

## CHAPTER 1

# The Case for Digital Diligence in English Language Arts Classrooms

We live in an era of distraction.

On this, we can all agree. Or, perhaps, at least we could agree if we might be able to stay focused long enough to have the conversation.

For any educator, from preschool through graduate school, the consequences of digital devices are present for our learners in every moment of every day. Students, even the most dedicated and attentive, can be preoccupied or sidetracked by the devices in their pockets and backpacks. The news media offers reports on the exponential uptick in the use of screen time. School policies on 1:1, “bring your own device” (BYOD), or other technology configurations can change, sometimes overnight, swinging from one extreme to another. One day, devices are allowed; the next day, or in the next classroom, those same devices are confiscated. These characterizations may be a bit extreme, yet the point is clear—schools can be consistently inconsistent places, and this applies especially so to our use of technology for teaching.

As we English language arts (ELA) teachers work conscientiously to help them become more attentive, substantive readers, writers, and thinkers, it feels as though we are fighting an uphill battle with our students, with their devices (and, oftentimes, with colleagues, parents, and our administration). Trying to figure out when, if, and how to use tech in our ELA instruction is a challenge in and of itself, outside of the actual content we want and need to teach. Then, given our broader, societal conversations about the use of digital devices, we see there are even more challenges ahead.

For instance, reports of increased anxiety, depression, and, terribly, suicides are linked to use of social media among teens (Twenge, 2017b). Silicon Valley employees have turned from their positions in high-tech companies to, instead, question the ethical foundations on which these companies are built (Harris, 2017). And all this happens

in an era where smartphone use is, for all intents and purposes, nearly ubiquitous. For many people, in fact, their mobile device is their single entry point to the Internet (Jiang, 2018). While we continue to grow more dependent on our devices, the academic and public discussion around device usage constantly returns to the topic of distraction.

For instance, in her book *Reader, Come Home*, psychologist and reading researcher Maryanne Wolf (2018) has again raised a significant question about the role of reading in the minds of a constantly distracted population:

The young reader can either develop all the multiple deep-reading processes that are currently embodied in the fully elaborated, expert reading brain; or the novice reading brain can become “short-circuited” in its development; or it can acquire whole new networks in different circuits. There will be profound differences in how we read and how we think, depending on which processes dominate the formation of the young child’s reading circuit. (Loc 136, Kindle)

Echoes of this dilemma have been raised for a decade (and, as we will see, probably even longer than that), going back at least to a time where smartphones were just entering our lives. In another example of a cultural touchstone, journalist Nicholas Carr asked a question in 2008 that still resonates: “Is Google making us stupid?” (Carr, 2008). Since then, there have been warnings that we are raising the “dumbest generation” (Bauerlein, 2008), that we are spending time “alone together” (Turkle, 2011), and that we are, indeed, addicted to distraction (Pang, 2013). Concepts like “continuous partial attention” (2009) and “email apnea” (2008), both coined by technology writer Linda Stone, and a more general “addiction-like behavior” (Clay, 2018) that characterizes technology use, have entered our conversations. Even Carr took his initial question about Google and expanded on it to craft an entire book, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (2010, 2020), which by its very title suggests a doomsday scenario for our already-fickle minds.

A brief exploration of how we got to this point is worthwhile, first with a definition of *mindfulness* and then a few more recent examples.

### **MINDFULNESS, DISTRACTION, AND THE (PERCEIVED) EFFECTS OF TECHNOLOGY**

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Especially as it relates to technology, we are all trying to figure out where to go next with the ways that we ourselves use—as well as how we teach our children to use—the devices that mediate our lives. What is it, exactly, that we are trying to accomplish with any given tool, in any given moment? What do we mean by mindfulness, and how do we go about achieving it, especially when it comes to using technology in meaningful ways?

As a place to start, I consider the idea of mindfulness. Though I am sure there are more erudite explanations in theological or philosophical texts, I borrow directly from the definition of mindfulness offered by *Mindful* (magazine and website, 2014):

Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us.

Mindfulness, in this sense, is constantly compromised by all the other possibilities that present themselves to us, whether in a passage of medieval scripture (as described below), outside the window of a stuffy one-room schoolhouse in the 1800s, or in our classrooms (or Zoom video calls) of today. This “basic ability to be fully present” has always been a challenge for us, and it always will. The devices in our students’ hands contribute to—but are not the sole cause of—our problem. As such, we need to stop blaming the devices themselves, or the students using them. Instead, we need to recognize these challenges while also aiming to overcome them as we always have—by learning to be better as individuals, as a society, and as educators working to support the students in our care.

It is worth noting that these concerns have gone back centuries, as history professor Jamie Kreiner notes in an article for *Aeon* (2019). She begins by describing a problem that we all face today in ancient terms—“medieval monks had a terrible time concentrating”—and documents the ways in which they employed renunciation and restraint, as well as strategies for building mental models. She concludes with a warning that resonates even today, “the problem of concentration is recursive. Any strategy for sidestepping distraction calls for strategies on sidestepping distraction.” In this sense, though I am not a psychologist or neuroscientist, I would argue that the challenges of mindfulness that have plagued our human minds have only been amplified by the introduction of digital devices, not brought on by them.

