This is the published version

O'Mara, Joanne and Gutierrez, Amanda 2010, Classroom teachers as co-researchers: the affordances and challenges of collaboration, Australian journal of language and literacy, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 41-54.

Available from Deakin Research Online

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Classroom teachers as co-researchers: The affordances and challenges of collaboration

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The article outlines the aspects of the research design that engage with teachers in schools and discusses some of the challenges and affordances that the relationships (between the teachers, the schools, the research partners and the researchers) experienced in the project, Literacy in the 21st Century: Learning from Computer Games. The article has a particular focus on the teachers’ work as co-researchers, their descriptions of working in the project and some of the issues for teachers and researchers in working in this way. The data used for the analysis includes the teacher writing, interview data and researcher observations. The teachers who participated in the project designed and delivered curriculum using computer games in various ways including making their own games, evaluating games, analyzing game structures, and examining the culture around games and the ways in which games and other technologies are merging. Some of these curriculum units are described elsewhere in this issue (Beavis & O’Mara, 2010). This article’s purpose is to follow the teachers’ professional learning experiences rather than detail these curriculum designs, which the teachers will describe elsewhere. The paper concludes with our personal reflections on the affordances and challenges of working this way for us in our different roles in the research team.

Visions and realities: Recruiting teachers and schools

When we designed the methodology for researching Literacy in the 21st Century: Learning from Computer Games, we envisioned recruiting six schools to the project, each of these supplying three teachers to work with us for a three-year period. We imagined the nice balance of two inner urban, two suburban and two rural schools and that, if we had the money to pay transport and Casual Relief Teaching, the provision of free, ongoing professional learning sessions and the opportunity to take students to work at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, that schools would be knocking at the door and that we might need a selection process! It all looked quite simple on a spreadsheet.

In reality, we found it very difficult to recruit schools and teachers, and not because teachers aren’t interested in continuing professional learning, or in computer games in the classroom. The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE) is a partner on the project, and they were heavily
involved in the recruitment process, which was advantageous as they are highly regarded by teachers and they provided much valued assistance and feedback. The project was widely advertised through the VATE newsletter and website, both regularly accessed by a large proportion of secondary English teachers in Victoria. Members of the VATE office also spent considerable time contacting and following up with potentially interested parties. Despite this, we were not flooded with requests, and we began the project with two Catholic boys' schools (one regional), two government schools and later one private school (after contact with one of the research team at the Australian Government Summer School for English Teachers at Deakin University).

Factors we have identified as being drawbacks to participation are the length of the project (three years), the extent of the commitment (we initially were asking for three teachers from each school) and the number of days that teachers were required to be absent from school for the PD program (four days per year). Comber and Kamler (2008) faced similar recruitment difficulties with their long-term intensive project. We envisaged that teachers could work in teams at the schools and, while it was relatively easy to find individuals who were interested, it proved to be difficult to find that level of interest and commitment across school teams. In addition, it is difficult for senior teachers and those in rural areas in particular to leave their classes, even if there is funding for Casual Relief Teaching (CRT). Even with the teachers and the schools recruited, we did not have the requested number of teachers—both of the Catholic boys' schools had fewer participants—two participants from one school and the other had one teacher initially participating, and another teacher was recruited later. Asking for a large commitment like this from schools in a reasonably impersonal way was not a successful strategy and in retrospect it would have been more effective to have engaged in a personal targeted recruitment campaign to get schools on board in addition to the public advertisements or to try recruiting individual teachers rather than involving larger groups.

The teachers who were engaged with the project joined for a variety of reasons, but they all identified their belief that using computer games in the classroom can help teachers design worthwhile, relevant and interesting curriculum for their students (in line with Beavis 2001; Gee 2003) and they mostly explicitly discussed the value of further learning and engagement with theoretical concepts (as described by researchers such as Comber & Kamler, 2005, 2008; Honan 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). Some of the teachers found the advertisement themselves and followed it up with other staff at their school to form a team. One teacher was already working with computer games in the classroom and was interested in connecting with others who were doing the same thing and further theorising his practice. An enthusiastic senior staff member, who was keen for the school to be involved, approached two teachers, who taught at one of the schools. While they were not initially
aware of the project, they agreed to become involved due to their belief that the project had the ‘potential to bridge the gap’ between the students’ outside worlds and their in-school worlds. Another teacher became involved after being approached by teachers already designing classroom programs for their students as part of the research project. She was very keen to be involved as she saw it as a great opportunity to work in a new way with her students, and saw that developing curriculum around computer games would lead to an ‘innovative and original curriculum’. Despite the difficulties in recruiting the teachers, those who were recruited remained with the project, dedicated to its aim and produced some outstanding curricula.

