We sat down to write this introduction just as the controversy over WikiLeaks broke and the Federal Communications Commission issued its controversial ruling on Net Neutrality. Siva Vaidhyanathan and the Institute for the Future of the Book are collaborating on a new project that questions what publishing, writing, and copyright in the future might mean. The Googlization of Everything, an “open book” experiment, is being written on-line and released in real time as Vaidhyanathan writes it. Digital technology, it seems, is everywhere. New technologies are redefining how we teach, how we work, how we write, how we live, and how we define ourselves as activists. In putting together this issue of Radical Teacher, we never met face-to-face as an editorial team or with our authors or the larger Radical Teacher board. All of our work happened synchronously and asynchronously, aided by technology.

But, just as academics have, for years, sought to critically interrogate texts as part of the classroom, working with students to deconstruct and decode articles, poems, plays, novels, non-fiction books, films, games, and more, we would argue that technology also has become a text, one which plays a central role in our lives and that of our students. What is the relationship between a critically engaged activism, pedagogy, and technology? What does radical teaching with technology look like? How do we, as radical teachers, ensure that we and our students are shaping the content and meaning of technology rather than just being shaped by it?

Teaching today, from K-12 through graduate school, is ubiquitously tied to digital technology, and the call to make it more so grows. Institutional resources are increasingly directed toward classroom digital initiatives. The “digital divide” discourse, abandoned for a while, reemerges as access to technology—whether it is the number of computers in a classroom, the kinds of on-line resources a school can provide, how students and faculty access on-line resources, or students’ access to mobile technologies—continues to be an economic issue. Moreover, students arrive in our classrooms overconfident that they have the technology skills they need. Teaching with technology becomes a process of reteaching basic technology before introducing a critical lens.

K-12 teachers struggle depending on
the budgetary constraints of their districts. New core standards for K-12 teachers demand “21st century skills,” yet, often, meaningful content is blocked by school boards and administrators and cutting-edge technology is prohibitively expensive.

In the university, libraries are merged with academic computing departments, and the instructional technologist has begun to occupy a central role on many campuses. The on-line course management system is a de facto part of the educational interface and textbook companies market interactive, on-line “course packs” that deliver pre-packaged material to students to supplement the curriculum. Completely on-line courses and virtual environments define the faculty-student dynamic and the workload required to manage it in new ways. New degree programs are popping up, and digital humanities is a newly, yet nebulously, defined discipline.

Yet this shift occurred quickly, as, over the course of the past ten years, we have moved from a paper-based, print culture to an on-line digital culture. For many in academia, these shifts have taken place without the opportunity to interrogate what they mean, how these changing work conditions alter our labor, and how these forces shape the landscape of education.

As the economic crisis continues to hold the country in its grip for a third year (at least), teachers and students are subjected to additional pressure to make themselves “competitive” as workers in a narrowly defined marketplace that demands technological skills as an end rather than a means to education. Much has already been published about the uses of technology in the classroom, including a 2002 cluster of articles in Radical Teacher. And yet, in the onslaught of new Web 2.0 technologies, new software, and new applications, many teachers struggle to keep up with learning new technologies let alone critically interrogating them or imagining radical uses for them.

It is unlikely that we will see any real decoupling of technology from teaching and learning, any more than it is likely that we will see it in any other aspect of our society or culture at large. Given the fact that ignoring or rejecting technology wholesale is not a viable or palatable option for most of us, we must therefore continue to actively think about its use, insist on approaching it with a critical eye, and ask questions at every turn about whose interests are being served, who benefits from our implementation of technology, and why and when we choose to engage with technology in teaching and learning.

We came to this issue from three very different institutional contexts. All proficient users and teachers of technology, we hoped to interrogate the radical uses of technology.