This brings us back to the moment noted in the preface, the urge in the mid- to late 2010s that Silicon Valley itself has begun to embrace a revolution in “mindfulness.” In early 2020, before the pandemic put a pause to such events, the annual Consumer Electronics Show occurred in Las Vegas, and a full battery (yes, pun intended) of new devices met the need for mindfulness. For instance, there were reports on a headband that monitors the electrical activity in one’s brain and “uses neurofeedback therapy to show you a real-time display of your brain activity, with the goal of teaching you how to identify and change behaviors through different exercises” (DeNisco Rayome, 2020). This is but one example in an industry full of gadgets that monitor biofeedback and remind us when to stand and how far we have walked, among other tasks. Even now, it seems we are trying to find new ways to use tech to solve age-old problems that medieval monks struggled with as well.

Furthermore, we are in an age where the tech faithful have lost their faith. We find that former employees of Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple, and others have begun movements for questioning the role of technology in our lives. Digital ethicist (and cofounder of the website and nonprofit The Center for Humane Technology) Tristan Harris (2017) forces us to consider deeper implications of the ways that algorithms drive our lives and how we can avoid the “digital attention crisis” engulfing our society:

It’s not just taking away our agency to spend our attention and live the lives that we want, it’s changing the way that we have our conversations, it’s changing our

democracy, and it's changing our ability to have the conversations and relationships we want with each other.

As noted above, terms like *continuous partial attention* (Stone, 2009)—or what has also been commodified as the *attention economy*—drive the dialogue about our screen time, not to mention our mental health and relationships with our partners, families, and friends. Couple that with the view expressed by Harris and others that, indeed, our entire democracy is disintegrating, and we are in for a load of trouble. Harris and many others from the technology industry who are raising these concerns were featured prominently in a 2020 documentary, *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski, 2020), released to Netflix about two months before the presidential election, reminding us again of the power that our devices have to influence (or perhaps manipulate) our real-world actions. (Of note, this portion of the chapter was composed before January 6, 2021, and it is beyond the scope of this book to fully analyze the events leading up to, during, and after the storming of the U.S. Capitol.)

Journalists such as Manoush Zomorodi, too, are focused on an interrogation of our personal use of technology and the relationships that we have with our devices. In her book *Bored and Brilliant* (2017a), Zomorodi outlined a series of challenges that she conducted with listeners of her podcast, *Note to Self*. For 5 consecutive days in the summer of 2015, Zomorodi asked her listeners to engage in tasks that would help them redefine their relationship with their smartphones, ranging from the action of deleting the one app that caused the most distraction to another option that would have them avoid taking pictures and posting them to social media. The result, she argues, is that we simply need to put our phones away and let our minds wander. Her continued work with the *TED Radio Hour* and Mozilla's *In Real Life* podcast keep exploring such themes. In one sense, we can make the case that any rational user of technology could simply put down their phones to disconnect and to walk away (at least for a while).

However, we know it is never that simple.

In addition to the many challenges that rely on psychological principles for keeping people attached to their phones, many of the scholars and tech ethicists would also contend that having people put their devices away is, in fact, bad for business. The CEO of Netflix famously quipped about their biggest competitor being our need for sleep (Raphael, 2017), and certainly there are many similar examples that could be drawn from the history of technology and the Internet.

With conversations about Bowles's articles still fresh from October 2018, we then look to February 5, 2019, when Cal Newport's *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* was released to rave reviews. Contrasting two extremes of (1) Luddism, where no technology should be used at all, with (2) the self-explanatory state of "mindless adoption," Newport advocated for "care and intention" (p. 193) to be used in our efforts to adopt new technologies. He argues for

a full-fledged philosophy of technology use, rooted in your deep values, that provides clear answers to the questions of what tools you should use and how you should

use them and, equally important, enables you to confidently ignore everything else.  
(p. xvi)

Newport's book was at the top of the bestseller lists and, like many of the others cited above, offered us ways to consider what it means to live in an era of distraction, where we are caught in a constant tug of war for our own attention, fighting against devices that are meant to keep us from more meaningful tasks and relationships. (As a quick aside, it is important to note that the origins of the term *Luddite* suggests they "were neither opposed to technology nor inept at using it," according to *Smithsonian Magazine* [Conniff, 2011], and this misapplication of their namesake could become an interesting topic of inquiry for students.)

Still, we see this tug of war between what any individual can do (making conscious choices about when, why, and how to use technology) as compared to another narrative where technology is designed to keep us addicted with what's been called "the endless scroll," or the algorithmic suggestions for what to "watch next," and other kinds of automated suggestions for who or what to follow that might align with a person's interests, ultimately keeping one's eyeballs on a particular platform so more advertisements can be sold. More recently, this type of behavior has earned the moniker of "doom scrolling," especially during the pandemic, protests, and U.S. presidential election season of 2020, and refers both to the apocalyptic content of the scrolling itself and, I suspect, the idea that we feel a bit resigned to our own endless obsession to the devices on which we are scrolling.

These are not trivial matters. The rise of conspiracy theories, the threats to our privacy, and the ways in which many individuals have become radicalized by their experiences on the Internet are evident. As just one example of ongoing reporting on this matter, Kevin Roose of *The New York Times* began documenting the ways in which one young man became more and more infatuated with alt-right conspiracies through his 2019 article "The Making of a YouTube Radical" (Roose, 2019) and subsequent podcast series *Rabbit Hole* (Roose, 2020). Following the plight of Caleb Cain, Roose shares a precautionary take of what can happen to someone left with too much time on his hands and who is open to the influence of the algorithm. The effects on individuals, and society as a whole, are tangible.