**Teachers as co-researchers: Developing a learning community at schools**

The research was designed so that the teachers were working as co-researchers with the chief investigators, research fellow and research assistant. Eisner argues passionately that if research is to actually work to influence educational practice, the construction of the research process itself needs to work closely with schools and teachers so that it becomes more than educational commando raids to get data out (Eisner, 2005, p. 92). Using a combination of reflective practice (Schön, 1983) and an action-research approach (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Deakin University, School of Education, Open Campus Program, 1988), teachers developed and researched their own projects that introduced computer games into their classroom repertoire and enabled them to report on their practice to the wider teaching community. Methods and processes used included collaborative work on curricula, the collation and discussion of relevant articles, action research plans, published teacher writings and professional development days. The experience of working in the schools meant that the university researchers were immersed in the school culture and daily systems and teachers were positioned as more than the ‘researched’ (Kincheloe, 2003; Doecke et al, 2007). All of the original participants recruited have remained with the project, despite the commitments demanded of them, and this research structure is one of the reasons cited by participants for remaining, despite the demands made of them. In this section of the paper, we will examine feedback from the teachers about sustaining involvement in the project and address some of the costs and benefits of participation that the teachers expressed.

Feedback from the teachers, both formal (through interviews, writing and questionnaires) and informal (emails, personal communication) indicates their participation in the project has been a very positive experience, and from our perspective their generous participation has immeasurably enhanced the quality of the work from the project. The intimate knowledge of their classroom spaces that the teachers brought to the project enabled them to develop sophisticated curricula that demonstrate the intrinsic value in using
computer games in the classroom. These projects spanned a wide range of

game usage including making their own games, evaluating games, analysing

game structures, and examining the culture around games and the ways

in which games and other technologies are merging. Our professional

conversations ranged from theoretical thoughts about computer games, how
to translate these into practice, perceptions surrounding computer games,
action research, models of literacy to how computer games ‘fit’ into ‘literacy’.
Following the lead of Comber and Kamler we ‘position[ed] teachers as
researchers and as collaborators’ and did ‘not shy away from the intellectual
work of teaching’ (2005, p. 5). The research team worked directly in schools,
assisting the teachers with the development of curriculum by providing space
and time for discussion, reading materials and making suggestions for future
development. At times the research team members were a sounding board for
new ideas; at others we were there as classroom observers providing feedback
with an ‘outsider’s eye’.

When teachers were interviewed about the professional dialogue with
the Deakin research team, the responses were very positive. We noted that
one of the strengths that came through thematically from the interviews
was the increased opportunity for formalised reflective practice through the
establishment of the professional learning community. Mark articulated this
in his interview:

I had a little trepidation, hadn’t taught Nines for a while and then taking on
something additional to it was a little difficult to start off with, and so the dialogue
between you two that I’ve had, whether it be email or face to face, and your efforts
to try and navigate a pathway through to getting something done has been good.
You try and think of new initiatives to bring the little piece of curriculum alive
and that’s why discussion is important ... Us talking about it all the time, us
dialoguing about it, because I’m thinking to myself, ‘Am I doing something that’s
on the right path?’ and it’s affirming.

Both the support of the research team and the dialogic nature of that
discussion helped Mark to reflect on the curriculum path that was most
appropriate for his classroom. While he always had to make these decisions
for his classes, working with the project team in a new situation helped to
increase his confidence and motivation to try something new. Another group
of teachers articulated the value of professional learning that goes beyond the
individual:

[Working with ...] Deakin I’ve really enjoyed it ... Any opportunity to team
up with the Unis is good ... for teachers it provides us with an opportunity to
improve ourselves as well, so we’re not just people who sit in a classroom and
kind of our life’s over and we stop learning. I think the whole school environment
is improved when the teacher feels as if they are learning too [absolutely, career
satisfaction (Paul)] so it’s really provided that kind of opportunity as well. (Joel).
We acknowledge that ‘teachers who cast themselves as learners redefine their roles in the classroom: they are part of classrooms that are ‘learning communities’. (Goswami & Stillman, 1987). This was reflected in a comment made by Paul:

I suppose I had to have the solid theoretical base first and that was the way it started for me and I was thinking wow because it was opening up a new world for me, I was a little apprehensive at first, but not anymore.

