and audio texts that extend beyond the classroom. One distinguishing characteristic of the computer as a production technology is that it facilitates composing in a variety of forms (graphics, audio, video, and various combinations) that were previously confined to specialized technologies. We expect that the computer will have staying power in the field going forward as computing technologies increasingly become integrated into many kinds of mobile devices. Of course, we must remember that computer access has been and continues to be unequally distributed among schools and students (Banks; Selfe); while the computer certainly has been a game changer on the pages of English Journal, we as a field still need to fight for societal changes that can enable all students across diverse contexts to employ computers as tools for reaching public audiences.
Learning from the Past, Remaking the Future

When looking for inspiration for incorporating new media in our classrooms, we need not just turn to scholarship published in the past few years. Teachers considering using podcasts in class might turn back to the rich history of radio pedagogy—especially revisiting articles in the 1930s demonstrating that audio production can be a powerful form of civic engagement for students (Cullimore). Teachers considering a digital storytelling project might look back at work in the 1970s about video documentary production as a way to engage students in social action (Cromer). We find throughout the history of English Journal many examples of methods that engage students in composing new media, not just analyzing it; it is our position that teachers who work with new media will best serve their students by promoting media production in addition to reception as a way to foster responsible and engaged models of digital citizenry.

Along with providing inspiration, this history also can warn us of pitfalls to avoid. Over the years in English Journal, we’ve seen too many teachers unnecessarily restricting student media use to viewing or listening to adaptations of canonical literature without considering how fully engaging with media could lead to a more expansive vision of English pedagogy. When we look back at past ways that teachers limited the transformative potential of new media, we can be reminded of the importance of embracing our current new media moment as an opportunity to collaborate with students in remaking our pedagogies. The benefit of hindsight can also importantly remind us of the need to be humble about our claims about how new media are transforming young students. Where radio was once seen a scary promoter of violence (Mersand), today’s teachers often try to get their students to listen to NPR rather than play violent video games. And while English teachers in the 1950s worried that their students were more influenced by television than books (Rugg), some of that very generation of students have grown up to become the stereotypical grandparents trying to convince their grandchildren to put down the mobile phone and pick up a book. When we remember the long history of cultural fears about how new media would replace traditional
reading and writing, we can avoid reductively viewing our students as “digital natives” (Palfrey and Gasser) wholly different from the generations have gone before. Instead, we can work with students to develop innovative ways of combining print and new media literacy learning.

Drawing upon this history can also help advocates of technology-enhanced instruction challenge the persistent stereotype that English has always been a print-centered discipline. By educating stakeholders (administrators, teachers, students, parents, legislators) on English studies’ century-long relationship with technology, advocates can help create a culture of support and sustainability that ensures greater understanding and acceptance of technology-based instruction for the future. When English teachers are represented in popular media, we are too often still positioned as dated, book-loving frumps. While our article is one step towards challenging this representation, we encourage fellow teachers to employ today’s new media to create and circulate more complex pictures of the exciting work that English teachers and students do with audio, visual, and multimodal composing in our classrooms.

To this end, we are currently developing a more in-depth analysis of our findings in an interactive digital format for online publication in the near future, so please follow us on Twitter for updates at @illiac and @jasonpalmeri.
Works Cited


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**Figures**

**Figure 1:** Number of Articles by Type of Media

![Bar chart showing number of articles by type of media: Audio Media (n=117), Computer Media (n=198), Moving Image Media (n=311).]
**Figure 2.** Common Arguments/Attitudes Concerning New Media

- Engaging for Students: n=491
- Expanding Audiences Beyond the Teacher: n=211
- Enhancing Alphabetic Literacy: n=461
- Harming Alphabetic Literacy: n=53

**Figure 3.** Production vs. Reception

- Reception: n=405
- Production: n=381
Figure 4. Moving Image and Audio Production vs. Reception Over Time

Figure 5: Computer Media Articles by Year