Though, for every tech problem, there is a tech solution. In yet another seeming paradox, the technology companies themselves are offering countless apps and extensions that can help us manage our digital lives, such as the popular "Moment" or "Forest" apps that help us track our own device usage, as well as tools for parents to monitor—and pause—their children's Internet usage. For instance, Circle, a product from Disney that is described on their website as the "smart way for families to manage content and time online, on any device" (meetcircle.com), has been on the market for many years. In their release of iOS 12 in the fall of 2018, Apple, too, built in an app that would accomplish similar goals—Screen Time, designed to "access real-time reports about how much time you spend on your iPhone, iPad, or iPod touch, and set limits for what you want to manage" (Apple Inc., 2019). These monitoring tools are but one way to address the problem,

yet still do not always move our children toward self-regulated (as well as more critical or creative) digital behavior.

Thus, we are still struggling with ways to manage our own attention. And, in many ways, this is the essence of what it means to teach ELA; we are constantly pushing our students to read, write, and think with more intention, to interpret existing texts, and to design their own texts in thoughtful, productive ways. The devices they have in their hands can help them in these efforts, or they can continue to be situated in our conversations about educational technology as distractions. How we frame this situation through our words and actions matters, as demonstrated by the following brief example of a recent school visit I made.

### **FRAMING THE CONVERSATION: DEVICE USE AND DIGITAL DISTRACTION IN ONE AMERICAN SCHOOL**

To begin, by no means is this single anecdote meant to be representative of what is happening in all schools, around the country, or around the world. Still, it is illustrative and demonstrates how important it is to frame the conversation about technology use with our students in productive (as compared to pejorative) ways.

To offer a specific example of these tensions, in a post I crafted for the *Educator Collaborative* blog in 2019 (T. Hicks, 2019b), I described a recent school visit in which I became quite intrigued, and then a bit infuriated, at the ways in which teachers, individually, and the school culture, as a whole, positioned students and their uses of mobile phones. From my blog post, I quote extensively to describe some of what I saw and share some images (see Figure 1.1) that I took while wandering the halls:

At this particular high school, when I had a few moments to myself to walk up and down the academic wing, I began to notice (on door after door) signs that suggested to students that their technologies were not welcome. As I continued to walk around the school, some of the signs repeated themselves, and I began to wonder if various anti-phone campaigns had been launched at the school over many years, considering the multiple incarnations of the signs that were plastered onto classroom doors. Some of the signs featured a flip phone or images of a classic iPod, and I had to wonder if some of them had been in place for years—perhaps even more than a decade.

I also became keenly aware that these signs took on different personalities, in a sense. The tone on the signs ranged from humorous to threatening, with very few words expressing any explicit rule or policy. One was in French, one in Spanish, and one even had a Seuss-like quality to it (though I'm unsure if that was intentional). What was most startling to me was the juxtaposition of one room that featured the classic Apple "Think Different" campaign posters on the walls and windows leading into the classroom and not one, but two copies of the "no phones" poster hung above the door. In this mid-size high school, these ten signs in the academic wing represented at least half of the doors that students would walk by on any given day. I was unable to see the library, the athletic wing, the arts wing, or other spaces of the school, but the images I did see caused me more than enough concern.



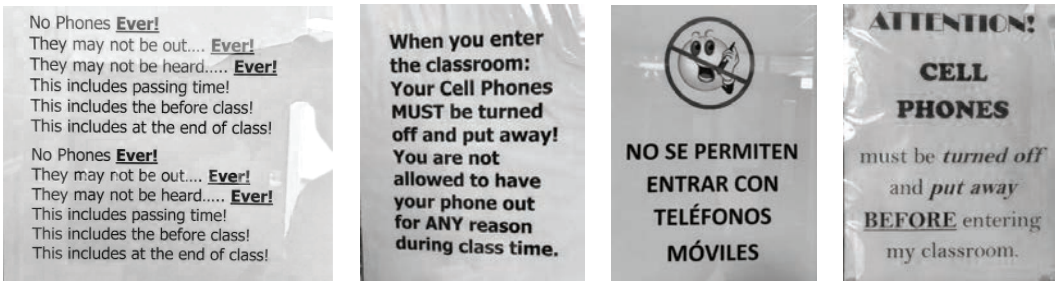


FIGURE 1.1. A collection of mobile device policy signs (photos by the author).

Looking back at these images again, more than a year after summarizing them in the original blog post, I am still dismayed. With demands like “Cell phones must be turned off and put away before entering my classroom” and the simpler “No Phones Ever!” shouting at students, it is clear the teachers in these classrooms are positioning themselves as arbiters of power and that phones are disruptions to the natural order of things. This is but one series of snapshots, and I am not going to go into a full discursive analysis of what each of these messages mean as well as the inherent power dynamics that happen in American high schools. That is a sociological and psychological conversation far beyond the scope of my work, though I strongly encourage readers to explore these dynamics through the work of many educational critics, including John Taylor Gatto (2005, 2008), Alfie Kohn (1993, 2000), and others noted throughout this book.

