A scene from episode two of "Inanimate Alice," a digital novel that uses text, sound, images and games to tell the story of Alice and her imaginary digital friend Brad. Educators are using the series in the classroom as they explore new forms of narrative that challenge the very meaning of reading and writing.

11.23.10 | Dave Boardman is an English teacher at Messalonskee High School in Oakland, Maine. Although he teaches a traditional English curriculum, his students aren’t producing typical five-paragraph essays or even research papers.

Take the case of “Tilman,” a writing assignment a struggling freshman produced a couple of years ago. “Tilman” is a moving video that tells the story of Patrick Tillman, the NFL player who quit football to fight in Afghanistan and came back in a body bag. The video moves seamlessly back and forth from the student’s own thoughts on the case and CNN coverage, atop edited pictures and news footage.

“I think the definition of writing is shifting,” Boardman said. “I don’t think writing happens with just words anymore.”

In his classes, Boardman teaches students how to express their ideas and how to tell stories — and he encourages them to use video, music, recorded voices and whatever other media will best allow them to communicate effectively. He is part of a vanguard of educators, technologists, intellectuals and writers who are reimagining the very meaning of writing and reading.

“The written word is coming to life by being a key part of multimedia,” Boardman said. “When people can not only pick up something by the written word, but also listen to it, see it move
across the screen or see someone’s interpretation of that word through moving images, then I think it becomes much more alive.”

We find when writing moves online, the connections between ideas and people are much more apparent than they are in the context of a printed book.

– Bob Stein, Institute for the Future of the Book

Bob Stein is founder and co-director of the MacArthur-funded Institute for the Future of the Book, an organization premised on the idea that “the written page is giving way to the networked screen.”

Stein agrees with Boardman that our definition of writing must change to include audio, visual and graphical components. Take a moment to digest that, because it’s actually the easy part. What Stein is working on at the Institute is something deeper than just the idea of books and other kinds of writing becoming multimedia. He’s encouraging a complete transformation of the notion of ownership of writing altogether.

“The age of the know-it-all author who went into her room for three months and figured something out that no one figured out, and had a whole idea that was hers alone – it’s over.”

The keys to understanding this new perspective on writing and reading lie in notions of collaboration and being social. More specifically, it’s believing that collaboration and increased socialization around activities like reading and writing is a good idea.

“You and I grew up with the notion of the little girl curled up in her chair reading, or the writer in her garret, right?” Stein said. “But what we’ve discovered is that when you move the function of reading and writing online, the social aspect comes forward.”

According to Stein, the idea of the author as someone who works alone to produce something that is hers comes from the Enlightenment—and from then until now is only a “blip in time.” This notion, he adds, is “only part of the picture.” The other part is facilitated by our increasingly networked world—reading other books, collaborating, sharing ideas, chatting with colleagues.

“We find when writing moves online, the connections between ideas and people are much more apparent than they are in the context of a printed book,” Stein said.

Essentially, the writer is a synthesizer of the information and ideas.

One of the Institute’s projects is CommentPress, an open-source plug-in for WordPress that aims to turn a document into a conversation (view examples here). Readers can comment on, say, an academic paper before it has gone to press and add insights and questions in the margins of the text.

It’s an idea very much in the air. The MIT Media Lab tagged collaboration as one of the key literacies of the 21st century, and it’s now so much a part of the digital learning conversation as
to be nearly rote. In his new book, “Where Good Ideas Come From,” Stephen Johnson argues that ideas get better the more they’re exposed to outside influences.

It is not only the act of writing that is changing. It’s reading, too. Stein points to a 10-year-old he met in London recently. The boy reads for a bit, goes to Google when he wants to learn more about a particular topic, chats online with his friend who are reading the same book, and then goes back to reading.

“What I’m arguing is that we should say reading equals all of these behaviors,” Stein said. “Not just when you’re looking at the book, but also when you’re talking to people about the book or when you’re Googling things that occur to you as you read the book.”

Students used CommentPress in their study of “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.”

The implications for learning are huge. In a recent experiment by the Institute, professors at the University of North Carolina used CommentPress when assigning the story “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” by Ambrose Bierce in a first year seminar course. The story was posted online along with clips from the 1962 film adaptation. Students engaged with the text not only in the classroom, but also while they were at the library after class and at home after the library. (Learn more about the project in this video.)

“They come back to class the next day still talking to each other,” Stein said, “because the conversation continued in the margins.”

Laura Flemming is an elementary school library media specialist in River Edge, N.J. About three years ago, she came across a hybrid book—half digital, half traditional—called “Skeleton Creek” by Patrick Carmen.

“The 6th graders were running down to library class, banging down the door to get in, which you don’t often see,” Flemming said.

Indeed, she was so struck not only by her students’ enthusiasm, but also by the way they were picking up themes of character, setting and mood that she started researching the subject in her spare time. Now she writes the blog edtechinsight.blogspot.com, where she discusses digital reading and writing.

Flemming’s favorite transmedia work is “Inanimate Alice,” a remarkably evocative and compelling multimedia book from the BradField Company. Alice is an 8-year-old girl in China searching for her missing father in episode one. Music plays; images float by; text rolls across the screen.
“We tell our kids we want them to know what it’s like to walk in the shoes of the main character,” Flemming said. “I’ve had more than one child tell me that before they read ‘Inanimate Alice,’ they didn’t know what that felt like.”

Flemming believes that digital storytelling, done right, can increase children’s ability to empathize. It is also about teaching kids interactive communication skills, because, says Flemming, “this is the world they’re growing up in.”

That is an answer you’ll hear a lot in the world of digital media and learning. But Stein says that’s not good enough. We must be sure we’re driving the horse, he argues.

Stein says it’s better to take advantage of new technologies to push the culture in the direction you want it to go. Stein is fully aware of the political and cultural implications of his vision of the future of reading and writing, which shifts the emphasis away from the individual and onto the community. It’s asking people to understand that authored works are part of a larger flow of ideas and information.

“We’ve grown up in a world where all great ideas are pretty much ascribed to a single individual,” Stein said. “What we’re not particularly good at is understanding what the origins of that idea were or seeing the continuous flow of ideas.”

Such a redrawing of the boundaries of authorship, of course, undermines our system of intellectual property and copyright laws. If the creation of a book is a collaborative process, who owns it in the end?

“The writer gets the marquee billing,” Stein said, but is this really appropriate? Consider a party, he says. A guy named Bob may have hosted, but if there weren’t any guests, the party wouldn’t exist. We call it Bob’s party, but is it really his?

As for what a new “progressive system” of copyright law might look like, Stein doesn’t have a prescription. He just knows that what we do have isn’t working.

Stein was recently in San Paulo giving a talk. While there he found himself deep in discussion with a filmmaker, a colleague of Jean-Luc Godard.

“He was arguing the auteur version of filmmaking,” Stein said, still going over the conversation in his mind. “And I understand why that worked for the first hundred years. But it’s not the future. The future is the collaborative effort.”