Jones, K., Jerasa, S., & Garg, R. (2025). Editorial: The complexities of teaching with digital texts for ELA teachers and teacher educators. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education, 25*(4). 526-532.

Editorial: The Complexities of Teaching With Digital Texts for ELA Teachers and Teacher Educators

Karis Jones
Baylor University

Sarah Jerasa
Clemson University

Rabani Garg
University of Pennsylvania

In this current teaching climate, teachers are swimming in a metaphorical riptide with respect to digital texts, navigating the multiple forces pulling them in different directions. For the last few decades, scholars have swung between portraying online spaces for digital texts as utopian or toxic. It can be difficult for teachers to decide what to do, as they navigate corporate pitches and professional developments asking them to try new technologies, to school policies, state mandates, and even national bans telling them not to.

It is not always even clear what is meant by digital texts or what types of digital texts and practices are best or safest, and who gets to decide the answers to these questions. Additionally, there is a call from the field to resist problematic dichotomies between digital vs. print, online vs. offline, formal vs. informal, and in-school vs. out-of-school (Low & Rapp, 2021) and to engage research around the complex digital meaning-making practices of underrepresented youth (Kelly, 2020; McDaniel, 2022; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016; Wargo, 2017) whose literacies are often marginalized in formal educational spaces.

Teacher educators also navigate and balance these numerous and often competing demands. In this current climate, institutions of higher education are under sustained attack and immense scrutiny. As a result, teacher educators and teachers must work together to make careful decisions not only about *which* tools to use but also *how* to use them (Robinson et al., 2024) in complex, politically and socially fraught contexts. This means shaping instruction in ways that avoid inflaming ideological tensions while still preparing pre-service teachers to be intentional, critical digital consumers who can leverage these tools to drive impactful instruction (Marlatt & Sulzar, 2020; Schroeder & Curcio, 2022).

While preservice teachers are concurrently learning reading and writing methods for classroom instruction, teacher educators are expected to solve these problems with digital texts across courses and school placements while preparing future teachers to effectively use digital texts in their classrooms (Aleksieva, 2025). The challenge, then, is not solely about selecting tools, but about cultivating pedagogical approaches that acknowledge and respond to the broader contexts in which those tools are taken up.

This special issue intends to be a tool for teacher educators to engage with pre- and in-service teachers about the complexities of digital texts and how to teach them. Across the articles, we provide English language arts (ELA) teacher educators with research about different types and modalities of digitally networked texts and various ways of engaging and analyzing them. We showcase both (a) pieces that synthesize interdisciplinary tools for analyzing particular types of digital texts on networked platforms that would be useful for ELA teacher educators and (b) studies that investigate how such tools and texts have been taken up expansively and productively in ELA classrooms.

The Multifaceted Nature of Digital Texts

When we talk about digital texts taken up in classrooms, a range of examples may come to mind: physical books or documents that have been digitized, multiple modalities or customizations for books or articles (e.g., audio recordings of books and news articles with changeable Lexile levels), platforms sharing original digital creations or content, and websites that allow for searching, circulating, or commenting on such texts. In this issue, we are particularly interested in ways teachers and teacher educators can take up digital texts that youth (or in some cases, teachers) consume, create, share, and learn from in networked ways in everyday life and popular media consumption.

It can be tempting to assign digital texts in our classrooms without reimagining our pedagogies (Philip & Garcia, 2013). This can cause problems with pedagogies that intend to use digital texts to engage youth, but instead *extract, decontextualize* or *conflate* genres of texts. For example, some teachers ask students to make recordings of PowerPoint presentations, recorded as videos and viewed by the instructor only. Though there can certainly be times when recording a PowerPoint presentation for a limited audience is appropriate, if instructors are interested in using such assignments to engage youth in culturally responsive and asset-based ways, this issue suggests we will need a different type of assignment.