Still, it all leads me to the following. We need to be safe, yes, but we also need to be smart. We want kids to know what the web is doing with their data, so they are not trapped in mindless consumption; at the same time, we want them to be creative, and to be so in an intentional manner. They need to be aware of the choices they are making

and then consider the ways in which they are producing new knowledge for the world. And we need to be the ones who teach them this. Banning the devices accomplishes nothing, except putting us in an adversarial relationship, both with the phones themselves and with our students. Stated simply, the way we talk with (or talk at) our students about technology matters, and the warnings that dotted the doors in this school were ominous for many reasons.

This was the state of the conversation through 2018 and 2019, as I began working on this manuscript. Then, as we turned the corner into 2020, the entire world experienced a pandemic, one that shut down our schools—and our lives—in ways we had never experienced before, causing us to again confront the ways in which we were thinking about and using technology to deliver instruction to our students. The entire notion of what it meant to be a “digital teacher” shifted—as did much of the rest of what we consider to be normal, day-to-day activity in our world—in the spring of 2020. Without belaboring the point that most teachers were not prepared to be online instructors, coupled with the fact that “emergency remote teaching” (Hodges, Moore, Trust, & Bond, 2020) is not considered the same as more focused, well-designed, and (often) peer-reviewed courses delivered as part of online teaching, the overnight shift brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic was, perhaps, not the best way to demonstrate that online learning could be implemented, as it was happening in a contrived manner.

As we consider this context—and if it is not evident by now, the stance I hope educators will take—I now want to expand on the definition for *digital diligence* that I offered in the preface. It is an approach that ELA teachers can take in terms of their instructional design and delivery, as well as in the ways we invite our students to be both consumers and creators of digital texts. In order to make substantive change to our teaching practices—and to invite our students into more production-oriented uses of technology for critical thinking and creative expression—these shifts are needed.

## ARTICULATING A DEFINITION OF DIGITAL DILIGENCE

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So, how do we approach our own digital lives through a deliberate stance? Moreover, how do we help our students accomplish similar goals? Versions of these questions have been asked for years, as outlined above, and—for my entire teaching career—I have approached various responses about what it means to be intentional, focused, and productive with our uses of technology in my own work, first as a middle school ELA teacher and now as a teacher educator and researcher.

In a sense, writing this book is a retrospective for me about using technology, specifically technology to teach reading and writing. At the time I am completing this book, in the summer of 2021, I find that the past decade has afforded me the opportunity to author or coauthor numerous books, articles, and blog posts, as well as to provide dozens of professional learning presentations, workshops, and webinars. Also, it is somewhere in this frenzy between “distraction” and “mindfulness” that I’ve described above that we find ourselves, as ELA teachers, trying to figure out the best ways in which to introduce



digital writing and connected reading tools into our curriculum, all while being ever-more conscious of our students' overall technology use and screen time.

As a parent, a teacher educator, and a researcher, these dilemmas and the context in which we find ourselves—and the inherent questions that this time, space, and series of concerns raise for us—resonate now more than ever. At times in the past, I have come down (sometimes forcefully) in opposition to the types of doomsday theories related to technology, some of which are outlined in the section above. At least one psychiatrist, Richard A. Friedman (2018), has also argued for a more nuanced approach. Parents, he believes,

have bought into the idea that digital technology—smartphones, video games and the like—are neurobiologically and psychologically toxic. If you believe this, it seems intuitive that the generations growing up with these ubiquitous technologies are destined to suffer from psychological problems. But this dubious notion comes from a handful of studies with serious limitations.

He then offers insights into the ways that correlational studies of technology use have, through exposure and amplification in the media (and social media), led to a false narrative about “an epidemic of anxiety disorder rooted in a generation’s overexposure to digital technology,” betraying our actual biology and suggesting “an exaggerated idea about just how open to influence our brains really are.” Again, I do not have the kinds of medical, scientific, or statistical training to know, for sure, whether these studies are (or are not) “exaggerated,” yet I am always aware that we need to think about issues from a variety of perspectives, and Friedman’s suggestion that, if we pathologize the devices, we will, in turn, pathologize our youth seems worthy of discussion.

Along these same lines, David Levy, a professor of information studies, has penned the book *Mindful Tech: How to Bring Balance to Our Digital Lives* (2017), arguing that

So many of the discussions we are now having about the digital world tend to be based around simplistic dualisms. We ask whether texting is good or bad for us, or whether the Internet is making a smart or stupid. But when we can look at the richness of our own experience online, we have the chance to discover when and how texting is helpful and when it isn't, or when being online is productive and illuminating and when it isn't. (p. 12)

Levy’s point here about “richness” is especially important. Just as we would ask our children and our students to look holistically at their lives, and to find balance across many relationships, activities, and challenges they could pursue, we need to position the different kinds of tasks that they might engage in (especially when using technology) among these broader life experiences. With this in mind, we can use—and teach our children to use—technology in ways that are productive, creative, and beneficial. Moreover, I believe there is little use in outright bans of devices in schools (and in the lives of youth outside of school), lest they find other ways of going online anyway (and might do so in deceitful ways). In short, how we mentor our youth to use technology matters.

Thus, knowing we do have professional obligations to teach students how to use technology (e.g., ELATE Commission on Digital Literacy in Teacher Education, 2018; National Council of Teachers of English, 2019b), my arguments are aligned with others who claim students should be media creators and not just consumers (Hobbs, 2017; Ito et al., 2009; Jenkins, 2009). I wonder (and model) throughout my many conversations and work with ELA educators how we might be able to help our students use tools in a mindful manner, where they have control over their own productive, ethical, and responsible device decisions. Moreover, when considering the many ways in which we can and must use technology to teach reading, writing, and other language arts skills, I am continually driven by the question of how we might renew our approach to doing so.