Overall the participants felt their involvement as a part of the research team, as teacher researchers rather than researched teachers, and the dialogue that came as part of that involvement in readings and professional conversations about theory, helped create ‘career satisfaction’ and a revitalised way to approach literacy and English curriculum in the classroom.

**Sustaining involvement: Professional Learning Days, time, distance, playground fights**

The reflective practice movement acknowledges the large amounts of time that systematic reflection upon classroom action takes, and the lack of time that teachers typically have to reflect in any kind of systematic way (Loughran 1996; O’Mara 2006; Ryan, 2004). A positive outcome of the project for the teachers was the provision of time to discuss work and reflect upon their practice in open, but structured ways, with the project team, their school team and across schools. Valuing the time for sharing and reflection came up again and again as a theme in our discussions with the teachers as a particular strength of the professional learning days that we had together. In the case of our project, the funding for the time (through the provision of Casual Relief Teaching) was provided by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). This support from the department was integral to the success of the project in many ways—not least of which is the support for teachers to develop new pedagogical approaches in their classrooms and to actually provide time for them to reflect on their practice. Receiving funding from DEECD also is an unofficial endorsement for schools to depart from what they have always done to use the computer games in their classrooms.

Nevertheless, money alone, while making it possible to attend, cannot ensure attendance. One of the teachers from the regional school was particularly dedicated to the project aims—he already had an extremely innovative project in place where students were making their own games, is highly engaged in professional learning, completing a masters degree, and his practice is extremely well theorised—however, despite the funding and the support of his principal, it was still often difficult for him to attend. The distance meant that for him, a half-day PD would take the entire day, and full day sessions cut into his after-school commitments with sport (he
was the Year Eight football coach). He is also the Head of the Junior School, so in one case, he had to miss at the last minute a session he particularly wanted to attend because he had to stay at the school to sort out a complicated playground incident. This mix of factors—the distance, the responsibilities of his position, his total commitment to his school—which made him so valuable to his community and our project, made it difficult to attend the events in Melbourne, despite the funding, the support of his school and the value he placed on the networking aspects of the project. Melbourne teachers too, had difficulty attending—there would be timetable clashes with sports days, and Year 12 exams and compulsory activities, so coordinating the teams to come together was always a challenge. Even claiming the money back for the Casual Relief Teaching was extra work for teachers, as they were usually the ones in the first instance who had to set up the arrangement, and the Project Research Fellow had to chase up many of the schools to pay them. The complexity of payment systems at the University and the individual schools came together in such a way that the whole process became unnecessarily bureaucratic and burdensome.

The teachers described the professional learning days very positively. The schools attended the Game On! Exhibition hosted by another partner, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), which was a valuable central shared experience reference point initially for the teachers. The number of shared experiences increased over the life of the project—as school teams and teachers from the different schools came to know each other and each other’s work more deeply. All of the days we spent together were structured with time for the teachers to talk to each other about their work, some days had new theory introduced, others had teachers presenting and discussing their work with each other, playing games, designing curriculum or writing for the project. When one of the teachers was asked about the value of the professional development days, she described it as:

a fantastic opportunity to discuss and experiment with the culture and research surrounding computer games and their use in classrooms.

The process of sharing experiences enabled them to be rethought in the light of others’ experience and the shared readings and theoretical approaches. Having the task of implementing their ideas as curriculum gave the teachers a focus and important part in the research, and enabled them to consolidate and experiment with their thinking and ideas. This approach (where the teachers work loosely in an action research framework) was very successful for both developing the teachers’ knowledge and furthering the aims of the project. We would recommend this approach to other researchers, and encourage them (as many researchers do such as Comber and Kamler, 2005; Honan, 2003) to build funding for CRT into the project application. We would also recommend that when researchers, state and Commonwealth departments are designing
teacher learning programs that they consider how to find teacher release and support the program beyond the provision of money.

