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Middle school students were supplied with personal e-mail accounts and participated in weekly exchanges with teachers.

Hi, it's [name]. I am just calling to say hello. How are you? I can't wait 'til the next lesson.

In this article we highlight how positive and productive student-teacher relationships were developed and sustained using new communication technologies during a program aimed at developing technological literacies for groups of Indigenous students in Australia. This program was part of the Positive Links between Universities and Schools (PLUS) Project, a project designed around sociocultural approaches to learning and a critical multiliteracies framework (C. Luke, 2000; Luke & Freebody, 1997). The project offered four technological literacy programs for 70 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from a cluster of primary and secondary state schools in Ipswich, Queensland, throughout 2000 (Community Services and Research Centre and Graduate School of Education, 1999; Doherty, 2002; Kapitzke et al., 2000; A. Luke, 2000). The project aims to give Indigenous middle school students the opportunity to develop critical literacy skills in technological environments and to become familiar and comfortable with a university setting. The PLUS Project is an ongoing collaboration between the schools, parents, and the University of Queensland.

Australia's Indigenous populations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds live in varied contexts and circumstances. Ipswich, a city of approximately 130,000 situated on the periphery of the larger metropolitan spread of Brisbane, has a significant Indigenous population (2% of the town's residents). This community is clustered in a higher density along a corridor of suburbs. An Indigenous identity does not preclude students' participation in urban consumer and popular media cultures. These students speak English (though perhaps of a nonstandard dialect), listen to U.S. pop star Britney Spears, watch Dragonball Z on television, follow World Wrestling, and eat fast food. But they also champion local Aboriginal rugby players, worship Cathy Freeman (the Aboriginal Olympian), and participate in Aboriginal cultural groups. However, they often face intractable educational disadvantage in mainstream schooling. This is associated as much with their relatively low socioeconomic status and a history of political marginalisation, displacement, and institutionalised racism as with cultural differences. The emerging digital divide between those who have access to informational technologies and those who don't
will potentially exacerbate such educational disadvantage.

In this context, e-mail was an integral and ongoing part of the project. Students attended eight weekly sessions of two hours in a university computer laboratory, where each student had his or her own machine with Internet access, an e-mail account, and networked drives. Weekly e-mail messages were exchanged between each student and members of the teaching team. These dialogues sometimes started as broadcasts to the whole student group, giving instructions for the day or demonstrating some feature such as attachments. However, they quickly became individualised, with each reply building interpersonal exchanges between the tutor and the student to form a thread of increasingly familiar dialogue. Occasionally students were able to access their e-mail during the week outside the project sessions, but the majority relied on these sessions to conduct their e-mail exchanges. The teaching team members read and replied to the messages between sessions, so they were able to come to each session with better knowledge of individual students. Given the short and sporadic nature of the program, the teaching experience was remarkable for the strength of interpersonal relationships established with these students.

E-mail was also used to connect the students with outside communities. An Aboriginal woman who acts as a cultural advisor to the local government was our "e-pal" for some student cohorts. Another cohort of students was matched with Indigenous students from a remote high school; the two groups exchanged messages from opposite ends of Queensland. These experiences demonstrated not only the capacity of electronic mail but also the culture and practices surrounding these texts.

Although it was not an explicit goal of the program, we repeatedly found that relationships facilitated by e-mail dialogue rapidly achieved a warmth which contributed to the productive and cooperative nature of each program. This statement is not a case of blind zealotry, or "uncritical enthusiasm" (Snyder, 2000, p. 98), about new technologies but rather bears witness to real outcomes of pedagogical value where we weren't expecting them. We relate this experience to broader issues of relevance to the core teacher-student relationship on which teachers' work relies, the unique qualities of electronic communication, and its contrast to the normative oral discourse of classrooms. We feel that incidental e-mail communication between teacher and student provides a new space—new in scope, location, time, mode, and interactional protocol—in which to explore and build this core relationship.