Yet, at the same time, I can't say I'm not beginning to doubt some of my long-held beliefs about the role of digital tools in our teaching and our students' lives, especially as I watch my own children engaged in remote learning here in 2020–2021. I acknowledge the very real concerns that have been raised through many of the sources I've cited in the section above. Moreover, watching my own teenagers—as well as reading and reviewing reports on teenagers from reputable sources such as Pew Research—suggests to me that *something* is indeed happening. As a nod to the report mentioned above, Pew's latest datasets, for instance, demonstrate that “54% of U.S. teens say they spend too much time on their cellphones” and that 36% of parents report similar feelings of their own (Jiang, 2018). Stories outlining the challenges of “remote learning,” too, abound.

Using this book as an opportunity to deepen the conversation, I also want to rethink my own perspectives, sharing insight with other educators about ways to make their work life more productive and design lessons that would be useful for students in upper elementary, middle, and high school grades. And by *productive*, please know I am using this term in the sense that we need to be “production oriented,” asking students to be creators of digital texts, as compared to the somewhat vague, tech-infused idea of *productivity*, in which we try to do lots of work, and to do so quickly. Production oriented work is often not fast work at all, and we need to allow our students time, space, and opportunity to play.

Moreover, the teaching of English language arts has evolved in the past few years to include many perspectives, especially those that honor culturally sustaining pedagogies and the inclusion of diverse texts and topics. It is beyond the scope of this book—as well as my own expertise—to cite extensively on these topics, though one important place to begin is with the work of Tricia Ebarvia, Lorena Germán, Dr. Kimberley N. Parker, and Julia E. Torres (2018), collectively known as the team who produces #Disrupt Texts, which is “a crowdsourced, grass roots effort by teachers for teachers to challenge the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve.” Their work—and the work of countless other educators who identify as Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) as well as educators who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+)—needs to become a more consistent part of the conversation in all literacy instruction, and especially as we teach students how to engage in digital literacies.

In this sense, I see the idea of digital diligence in line with other lenses for teaching and learning that promote values such as attention and alertness, curiosity and perseverance, and, at the core of it all, inquiry-based practices that lead to deliberate action where we ask critical questions and provide creative responses. And, before moving into an overview of the book and subsequent chapters, I will provide just a bit more of my thinking about how I have come to this stance for teaching digital diligence, sharing some of the influences from professional organizations that have guided my current thinking about teaching and learning.

### **TEACHING AND LEARNING: INFLUENCES ON ELA, DIGITAL LITERACY, AND MORE**

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Like many educators, I draw ideas from influences too numerous to name, ranging from casual conversations with colleagues that I have met at conferences to longtime friends, from books, journal articles, and workshop presentations, and from webinars, podcasts, and blog posts. Each of these resources in my professional life has been invaluable, and I appreciate the many ideas I encounter each day. For the many people who have influenced my work, let me pause to share a brief, yet heartfelt “thank you.” There are more of you than could fit in a few pages of acknowledgments, and this feeble, wholesale statement of thanks will have to do for now.

As a way to ground the work presented here in the book, I do draw explicitly from three related pools of professional knowledge, and the underlying ethos of the organizations that have created the resources: the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), and the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE). Also, though I don’t go into detail about them, I draw from the six “social practices” that are encouraged by the National Writing Project as part of their “Teacher-Consultant Badge Framework” (2018), including the ideas that we “go public with our practice” and that we “lead” and “advocate.” The approaches of digital diligence that I describe in this book are, in some ways, similar to other models of digital literacy and citizenship instruction yet are, in other ways, somewhat different. My hope is that by articulating these professional influences and sharing my own path toward this mode of thinking, other educators might be able to engage in similar kinds of professional learning too. Here, then, I focus on NCTE, ISTE, and NAMLE.

#### **The NCTE and 21st-Century Literacies**

The NCTE, founded in 1911, is an organization of approximately 25,000 educators representing all grade levels from elementary school through the university, broadly interested in the teaching of English language arts, including literature, composition, and related disciplines (NCTE, n.d.). NCTE has been my professional home since my

senior year of college, when I joined as a preservice teacher, and I have been continuously engaged as a member ever since.

At the time of this writing, NCTE has compiled more than 20 different positions statements, resolutions, and research reports on “21st Century Literacies” (2019a). Beginning with 1970’s “Resolution on Media Literacy” (1970) and stretching to 2018’s “Beliefs for Integrating Technology into the English Language Arts Classroom” (ELATE Commission on Digital Literacy in Teacher Education, 2018), there are numerous examples of what students are expected to know and be able to do. The most recent document, NCTE’s 2019 updated position statement on the “Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age” (2019b) aptly summarizes many of these overarching goals into nine concise points (see Figure 1.2). It will also serve as a touchstone throughout the topics explored later in the book.

In particular, my experience as a co-coordinator of the team that wrote “Beliefs for Integrating Technology into the English Language Arts Classroom” helped me to think about the complexities inherent in approaching ELA instruction in a holistic manner. Inherent in all these position statements and guiding documents are a broader conception of students as agents in their own literacy learning. The opening segment

NCTE’s “Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age” makes it clear that the continued evolution of curriculum, assessment, and teaching practice itself is necessary.