**Innovating classroom spaces: benefits, challenges and outside eyes**

All of the cases revealed the extraordinary impact of connecting with students’ out of school worlds and the impact that this has had on their classroom. Paul expressed this impact from both the teacher’s perspective and that of their students:

Looking at the world of the kids’ gaming I think you understand more about kids to an extent as well.

Teachers identified the importance of acknowledging the students’ undervalued knowledge gained from becoming experts at computer games, and how drawing on this knowledge in the classroom context can enable the teachers to learn more about their students. Lisa saw the process of working with the games in the classroom as providing her with a new understanding and respect for the kinds of knowledge that students were developing as they used computer games. For her it was an

opportunity to look at the way, a little window into the world of a student’s mind and how they learn and how they communicate knowledge … we start to realise that they’re very much aware of what they’re doing when they’re doing it.

Increased levels of student engagement were widely reported, and teachers felt more engaged themselves because of this:

It’s certainly getting the kids engaging on a level that I haven’t seen for a long time … about what they want to do, and I’m really excited about the stuff I’m going to be doing with them in the future too. (Paul)

One teacher reported that he noticed a difference with the kids in terms of increased rapport. Another thought that bringing the games into the classroom changed the tone of things:

I think teaching it, emphasising it in the classroom has really set a good tone within the classroom, particularly boys seem enthusiastic about it. (Mark)

Teachers reported that demonstrating a willingness to include these texts into curriculum and valuing students’ experiences with these texts helped gain more rapport with some of the students who were otherwise difficult to engage. An important part of this is a more democratic approach through using computer games:

I think we’re making efforts to, rather than being a top down driven thing, you’re doing this text, let’s make an effort to tap into the world where kids are at and develop some literacy around that—that has to be a good thing. We’re still navigating and negotiating where it’s going to go, but the efforts so far I think are proving rewarding because they are doing something with it. (Joel)
It was also recognised that computer games feature so heavily in students' lives that they are important cultural texts to study. In addition to opening the relationships with the teacher, one case also showed the work as changing the ways in which the classroom was operating (Beavis & O’Mara, 2010). In other classrooms the impact on classroom organisation was not so great, however teachers reported benefits in terms of connecting more closely with the students' life-worlds and the impact that this had to the way that students approached and participated in activities.

English teachers are always in the public eye, and current debates around the national curriculum development have thrown perceived binaries of popular culture versus literature into the spotlight again. Using computer games in the curriculum is still a contentious act, and one that leaves teachers open to criticism. The greatest barriers that the teachers in the project faced were around the perceptions of others, both inside and outside the school community.

We were surprised that, despite the support of the principal and the rest of the English teaching staff, the teachers at one location faced difficulties because the Information Technology support staff were acting at gatekeepers rather than supporting the curriculum:

It’s ok for Admin to say, ‘Go ahead’, but getting the IT people was a little difficult because we’ve got an IT guy who is a little suspicious of games, which is a little ironic really ... But he has let up a little now and is letting the students play Runescape at lunchtime in their own room. So I have to negotiate more, because I will be doing a lot more games stuff next semester, so I’ve got to negotiate with him. Admin are happy for us to try new stuff. (Paul)

Another difficulty identified was the resistance that can come from other teachers within the school community. This possibility was raised by Lisa and Maureen:

Some members of the school community may raise the issue of ‘rigour’. How do you explain the value of gaming other than ‘entertainment’?

I imagine there would also be resistance to it from some teachers. Teaching such a unit [focusing on computer games] is relevant to students' interests and skills – I don’t think it is wise to ignore such technology in the classroom.

Joel reflected on the difficulties raised due to public perception about computer games, and the lack of trust the public often has towards teachers’ professional judgements about how to use these texts in the classroom. He felt it is important for teachers to be sensitive to these perceptions:

We’re English teachers, but we’re not necessarily talking about novelty. I mean someone like Andrew Bolt would be disgusted knowing that his child was going to school everyday and learning about video games, but in terms of best practice I think that we’re all intelligent enough to realise that it’s not all just about fun
and games, but these things do have links to the real world and they do help kids with their range of expression, their lateral thinking and all those kinds of things. But at the same time I think we have to be aware of the kinds of opinion that is possibly out there in terms of promoting this kind of content, so it’s got to be handled in the right way I guess.