Teacher-student relationships in the middle years

Teachers in the middle years of schooling commonly experience tension between their function of establishing close relationships with students and their charter to provide academic challenge (e.g., in Australia, Whitehead, 2000; in the United States, Norton & Lewis, 2000). The common solution of compromise fails to recognise the integral nature of the teacher-student relationship and how this relationship in effect underpins any pastoral or academic work the teacher undertakes. In a review of research related to the academic achievement of middle school students, the U.S. National Middle School Association (2001) concluded that students' academic achievement is enhanced in schools that support personal and sustained connections between students and adults in the school setting. In the United Kingdom, Doddington, Flutter, and Rudduck (1999) explored the dips in motivation and performance in year 8 students and concluded that having a good relationship with teachers was crucial to students' commitment to learning: "It may help them resist the 'school work isn't cool' perspective that often emerges—and flourishes—at this time" (p. 33).

In Australia, Harslett (1998) researched teachers' perceptions of the characteristics of
effective teachers of Aboriginal middle school students:

The ability to develop and sustain good relationships with Aboriginal students and their families is a major element in the profile of effective teachers. Such relationships require building rapport, trust, getting to know students as individuals, and taking a personal interest in school and out of school activities. (p. 9)

Likewise, Glover and Butler (2001) highlighted constructive one-to-one conversations between teachers and students as crucial to middle school students’ sense of being valued.

Clearly, positive and productive teacher-student relationships in the middle years of schooling enhance the learning outcomes and feelings of self-worth for middle school students. In addition, the literature supports the view that positive interpersonal relationships (both with students and with colleagues) are important considerations in teachers’ professional lives. As Hargreaves (1998) asserted,

Good teaching is charged with positive emotion. It is not just a matter of knowing one’s subject, being efficient, having the correct competencies, or learning all the right techniques. Good teachers are not just well oiled machines. They are emotional, passionate beings who connect with their students and fill their work and their classes with pleasure, creativity, challenge and joy. (p. 835)

This emphasis on teaching as emotional practice is not new. In 1988, Eisner suggested that good teaching involved significant aspects of intuition and emotionality, what he called the “connoisseurship” of teaching. In 1991, Van Manen described effective teachers as “tactful.” Tactful teachers “read” the inner life of their students and intuitively know how much to expect and what is appropriate for them. Another dimension of this emotional perspective on teaching and teachers’ lives has come from feminist scholars who argue for exploring teaching as a moral enterprise. For example, Elbaz (1992) highlighted the moral dimension of teacher knowledge, while Noddings (1992) argued that education must attend to children’s fundamental need to be cared for. Likewise, Acker (1995) emphasised an ethic of care and a focus on connectedness in teaching.

However, despite the obvious importance of positive and productive teacher-student relationships for middle school students’ learning outcomes and feelings of self-worth, and the fundamental importance for teachers of acknowledging teaching as emotional practice, debates about effective middle school teachers often reflect gendered discourses. These arguments position teachers of middle school, like primary or elementary teachers, as caring and nurturing individuals who lack the subject specialist knowledge to provide a rigorous curriculum that will provide intellectual challenge for young adolescents. This lack of subject content knowledge is implicated in the underachievement of students in the middle years of schooling (Norton, 2000). Middle school teachers, like primary teachers, are often women, and thus teaching is often seen as an extension of mothering. By contrast, secondary school teachers are positioned as having subject content knowledge and the ability to provide an academically challenging curriculum but lacking the skills to connect with their students and thus provide pedagogically appropriate lessons (e.g., Acker, 1995; Hargreaves, 1994; Whitehead, 2000). In this way, primary teaching is seen as nurturing and mothering work, while secondary teaching is seen as intellectual work. We argue that for students in the middle years, positive and productive teacher-student relationships are the core of effective teaching, providing the foundation for improved student learning and enhanced feelings of self-worth for both students and their teachers.

**E-mail communication**

Snyder (2000, p. 11) alluded to a “new communicative order” inherent in computer-mediated communication (CMC). E-mail has been
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theorised as a hybrid, drawing on practices of reading and of writing, while developing its own unique qualities (Moran & Hawisher, 1997). This new mode of electronic communication has created new textual practices and new social practices around its texts. In particular, e-mail is distinguished by its ease of retrieval, speed, absence of paralinguistic cues, and asynchronicity. These assets come with decreased security and some interesting conflicts:

• its seemingly ephemeral, fleeting nature (like speech) with the fixity of print;
• its illusion of intimacy, with its possibility of being endlessly “forwarded”;
• its sense of communal “warmth,” despite geographical distances or anonymity; and
• its playful informality and spontaneity (like speech) with its decontextualised audience (like print).