For audiovisual essays, like longer-form YouTube essays or short-form TikToks, teachers can design assignments that allow youth to draw from affordances of the genre that they know well, such as pulling from favorite mentor texts, carefully curating settings and props, imitating popular gestures, and working toward particular aesthetic vibes (see Aleo, this issue). Additionally, teachers may ask students to write fanfiction as a class assignment (such as after reading a class book), but it is less effective if teachers do not consider what makes fanfiction engaging for youth – passionate engagement with the source text, shared desires with a community of other fans, or the possibility for enthusiastic commenters. In this issue, we see youth writers drawing from fanfiction writing practices outside of school by taking superhero worldbuilding inspiration from animes, watching clips for character design inspiration, and developing characters that can be inserted into many different storytelling universes (see Krone & Ensciso, forthcoming in this special issue series).

One method of thinking about the networked aspect of digital texts is to consider representational vs. performative aspects of texts. Those interested in how youth engage with *representational* aspects of texts may look at ways digital texts are "created, interpreted, mobilized, or critiqued… [including] material, aesthetic, algorithmic, and economic activities" (Nichols & LeBlanc, 2021, p. 391). Educators can also look more expansively at *performative* aspects of digitally-situated texts, which considers how such texts are shaped by their situation within larger media ecologies. Thinking about participation in media ecologies opens us up to expansive engagement with issues like "misinformation, algorithmic discrimination, surveillance and predictive analytics, techno-capitalism, movement work and activism, [and] environmental extraction" (p. 397). This issue shares ways that teachers consider both texts and the broader media ecologies within which the texts circulate, and ways that they might make these issues visible in their classroom pedagogies (see Rushek & Batchelor, forthcoming; Talian et al., forthcoming; McBride & Gambino, forthcoming; Catena & Tenore, this issue).

To engage with the multifaceted nature of digital texts, we offer ELA teacher educators support to move beyond traditional tools of print-based meaning-making toward interdisciplinary tools for reading digital and networked multimodal texts. There are general content-related, discursive, and linguistic tools for analyzing networked multimodal texts as well as tools that may be specific to particular mediums, modalities, and networked communities. We invite readers to learn about these tools for various types of digital texts across this issue, including digital texts such as anime, animations, fanfiction, audiovisual essays, music videos, social media posts, video recordings, etc. and platforms such as Discord, Wattpad, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Pintrest, Twitter/X, and so forth.

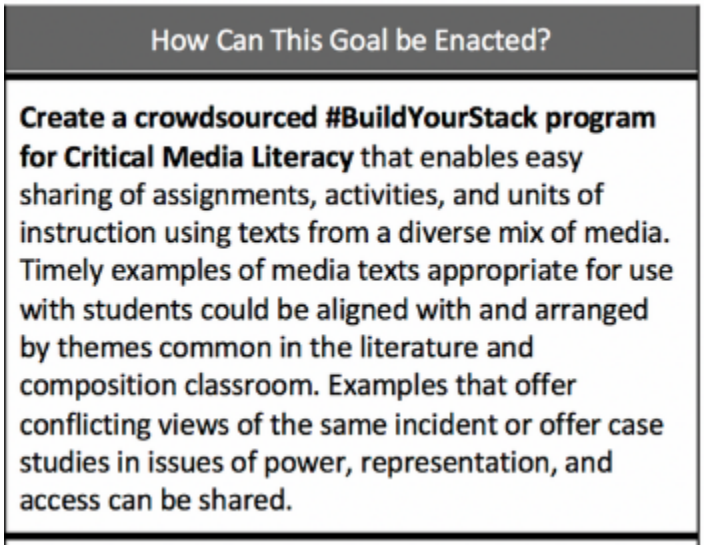
How to Use this Special Issue

This special issue is intended to support teachers with effectively engaging a broad range of texts that youth love and consume in vibrant digital communities. It can be hard to know where to start with digital texts, especially as genres of texts evolve rapidly (Magnifico & Jones, 2025) across rapidly changing platforms (Doctorow, 2022).