Literacy has always been a collection of communicative and sociocultural practices shared among communities. As society and technology change, so does literacy. The world demands that a literate person possess and intentionally apply a wide range of skills, competencies, and dispositions. These literacies are interconnected, dynamic, and malleable. As in the past, they are inextricably linked with histories, narratives, life possibilities, and social trajectories of all individuals and groups. Active, successful participants in a global society must be able to do the following:

- Participate effectively and critically in a networked world
- Explore and engage critically, thoughtfully, and across a wide variety of inclusive texts and tools/modalities
- Consume, curate, and create actively across contexts
- Advocate for equitable access to and accessibility of texts, tools, and information
- Build and sustain intentional global and cross-cultural connections and relationships with others so to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought
- Promote culturally sustaining communication and recognize the bias and privilege present in the interactions
- Examine the rights, responsibilities, and ethical implications of the use and creation of information
- Determine how and to what extent texts and tools amplify one’s own and others’ narratives as well as counter unproductive narratives
- Recognize and honor the multilingual literacy identities and culture experiences individuals bring to learning environments, and provide opportunities to promote, amplify, and encourage these differing variations of language (e.g., dialect, jargon, register)

**FIGURE 1.2.** Opening segment of the NCTE’s (2019) “Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age.” Used with permission of NCTE.

of NCTE's "Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age" (Figure 1.2) outlines these key points.

More than just passively reading a text or writing by rote formula, these expectations described across multiple NCTE documents encourage us to see students as designers, creators, and critics, able to use digital literacy skills and multimodal resources in authentic ways to meet goals both in and beyond the classroom. These intentional stances are in alignment with my definition of digital diligence and encourage educators to help their students to employ technology in ethical, productive, and responsible ways.

## ISTE's Standards for Students and Educators

Having recently celebrated its 40th anniversary, ISTE serves approximately 100,000 members worldwide (ISTE, n.d.). Like NCTE, ISTE has created a variety of resources, including sets of standards for both educators and students. ISTE's 2016 revision of their standards for students encourages us to see them as active producers of digital products and contributors to a digital world (2016a).

Of the seven major standards and 28 substandards for students, many of them are useful in our exploration digital diligence; thus, it would be too much to list them all here. Instead, a brief explanation of how the revisions to the standards, drawn from the *ISTE Standards for Students: A Practical Guide for Learning with Technology* (ISTE, 2016b), demonstrates the intention with which the standards committee worked:

In this new iteration of the standards, the focus is squarely on learning, not tools. Yes, students still need to be proficient in foundational technology skills, but that's not the end. It's the means to an end where the expectation is that students will use technology when appropriate to take charge of their own learning. (p. 1)

Throughout the ISTE standards, then, we see a conscientious effort to move students into roles where they are doing more than just consuming resources via technology, or using computers, devices, or websites for routine tasks. Instead, there is a focus on helping students generate their own ideas, communicate those ideas effectively in a variety of contexts, and embrace a collaborative spirit while doing so. All are available on the ISTE website, and I highlight just a few of the substandards that embody both the spirit and outcome of practicing digital diligence:

- "Students cultivate and manage their digital identity and reputation and are aware of the permanence of their actions in the digital world." (Digital Citizen, 2a)
- "Students plan and employ effective research strategies to locate information and other resources for their intellectual or creative pursuits." (Knowledge Constructor, 3a)
- "Students publish or present content that customizes the message and medium for their intended audiences." (Creative Communicator, 6d)



Also of note, the ISTE Standards for Educators (2017) encapsulate the dispositions we must embrace in order to fully enact the standards for students. Again, quoting them at length would be too much, so I highlight a few that are noteworthy in relation to literacy and encourage readers to explore them all on the ISTE website:

- “Model for colleagues the identification, exploration, evaluation, curation and adoption of new digital resources and tools for learning.” (Leader, 2c)
- “Establish a learning culture that promotes curiosity and critical examination of online resources and fosters digital literacy and media fluency.” (Citizen, 3b)
- “Model and nurture creativity and creative expression to communicate ideas, knowledge or connections.” (Facilitator, 6d)

Combined with the NCTE definition of digital literacy, the ISTE standards provide educators with insight on how best to integrate technology into a model of collaborative, inquiry-based teaching and help their students critically evaluate media and technology too. Having recently completed the process to become an ISTE Certified Educator, I have become quite familiar with these ideas in the past 3 years. These themes align with my definition of digital diligence and provide more ideas for how we can actively promote these skills in our instruction.

### **NAMLE’s Core Principles**

Begun in 1998 as the Partnership for Media Education, evolving to the Alliance for a Media Literate America in 2001, and then becoming the National Association for Media Literacy Education in 2008 (NAMLE, n.d.), NAMLE now serves educators with a free membership and access to numerous resources. As part of their “Core Principles of Media Literacy Education” (2007), NAMLE embodies an inquiry-driven stance where students are encouraged to interrogate the messages they receive and to design their own messages in a critical, creative manner. Inviting students to be both media makers and conscientious consumers, NAMLE’s proactive stance is woven throughout their core principles and the many resources they provide.

Of particular importance for the ideas behind my understanding of digital diligence, Principle 2 contends that “Media Literacy Education expands the concept of literacy to include all forms of media (i.e., reading and writing),” and Principle 6 “affirms that people use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.” As we teach our students to examine text, images, videos, maps, and other forms of media—as well as to create these types of documents—they must be aware of their own perspectives and how their own interpretations can be, during some moments, insightful, and at other times, limited. By bringing this sensibility to their own reading, listening, and viewing—as well as to the ways in which they write, speak, and visually represent their ideas—students can become more effective with their academic and personal use of media.