These paradoxes create a communicative space like no other, distinct from face-to-face and pen-and-paper communication. It is a potentially intimate space shared only by the sender and receiver. Its ease and immediacy of delivery erect a transparent boundary between communicative acts, which facilitates the sense of dialogue and coconstruction.

The emerging conventions of e-mail communication display hybrid practices drawing from oral and written modes (Moran & Hawisher, 1997). The genesis of these literacy practices is evident in the way PLUS Project students engaged with e-mail texts in dialogue with project staff. Students drew on a combination of oral and written conventions as they came to terms with this new electronic space and communication mode.

Oral practices were transferred to e-mail contexts in the way many students chose greetings such as “Hi” to open their postings and made explicit references to talking such as “I don’t know what else to say so bye.” Some used upper-case and excessive punctuation (“BYE!!!”) to create a shouting effect at times, and some chose to create their replies below the original postings, recreating the time sequence normally experienced in oral turn-taking. Many students used informal spoken forms such as “gotta” or “prezzies” (for birthday presents). One student used a strong metaphor of phone communication to make sense of e-mail space—“hi, it’s [name] I’m just calling to say hello.” Another student reproduced verbal hesitation, “So um... yeah...” It is also possible that the students who failed to identify themselves in their closing, but used “I” and “me” in their text, were assuming identification as would happen in face-to-face dialogue.

In other ways, the same students approached e-mail more from written text practices. At times they used carefully indented greetings and closings, and wordings such as “To,” “From,” “This is [name],” and “p.s.” These students tended to use a more formal, polite tenor. The most marked practice was the way some students used laburous spacing to create a blank page prior to composing their replies. Sometimes this included using the reply function in e-mail software, but deleting the previous posting to create the clean page.

As the students participated in e-mail communication over the eight-week project, they displayed a growing awareness of its unique practices and possibilities. Students quickly mastered the use of the reply function and often chose to insert their own subject over the default it created. Over the course of the project, more students adhered to the convention of replying on top of the original posting. They experimented with the abbreviated spelling used in e-mail and chat-room discourse (e.g., “by 4 now,” “C’ya”). They also experimented with other chat-room practices such as not using punctuation or capital letters.

Our students quickly grasped the interactive aspects of the technology and delighted in sending messages to the person sitting next to them as well as to others. For this generation of students,
technology is not an intruder or newcomer in their worlds but rather a natural and desirable aspect of their everyday environment (Green & Bigum, 1993). They have been exposed to chatroom culture and are eager to participate in virtual communities. For them, it was fun, motivating, intriguing, and engaging.

There is a growing body of small-scale research that suggests that e-mail in educational settings (usually tertiary) can build supportive and intimate communities (see Lapp, 2000; Snyder, 2000). Craig, Harris, and Smith (1998) gave a more complicated insight, that “by freeing students from some of the constrictions of polite, face-to-face conversations, CMC allows a less socially constrained self to emerge” (p. 124). Their metaphor of CMC as a “contact zone” acknowledges that less constraint can lead to more self-exposure, less guarded and more divergent opinion, and potentially more conflict. However, if the space was not devoted to set tasks, but rather existed as an open means of teacher-student communication without an agenda, it could constitute a “contact zone” without the connotations of war—simply a zone for interpersonal contact. Niday and Campbell (2000) used e-mail to connect middle school students (grade 8) with preservice teachers who focused on teaching a particular piece of literature over a four-week period. They found that when the eighth graders’ preservice teacher partners affirmed their viewpoints or challenged them to think differently, they felt the person genuinely cared about their perspectives. This reinforced their own sense that they had something important to express. The technology had the ability to negotiate differences; the faceless aspect of the exchange allowed the partners to focus on the things that drew them together, in this case, making meaning from literature, not on their differences. Rather than the cross-age differences being alienating, they instead enriched the relationship and the learning. (p. 61)

The use of Internet technology in schools takes place in a troubled area of competing discourses. The Internet is simultaneously constructed on one hand as a remarkable information source that justifies considerable expenditure of educational resources, and on the other as a terrible risk to the innocence and safety of children. This latter concern of worst-case scenarios justifies the associated moral panic and the considerable effort that goes into the control and surveillance of Internet use in schools. Education Queensland’s state departmental manual of policies and procedures (The State of Queensland [Education Queensland], 1997–2002) shows this uneasy marriage of concerns. The policy states briefly that “Education Queensland will provide public online information services such as the Internet, to enhance teaching and learning” (The State of Queensland [Education Queensland], 1997–2002, Policy CM-11-1: Internet—Student Usage) yet devotes the rest of its explicit efforts to risk management, guidelines, and exemplar Internet agreements that warn of risks and responsibilities and have to be signed by students and parents. Many schools choose to route student e-mail through a teacher-monitored generic account, with access limited to supervised time at a school computer. We are not arguing that these protective concerns are misplaced, but if we view the Internet only as an information source (be it tasteful information or not), we are overlooking its communicative and interactive qualities.