Drawing from National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) policy statements (Lyiscott et al., 2021) and working group recommendations (Task for on Critical Media Literacy, 2021) around critical media literacy, the seed for this special issue grew from when a group of educators and teacher educators who cared about studying digital texts gathered to discuss what new directions we would like to see in the field. We discussed recommendations to broaden types of texts that we use in our classrooms and suggestions about ways to implement them without deadening or co-opting them for youth.

In 2021, a critical media literacy working group had suggested that NCTE create a space for sharing bottom-up recommendations by teachers across the organization. They discussed how at NCTE, there is a longstanding initiative called #BuildYourStack, which helps teachers to learn about new print books through events such as webinar discussions and author talks. However, this initiative only features traditionally published works, and the taskforce suggested including curated digital texts as well (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Recommendation for Crowdsourced #BuildYourStack



We decided this initiative was not something we wanted to wait for and brainstormed the idea for a crowd-sourced platform we called #HackYourStack, coined by Trevor Aleo. We chose this phrase because of its play on #BuildYourStack, as well as the multiple connotations of "hack," encapsulating both the idea that our stacks might be digital instead of physical, as well as the idea that we might be doing something different and a little scrappy with our stacks.

Using the platform Notion, we started creating a crowdsourced collection of mentor texts, tools, resources, and academic research focused on digital media. The database included genres, forms, and mediums for teachers to access and explore (video essays, fanfiction, webcomics, podcasts, TikTok

videos, etc.). Our hope was that the database would be a tool for classroom educators and teacher educators to explore types of expansive texts they might take up in the classroom. Each type of text included a description, mentor texts and information about their context, as well as teaching protocols, lesson plans, and supporting resources.

Access our Notion platform here: https://bit.ly/hackyourstack1

This special issue is intended to be paired with the platform, to show textured examples of research-supported ways that educators can engage digital texts in ELA classrooms. We hope that teacher-readers explore the platform to learn about texts and read the associated articles for specific examples of their uses by teachers. We envision that teacher educators might assign a jigsaw reading to their class, guiding current or future teachers to choose a digital text of their choice to explore and share out to the group ways they see taking up the information shared in their own contexts. We suggest the following questions for such an activity:

- What is this type of digital text and what are some examples?
- What specific multimodal and digital tools are used to analyze or interpret these texts? Which communities do they derive from?
- Who has agency in accessing or composing these texts? How do these texts circulate, and what factors affect their circulation across various platforms or audiences?
- How have or might you purposefully and critically integrate these texts into your curriculum? What designs would you need to take up to center youth asset-based learning?
- What kind of issues or pushback might we anticipate from various school-based or external audiences? How might we navigate this pushback in our current sociopolitical climate?

Conclusion and Special Issue Topics

Over the course of the next issues of this special collection, we present articles that examine ways ELA teacher educators are expanding definitions of digital tools and how they are used for both teaching, learning, meaning-making, and justice-oriented practices. In this first issue, Aleo (2025) illustrates how early-career teachers and teacher educators can bridge disciplinary and youth literacies through audiovisual essays that honor students' practices, connect aesthetic literacies with literary and digital composition, and foster culturally sustaining, justice-oriented pedagogies that expand the scope of intellectual work in ELA classrooms. Also in this issue, Cantena and Tenore (2025) contend that social media can serve as a generative space for ELA and civic engagement by offering contemporary multimodal texts that teachers might otherwise overlook. By critically mining social media feeds, teachers can develop "civic dreaming" and cultivate critical algorithmic literacy, reflecting on how platform algorithms, corporate interests, and personal orientations shape the content they encounter.

Scholars featured in future issues will examine the kinds of learning that emerge through engagement with digital texts, ranging from English disciplinary outcomes, such as interpretive literary analysis and application of literary theories, to more expansive aims such as multimodal communication, digital civic engagement, and expansive worldbuilding. These scholars consider how even brief interactions with short, informal, or networked texts can provide complex meaning-making opportunities and how engagement with youth-produced and out-of-school digital texts informs both student learning and teacher pedagogical choices. Scholars also explore several interdisciplinary tools that educators use to analyze digitally networked texts, considering both representational content and performative relations.