Emily:

Ten years ago, my title would have been Reference Librarian. In 2010, I am an Electronic Resources and Instruction Librarian, a title change that reflects a pro-
fessional shift away from stewardship of vast print collections (I cannot remember the last time I held a book as part of my job) and toward a pedagogical role, teaching students to navigate digital information environments both out on the open web and inside gated scholarly databases. The more I work with students at the contact zone of the database interface or OPAC, the better I understand my role as a critical teacher of digital information use. Digital information offers as much promise as it does peril. Thanks to ventures like Google’s book digitization project, students anywhere can access primary source materials from campus computer labs and laptops that were once confined to university archives. More of us have more access to more knowledge than ever in history. But the world of electronic information is equally subject to the perils of the privatization of intellectual heritage and the masking of the political, social, and economic structures that amplify some voices while dimming others. Part of my job, then, is teaching students to “see through” the apparently free and easy universe of digital information. I am a radical librarian in the sense of radical as root: I want my students to understand the structures that invisibly determine why they retrieve what they retrieve when they throw that handful of words into Google, because it is not “everything.”

Sarah:

In 1993, I discovered the Internet and it changed my life. When I first logged onto a shared social space in what was at that time a text-based medium, I was awestruck by the potential that I could imagine for it and the hopefulness I felt for it as a transformative space and site of resistance. It was in the context of these early online communities, connected—via text-only and at impossibly slow transfer rates—from university to university, that I was exposed to the notions, ideas, and people that would challenge me to form my own political, radical, and activist identity that characterized my life at that time. In retrospect, these ideas seem quaint, infeasible, and unlikely. So what happened? Quite simply, the World Wide Web was born and the Internet became a multimedia sensory commercial experience open to, and making consumers of, all. Meanwhile, I found myself working as an academic technologist at an elite, private university with many resources. Despite my misgivings about the general direction that digital technologies seemed to be headed in, I still believed that the answer lay in giving more people access to and control of technology. Yet the question remained: to what end? What responsibility did I have to the students, and to myself, to critically approach these technologies, to question partnerships with industry, to examine the emphasis on technology training and skills, to wonder about the size of my budget vis-à-vis that of historically underfunded and undervalued areas of the university enterprise? This critical approach continues to inform my interrogations of technology as a teacher, a researcher, and a student, particularly as I work to uncover the very real and very human labor interventions hidden behind the facade of “DIY” content creation and relationships touted as simply unidirectional user-to-computer. Until we understand the complete production cycle behind these technologies, in a global context and across the
entire life-cycle from manufacturing to dismantling and at every stage in between, we lack a clear picture and a clear understanding of the implications of the ubiquitous usage of digital technology.

Liz:

My first pedagogy course was teaching composition with computers. I was an impatient student, unclear of the role technology would play in my classroom. I completed the course, but went on to study other aspects of pedagogy that I found more compelling, more useful, and more important. But in my first year as a faculty member at LaGuardia Community College, I was assigned to teach all of my composition courses in a computer lab. On the first day, when several students did not know how to turn on a computer let alone how to access the software, I immediately understood that to help my students be successful, I needed to ensure that they could use—and critically interrogate—technology. In my composition courses today, I am led to ask, how would I teach writing without teaching technology? If I do not actively teach technology skills and bring a critical lens to technology in my courses, am I underpreparing my students? The answer to these questions is yes. And so, over the past several years, I have come to use technology as the center of my classes, working to ensure that my students know how to use technology and also how to raise questions about technology. This has meant for me a self-education in the world of teaching with technology, learning alongside my students as we explore new technologies and branching out into research areas I had never imagined in the course of my graduate studies. Today, I seek to ensure that students can both consume and create on-line materials as part of their education in my courses. I want them to understand what is at work in watching a YouTube video or creating one. I also want them to understand what is behind the “seamless” nature of the technology they use. Whose labor? At what cost? I also work closely with the Center for Teaching and Learning at my school to lead seminars on technology and pedagogy. This was not the shape I thought my work would take, but it seems to me to be a critical issue for my students, for the classroom, for pedagogy, and for the shape of education to come.

All three of us work in contexts so tightly coupled with digital technologies that it is difficult to imagine working, teaching, or learning without them. Its ubiquity is what makes so urgent the need for continuing reflective and recursive dialogue about the use of technology inside and outside our classrooms. How do we maintain critical perspectives on the tools that are increasingly the very material we teach?

The six contributors to this cluster suggest ways that digital technologies can be used to serve radical ends, as well as providing potent reminders that technology alone can be anything but radical.