Normative classroom oral discourse

In contrast to the informal, democratic discourse style of e-mail communication, oral classroom discourse is typically highly structured, dominated, and controlled by the teacher, with grossly asymmetrical rights to speak, choose the topic, and allocate turns. Edwards and Westgate (1994, p. 29) referred to the “deep grooves along which most classroom talk seems to run,” which researchers have been documenting since the 1970s, and described this resilient default mode thus:
Briefly, appropriate participation requires of pupils that they listen or appear to listen, often and at length. They have to know how to bid properly for the right to speak themselves, often in competitive circumstances... They have to accept that what they do manage to say in answer to a teacher’s question will almost certainly be evaluated (if only by repetition), may well be interrupted if judged to be irrelevant to the teacher’s purposes, and may be so heavily modified and translated to fit the teacher’s frame of reference as to be no longer recognizable as their own contribution. (p. 40)

Teachers’ heuristic pseudoquestions (to which the teachers know the answers) typically operate on a one-to-many economy, with one student’s answer often being generalised to act as the answer for all, in order for learning to progress. Shuy (1988, p. 121) pointed out the common yet paradoxical practice of “probe shifting”—that is, of asking further probing questions of a student that arise from another student’s response—in the interests of broadening participation. Time pressures within this economy limit deviations and asides; their relevance is policed by the teacher. The teacher and students occupy distinct roles with sharply drawn, highly “insulated” boundaries (Bernstein, 1990) that demarcate and maintain their respective talking rights. The fact that inappropriate talking in class can constitute a behavioural problem demonstrates the strict social code operating in these contexts. This code is as much one of the structures we have historically constructed in which to conduct our children’s education as any timetable, curriculum, or buildings.

**Breaking the code**

In the e-mail dialogues, we repeatedly found this discourse code being broken in a multitude of ways. Using Halliday’s (1985) distinction between textual field, tenor, and mode, which he explains as “what is going on; who are taking part; and what role the language is playing,” respectively (p. 44), the interchange in e-mail mode was quite distinct in tenor, with its markedly democratic distribution of rights between students and teachers, and in the open field possibilities or scope of topics. The students often introduced new topics of personal interest that reflected and legitimised their own experiences, opinions, and expertise. They took the opportunity to express worries or problems candidly. In terms of tenor, students shared equal rights to initiate topics and allocate turns. This equity in roles extended to their making suggestions and giving feedback on the conduct and design of the program. Students protected the one-to-one nature of the exchange and often demonstrated a playful sense of humour. They sought to blur the distinction between teacher and student status by pursuing shared topics of interest and offered to extend the e-mail relationship beyond the life of the project. These qualities, which distinguished the e-mail exchange from normative classroom discourse, are exemplified in the following extracts. Original spelling of student postings has been kept to retain a sense of the students’ voices.

The students frequently took control of the topic, freely introduced new topics in the exchange (“So. Let’s talk about you”) and actively allocated turns to the teacher (“So I will ask you some questions now”). They inquired about tastes in music (“what music do you play at the moment”) films, television shows, and sport. They also inquired about life style in terms of children (“Do you have any children?”), pets (“I want to know if you have any pets”), and weekend activities. They brought their personal worlds into the exchange, sharing their news with the teaching staff, taking the space to boast (“My good news is that… I’m going in the Central District team for running”), gossip (“People in my… class are now calling me Dawson Leary. You know that guy off Dawson’s Creek”), and celebratic (“I turned 12 on Friday”).

Students shared their expertise, providing information where they knew more than the tutor about the topic at hand (“Well Australia is having a bad week in cricket at the moment”). They also offered detailed descriptions of significant local events, such as the passage of the Olympic Torch...
through their community. The students used the e-mail messages to express opinions ("I liked your olympic site It was cool") and make requests of the teachers in terms of the selection of resources or processes, to individualise or democratise the process ("Maybe you can get some pictures of the [school] students"). Students were also encouraged to initiate an e-mail exchange with their school principals to provide regular updates on what they were doing and how they were progressing ("we are going so deadly up here").