As the articles from this issue release across the course of the next year, we invite you to join us in this expansive exploration of digital texts and how to teach them.

References

Aleksieva, L. (2025). Preparing pre-service teachers for the digital transformation of education: Exploring university teacher educators' views and practical strategies. *Education Sciences, 15*(4), 404. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15040404

Doctorow, C. (2022). The 'Enshittification' of TikTok. *Wired*. https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-platforms-cory-doctorow/

Goodbrey, D. M. (2013). Digital comics—New tools and tropes. *Studies in Comics*, *4*(1), 185–197. https://doi.org/10.1386/stic.4.1.185_1

Kelly, L. L. (2020). Exploring Black girls' subversive literacies as acts of freedom. *Journal of Literacy Research*, *52*(4), 456–481. https://doi.org/10.1177/1086296X20966367

Low, D. E., & Rapp, S. M. (2021). Youth identities and affinities on the move: Using a transliteracies framework to critique digital dichotomies. *Pedagogies*, *16*(2), 111–124. https://doi.org/10.1080/1554480X.2021.1914053

Lyiscott, J., Mirra, N., & Garcia, A. (2021). *Critical media literacy and popular culture in ELA classrooms*. James R. Squire Office of the National Council of Teachers of English. https://ncte.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/SquireOfficePolicyBrief_CriticalMediaLiteracy_April2021.pdf

Magnifico, A. M., & Jones, K. (2025). Theorizing fanfiction: The importance of remixed social genres composed on the internet. *Computers and Composition*, *75*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2025.102916

Marlatt, R., & Sulzer, M. A. (2020). Illuminating the dark side: A typology for preservice ELA teachers engaging in ideologies of digital texts. *E-Learning and Digital Media, 18*(3), 226-250. https://doi.org/10.1177/2042753020980119 (Original work published 2021)

McDaniel, D. (2024). Tatum's social media activism as multiliteracies: Connecting, advocating, and resisting social injustices. *Journal of Language & Literacy Education*, *20*(1), 1–26.

Muhammad, G. E., & Haddix, M. (2016). Centering Black girls' literacies: A review of literature on the multiple ways of knowing of Black girls. *English Education*, *48*(4), 299–336.

Nichols, T. P., & LeBlanc, R. J. (2021). Media education and the limits of "literacy": Ecological orientations to performative platforms. *Curriculum Inquiry*, *51*(4), 389–412. https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2020.1865104

Philip, T. M., & Garcia, A. D. (2013). The importance of still teaching the iGeneration: New technologies and the centrality of pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, *83*(2), 300–319.

Robinson, B., Thrall, A., & Nichols, T. P. (2024). Editorial: Critical perspectives on digital platforms in ELA teacher education. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education, 24*(4), 421-430. https://citejournal.org/volume-24/issue-4-24/english-language-arts/editorial-critical-perspectives-on-digital-platforms-in-ela-teacher-education

Schroeder, S., & Curcio, R. (2022). Critiquing, curating, and adapting: Cultivating 21st-century critical curriculum literacy with teacher candidates. *Journal of Teacher Education, 73*(2), 129-144. https://doi.org/10.1177/00224871221075279

Task Force on Critical Media Literacy. (2021). *Report of the Task Force on Critical Media Literacy*. National Council of Teachers of English. https://www.canva.com/design/DAERz0BpJyk/I4sPUxfrZlHLVys3QIViIQ/view?utm_content=DAERz0BpJyk&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=homepage_design_menu

Wargo, J. M. (2017). "Every selfie tells a story …": LGBTQ youth lifestreams and new media narratives as connective identity texts. *New Media & Society*, *19*(4), 560–578. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815612447