Larry Hanley opens this issue with a discussion of the perils of course management systems. He describes the terrible work of reducing transformative education to a series of boxes and buttons prescribed by proprietary systems like Blackboard. Instead of suggesting we
abandon digital spaces, Hanley asks us to imagine ourselves as bricoleurs, “mashing up” tools from Flickr to Glogster to wikis as a way of resisting the homogeneity of institutional systems. Hanley reminds us that technologies matter most in the ways they are used; we resist corporatized digital spaces when we decide to make our own.

Tricia Kress discusses the very real limits to that demand, even when access to the tools of digital technologies is at hand. Kress follows a literacy teacher in an urban public high school contending with the simultaneous growth of surveillance technologies and restrictions on technologies for teaching and learning. Hers is a caution against the argument that access to technology always means equity; if students must run a security gauntlet to get to a computer lab, how meaningful is that access?

Laura Fokkena’s contribution asks similar hard questions about access and equity from the standpoint of a teacher in an afterschool program. She describes the difficult realities of technology integration—mandated by grant funders and measured by hardware counts—in programs geared toward students who are too often seen simply as consumers rather than producers of digital content. Any radical approach to technologies in education broadly conceived must involve a critical rethinking of what we imagine our students capable of doing and making with machines.

Our final two submissions explore concrete ways that new technologies can be deployed to radical ends. Tyler Schmidt describes his use of online discussion boards in a course for education students. He asks whether digital spaces might be productive homes for antiracist pedagogy and dialogue. How does the way we talk about race change when we are required to narrate it to each other? Rounding out the issue, Karen Weingarten and Corey Frost explore the implications of collaborative authorship in digital environments. They ask how tools like wikis radically undercut the idea of the singular author, and what this might mean for composition instructors seeking to equip their students with the skills necessary for navigating an author-less world.

These articles scratch the surface of a larger discussion about radical teaching and technology. Moving forward, we see a space for a discussion about the political economy of technology and for examining the nexus of technology, politics, and the classroom. We also believe that radical teaching must include considerations of the invisible labor of technology, the new ways the digital divide is emerging with mobile technology, how technology is transforming classrooms and who makes those decisions, how technology is funded in K-12, how technology is funded in the university, and the professionalization of technology.

These are some of the questions we hope future writers will address in continuing a discussion of radical teaching and technology:

- How can technologies be used for their empowering potential, including supporting and training students to be active users of technology?

- What are the implications of the commodification of intellectual material, including the modularization and “just in time” delivery of teaching material via commercial courseware on university-owned servers?
• What are the implications of the lopsided funding of technology projects over all else in academic institutions over the past decade and a half, and the collusion of academic institutions with high-tech business on joint ventures and for-profit activities? What are the ramifications of “invisible technology”? How do we teach about the production and labor behind technology?

• What are the implications of changing forms of digital labor in the academic environment, including demands to build technology skills, learn software packages, and contribute intellectual material to university-owned and/or commercial databases, thereby creating and populating online learning environments?

• What is the relationship between contingent labor and on-line teaching?

• What are the demands on instructors to provide vocational training for careers to students and train them to use commercial software packages, and deliver a labor force that is skilled in technology, as opposed to having support, space and resources for the teaching of academic material?

• How can we understand the digital divide, widely claimed to have been “erased,” as it manifests in the wide disparity in how and where technology is implemented in our schools?

• What happens when many of the decisions about technology are removed from teacher and faculty control?

• What does it mean that instructional technologists and librarians provide almost invisible support for the integration of technology into classrooms?

• How does the use of technology bring additional pressures to the classroom around teaching, learning, and assessment?

All around us, the world is rapidly changing and technology is a critical force that keeps pushing our institutional structures forward. As we continue to push forward, where are we going? What are the implications of this global shift? While we are very pleased with the articles we did receive and the ways in which technology is being used and seriously critiqued, there is much more room for conversation and a wide exchange of practices and pedagogy. We believe this cluster of articles represents the beginning of a conversation considering the political economy of technology and we look forward to the continuing discussion and the radical implementation of technology in our classes.