The students used the e-mail exchanges to express their feelings, worries, and problems, such as learning difficulties, "getting in trouble" at school, and leaving close friends in the move to high school. One student asked for advice about a problem with an older sister. Students often risked an infectious, cheeky sense of humour. For example, one student outlined his subject choices for the following year in response to an earlier query, then suggested that the teaching team member "stop meddling in my future." This was immediately followed by the disclaimer "Jooooooookkkkkiiiiiiinmmng!" Texts blurred the boundaries between teacher and student personae ("Well it seems we've got 2 things in common"), frequently highlighting common ground in matters of musical taste, media opinions, and shared experiences.

The students relished and protected the one-to-one nature of the communication with individuals of the teaching team and textually referred to the need to maintain this privacy ("Any way I g2g now [name] is looking now ok g2g now"). The students contributed to maintaining and extending the e-mail dialogue and thus the relationships beyond the life of the project program. In their messages, they raised the possibility of returning to the program "next year if you still want me" and promised to "keep in touch."

The teaching team members were also breaking the normative code shaping our interactions. We were asking real questions ("So how did your next softball game go?"); we brought our worlds into the conversation, volunteering information about ourselves as people, not just as teachers ("Red Red Wine is also my favourite"); and often matched the students' sense of humour ("I hope they are working you really hard at school!"). We took instruction from the students when they had more expertise ("Do you reckon Cathy Freeman will win her race in the Olympics?"). Our probe questions built on the response that prompted them, folding back to the originator, not to the next student in the queue. The discourse structure resembled far more natural conversation, as opposed to the constrained institutionalised discourse of classroom settings.

This electronic exchange between equals did not seem to compromise our status or workable relationships in face-to-face settings. On the contrary, it often served to pull the group together and invested in the cooperative atmosphere of the class time spent together, winning over the reluctant or reticent student. We could make pertinent comments to individual students, and we were also able to quickly grasp a sense of the collective nature and interests of each group.

A space for building relationships

Increasingly, the Internet is a working space within which knowledge can be co-constructed, negotiated, revised over time, where disparate students from diverse locations and backgrounds, even internationally, can engage one another in learning activities; where collaborative projects can be developed; where communities of inquiry can grow and thrive... Such activities are not just supplements to the classroom experience; they are unique and irreplaceable learning opportunities themselves: and often they can only exist online, not in "real" classrooms. (Burbules & Callister, 2000, p. 275)

In the PLUS Project, e-mail competencies were initially pursued as a "technological literacy" outcome, but the relationship outcome was unpredicted and overwhelming. We suggest that the technology played a crucial role in allowing this
relationship building to happen, by providing the new dialogic space between individual students and teacher. We can look beyond e-mail communication as merely an instrument for curriculum purposes in schools, such as forwarding files and giving feedback. Any investment of time in connectivity between teachers and students can offer this bankable "byproduct" of relationship building. The interactive nature of Internet communication, facilitated by warm, humorous, and genuine dialogue, can change the way teachers and students know one another. Communication technology offers a space where care and content can coexist and be mutually supportive. The electronic medium is a comfortable and invigorating environment for young people—teachers can join them there on their ground and on their terms. We are not suggesting that close relationships don't happen in other modes, but we wanted to demonstrate how effective e-mail dialogue was in building this quality of relationship quickly in a short and sporadic program.

There's a lesson here also about adopting and adapting new technologies, and what we make of the opportunities offered to us:

Learning technologies clearly have the potential to vastly transform relationships between teachers and students and even what schools look like. However the history of education reform provides scant evidence that such a transformation will occur simply because the technology exists. Reforms that are adopted tend to be those that readily fit existing organizational structures and practices. (D. Dwyer, in Dellitt & Adams, 2000, p. 1)

For the middle years of schooling, we are sharing an enviable opportunity to redesign educational structures. These moments don't happen very often, and this one is happening when information technology is well-established in our community's ecology. The technology creates a space with different discourse patterns and codes of conduct whereby people can come to know one another in different ways. An active e-mail box offers a "contact zone" that acts as an investment in the shared enterprise of schooling.

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