Like the NCTE stance on 21st-century literacies and the ISTE standards for students, NAMLE, too, embraces the idea that students should be critical consumers and creators of all media products. Though it may feel repetitive, I feel this point certainly deserves a reprise. As ELA educators, we must encourage our students to critically evaluate the technologies they use and the products that are delivered to them, all the while pushing them to create new work that demonstrates their skills at using these digital tools. This then models the kinds of mindful approaches that encapsulate the spirit of digital diligence.

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## OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

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As we turn toward the broad principles of digital diligence and the lessons that support this stance, I reiterate a concise definition:

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*Digital diligence* is an alert, productive stance that individuals employ when using technology (apps, websites, software, and devices) for connected reading and digital writing, characterized by empathy, intention, and persistence.

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Throughout the book, I will work to provide ideas that can be adapted by educators and aimed toward an audience of middle and high school students. My hope is that, given any reader's own classroom context, there will be opportunities to adapt and extend the ideas presented here in many ways. Depending on the age and skill level of the students, as well as the time available to explore, I could imagine different topics being examined differently. The depth to which any individual educator may explore these ideas can be flexible, ranging from a simple introduction and awareness to several days of exploration. Here is an overview of what's ahead.

### Chapter 2: Planning for Purposeful Arcs of Instruction

In Chapter 2, I will outline my thinking on what it means to teach in a *synchronous/asynchronous, real-time/anytime, both/and* world. (See the short Interlude after Chapter 1 for an introduction to these concepts.) What I mean by introducing the idea of a *purposeful arc of instruction* is something different than simply a lesson or unit plan. While there are some similarities, I want to avoid the use of *plan* as that implies a specific agenda for instruction with crystal clear learning objectives. And while having these in mind is important, the idea of an "arc of instruction" encompasses so much more than just planning what one will say and do when you are standing (or sitting) in front of students (in school, in a video call, or while planning for anytime online learning). This is about more than creating what I've started to call "digital dittos," or simply preparing an assignment sheet and posting it online. Purposeful arcs of instruction encompass several additional elements related to the ways that we reconceptualize time, topics of study, the teaching techniques we employ, and strategic uses of technology.

Then we move into Chapters 3 through 8, with topics for teaching digital diligence. As we think about the ways in which technology continues to affect our lives and our students' lives, these topics are ones we can explore as a way to introduce those dispositions of intentionality, persistence, and others. I outline a number of ideas I have explored with my own students (undergraduate, masters, and doctoral). Through my work with dozens of teachers in professional development and coaching contexts, I consider resources that could be useful for middle and high school students. We must think about all the ways in which we might work to become more aware of the history and impact of technology, as well as what we might want to do here in the present moment to better protect ourselves and our privacy as we move forward. These ideas for arcs of instruction are organized across six major themes, all of which I have explored in my writing, teaching, and professional development work in the past few years, and am pleased to be able to capture some of in these chapters.

### **Chapter 3: Protecting Privacy**

We begin by exploring issues of privacy and why it is crucial in our “always on” world to still take measures that give us some control over our personal data. A recent series of articles from *The New York Times* (2019), “The Privacy Project,” began in April 2019 with the idea that tech companies have been using our data in many ways over the years, especially since the advent of the smartphone, and while “the benefits of such advances have been apparent for years; the costs—in anonymity, even autonomy—are now becoming clearer.” These benefits and costs are explored through a series of lessons that invite students to examine their own relationship with the web and use of various web-based tools. In doing so, they build a stance of digital diligence in which they are aware of the tradeoffs they are making and consciously choose to do so when the benefits do, indeed, outweigh the costs (or, at the very least, provide a reasonable tradeoff and make the use of such tools worthwhile).

### **Chapter 4: Maximizing Our Own Attention**

The Internet is nothing if not a series of distractions. As noted throughout this introduction, humans have always faced the challenge of maintaining our focus, and the ways in which smartphones capitalize on our desire to be stimulated has, as described by the Center for Humane Technology (n.d.), given us technology tools that “are caught in a race to the bottom of the brain stem to extract human attention.” We need to help students figure out how to use their own ingenuity (as well as some additional tech tools) to be focused when they need to be, and at other times to allow their minds to wander down the endless paths that the Internet offers, enjoying some of the serendipitous and wonderful things that can be found online. Working toward digital diligence requires us each to know our own strengths and weaknesses when it comes to using tech, and the topics in this section of the book help us make small moves in our daily lives that have the potential to keep us more focused.

## Chapter 5: Popping Filter Bubbles and Breaking Algorithms

The algorithms that drive our lives are becoming increasingly problematic. Safiya Umoja Noble (2018), in her book *Algorithms of Oppression*, argues that “while we often think of terms such as ‘big data’ and ‘algorithms’ as being benign, neutral, or objective, they are anything but” (p. 1). Similarly, as described in his 2011 TED Talk and book of the same title, Eli Pariser (2011a, 2011b) notes that with increasing efficiency in platforms like Google and Facebook, we each live in a “filter bubble,” or “your own personal, unique universe of information that you live in online.” In order to move outside of these bubbles and to understand the algorithms at work in our lives, the lessons here will encourage students to see beyond what they might typically experience; moreover, I will share some ideas about how to engage in civil dialogue with others online as a part of digitally diligent practices.

