

**B is for Battledore, and also for Book:  
Student Textuality and Instructional Technologies in Eighteenth-Century England**

The texting and twittering of “millennial generation” students alarm parents and professors alike. However, digital technologies are not the first to recast student literacy. This paper analyzes the ways in which the eighteenth-century English print trade, through the marketing of educational media, fostered new methods for learning and new representations of the reading-writing relationship.

Early Modern student writing had been seen as a *physical* skill based in the transcribing of others’ texts, beginning with individual letters and moving to the recitation of complete essays. Because of the growing acceptance of specifically print-based methods of instruction that required no copying, however, the late eighteenth-century student reader was increasingly represented as the subordinate member of a hierarchal relationship, poised to passively absorb the superior mind of the published genius. This reconceptualization will be traced in two examples.

The first examines the ephemeral texts called “battledores,” designed to teach the ABCs and simple reading to young children. Both in their marketing strategies and content, battledores coded alphabets as not to be copied, only read, separating these once fundamentally linked tasks. This created, even in the nursery, reading subjects prepared not to produce their own texts, but to consume a variety of items marketed by the print trades.

My second example concerns the proto-textbook *The Preceptor*, planned and compiled by the well-known and admired bookseller, Robert Dodsley. Utilizing his network of authors and calling on tropes familiar to readers of the canon he himself was instrumental in creating, Dodsley privileged the *appreciation* of published works over the quotidian writing tasks likely to be undertaken by most students.

Of course, this history of educational technologies is complicated by the gender of students, their class positioning, and even their religion (many of the methods were promoted in Dissenting Academies). These factors warn us against grand narratives and insist that we historicize the relationship between literacy and print culture as emerging from specific local agents and texts, not just the technologies themselves. Understanding the local helps us see that our new “literacy machines” are also embedded in institutional, commercial, and pedagogical cultures—and that we, too, can be agents of a new digital literacy.