## Chapter 6: Understanding How Knowledge Gets Created and Circulated

Though this chapter could include a catchy title that draws in ideas of *alternative facts*, *post truth*, or the still-present term popularized in American politics *fake news*, I come at it from a different direction. Steering slightly to the side of those conversations and asking instead a question that philosophers, scientists, journalists, and others have been working on for millennia, I wonder: How do we know what we know? Or to put a slightly more modern twist on it, how do we understand the ways that different news organizations, entertainers, and social media influencers—as well as academics, officials, and other experts—create new knowledge? A scholar, senator, and ambassador, Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1927–2003), put it this way: “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts” (Moynihan, 2010). However, given our 24/7 news cycle, the question quickly moves from what we have discovered as “fact” (the who, what, when, and where) to an analysis of the why and how. Through these lessons, we ask these questions: What counts as evidence? For whom? In which context? Understanding the answers to these questions—and how to get the answers to these questions—is another aspect of building an intentional stance toward information literacy as one component of digital diligence.

## Chapter 7: Extending Opportunities for Digital Writing

In addition to finding and consuming information, we must move students toward opportunities to share their own ideas. Based on a large portion of my work over the last decade, and in keeping with the spirit of digital diligence, this chapter explores openly available tools that students can use to become more critical and creative digital writers. While, yes, we can consider texting, word processing, and emailing to be core tools of digital writing (each with their own expectations related to formality of language, specificity of audience, and timeliness in terms of response), we also need to invite students to create multilayered digital compositions, rich with text as well as images, videos,

maps, and hyperlinks to additional resources. Digital writing, as I described it with my coauthors in *Because Digital Writing Matters*, includes “*compositions created with, and oftentimes for reading and viewing on, a computer or other device that is connected to the Internet*” (National Writing Project, DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl, & Hicks, 2010, p. 7; emphasis in original). The idea that we are creating texts that are meant to be consumed on-screen means we have many opportunities for helping students become more digitally diligent as authors, all the while embracing the needs of their readers, viewers, and listeners in the process of composing.

## Chapter 8: Embracing Opportunities for Connected Reading

This chapter builds on my work related to reading with digital tools. We understand that reading on-screen is different than reading on the page, but exploring *exactly* what that means for our students is still up for discussion. Readers are increasingly being asked to engage in what technology journalist Clive Thompson, author of the book *Smarter Than You Think*, describes as “short take,” “middle take,” and “long take” forms of writing, varying their expectations and pace of reading from social media messages to blog posts and to extended, long-form journalism (Thompson, 2010, 2013). Working with students to explore these many types of reading environments—as well as different kinds of texts that can be accessed on their devices, such as ebooks and subscription databases—the goal here is to help students embrace what Kristen Hawley Turner and I have called *connected reading*, employing the mindful and social practices surrounding the use of digital texts (Turner & Hicks, 2015a, 2015b; Turner, Hicks, & Zucker, 2020). Turner, Zucker, and I have recently defined *connected reading* as

a model of print and digital reading comprehension that conceptualizes readers’ interactions with digital texts through encountering (the ways in which readers seek or receive digital texts), evaluating (the ways in which readers make judgments about the usefulness of digital texts), and engaging (the ways in which readers interact with and share digital texts). (Turner et al., 2020)

As with previous chapters, topics here provide ideas for how we might help our students use their devices for sustained, substantive engagement with texts, building their reading stamina and persistence.

Throughout each of these chapters, there will be examples of the many tools that are available for teaching our students to be mindful, to be digitally diligent. These will include tools for reading through purposeful annotation and interaction, as well as digital writing tools that use words, images, videos, data, links, maps, and other forms of media. With these tools, I will also consider the many ways in which students might be able to capture snapshots of their learning and reflect on that learning in intentional ways. As a reminder, I have a complete list of resources mentioned here available on the book’s companion website—[hickstro.org/digitaldiligence](http://hickstro.org/digitaldiligence)—and I welcome additional suggestions of tools to add to these lists. Please contact me with new items to add.



## Chapter 9: Conclusion

Finally, Chapter 9 will bring our discussion of digital diligence to a close using a model for suggesting increases in particular digital literacy practices and a decrease in others. I draw the inspiration for this model from the fourth edition of Steve Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde's book *Best Practice: Bringing Standards to Life in America's Classrooms* (2012). Using this model, I reiterate the key principles of digital diligence and offer some specific suggestions for how we can continue to innovate, even in an era of remote teaching and learning.

As we move into the next chapter of the book, "Planning for Purposeful Arcs of Instruction," I reiterate the point that, without a doubt, we live in an era of digital distraction. Numerous authors, media pundits, journalists, parents, academics, and others have spoken to the incredible challenges that we face as we prepare our students for the demands of an ever-evolving workforce and increasingly complex world. To ensure mindful practice—or what I call digital diligence—we as teachers of English language arts must move quickly to bring our pedagogy in line with the shifting expectations of society while, at the same time, adhering to the pedagogical principles that have, in the past, led our students to enhance their literacy skills, becoming critical and creative along the way.

My hope is that the ideas in the pages ahead lead us to adopt our own set of practices that bring digital diligence to our lives and, in turn, to the students we serve.