From the project so far, there has only been one complaint from parents about the usage of computer games in the classroom. The teachers were supported by the school administration and the issue was resolved. Public debate about computer games often appeals to parents’ fears about the damaging effects they argue these popular culture texts are having on their children’s literacy. Apart from the case cited above, the teachers did not identify concerns about parental perceptions in the interviews or previous conversations. In our student interviews however, computer game usage was a highly contested space at home, and students spoke at length about their parents’ concerns about their computer game usage and the ways that computer access was negotiated and controlled in the home. We think that the ethics approval process, with the parents and students reading and signing off on ethics plain language approvals, and their knowledge of the project intent, university relationship and DEECD support may have influenced the parents to view the use of games more positively.

**Bringing together theory and practice: using literacy models in the classroom to directly shape classroom practice**

Throughout the project we presented a range of literacy models and theoretical approaches to gaming to the teachers as a set of tools to enable them to understand and further develop their practice. We have found in the past in our work with pre-service teachers that it is important for teachers to see theory and practice as informing each other, rather than as unrelated binaries (Beavis and O’Mara, 2006). We used Green’s 3D model (Green, 1999) as a way of understanding the relationships between literacy and technology and introduced the teachers to theoretical frameworks from various gaming researchers and terminology that could be useful to their conceptualisations of literacy in the classroom, such as Bogost’s (2006) procedural rhetoric and Galloway’s (2006) discussions about action in gaming.

Different groups of teachers took up different models and ideas, determined by when the ideas were introduced and how they applied to the work that they were doing. For instance, Joel adopted the 3D model as a way of understanding the classroom and to ensure a balanced approach

... in terms of using a model to be able to gauge what’s happening with the students, the 3 ways, that one here, the cultural, critical and operations, now I guess the kind of thing I'd be looking at would be those first two, cultural and critical model I guess. The operational one, I don't want to get into a situation where I'm quite simply testing the equipment.
Paul used Freebody and Luke’s repertoire of literacy practices model (Freebody and Luke 2003) to shape the curriculum, developing questions around each of the four types of practices. He explains:

The first questions were code breaking the game – How do I play? What are the rules? Making meaning of the game – Have you seen a game like this before? What was it called? What was it used for? How did you use it? How is that game similar/different to this one? Have you played this game with other people?

Using the game – What is the game’s purpose? What is my role in the game when I play it? When do I normally play the game? When do I normally play the game? What is the genre of the game? How do I know this?

Analysing the game – Why do I like the game? Is there a way I can improve the game to make it better? And, if there are any other questions you’d like to ask then please let me know!

Paul utilised the students’ deeper knowledge of the games and gaming practices to get them to work with a critical literacy approach.

I sort of took it for granted that the kids ... well they did, they knew a lot more about game than I did but what they didn’t know was actually looking at it from a critical literacy perspective.

During the project, Mark focused on his Year 9 English class. He wanted to take himself out of his comfort zone and try creating a program using computer games for this class due to his desire to be able to connect his students’ real world literacies to their in school experiences. He became interested in the educational potential of computer games when observing how his young son engaged with computer games. He decided to use film data of his children as a reflective introductory activity for his Year 9 students before moving into a critical literacy approach that included looking at game ratings, stereotypes and representations of violence in the media and in games. He reflected on this experience:

[This has] taken me out of my comfort zone a bit, which is great because I am a later career teacher, and I think we do get a bit text bound and I think it is great that it has made me feel more aware of other possibilities.

The work in the project increased teachers’ work satisfaction, leaving them ‘feeling more engaged’ and ‘a bit more inspired about everything’. Sandy described:

I’ve found myself being more organised and having more things to do in the classroom ... it has decreased my work load in Year II media, taking it on hasn’t increased or stressed me out any more, it’s been cathartic if anything, I feel like there’s a nice structure we now know where we want to get to.

Without wanting to over-simplify things, we found, like other researchers (Firkins and Wong, 2005), that English teachers are well-placed to engage in this sort of the research, they are well used to thinking about combining
practice and theory and that they, given the space and opportunity enjoy and excel at theorising their practice and trying out new approaches to the teaching of the subject material. Giving teachers the space to engage in a dialogical way with theoretical material can have transformational effects for the classroom.

Moving forward, looking back: Personal reflections and conclusions
In this section of the paper, we provide our separate musings on our experiences of the teacher collaborations and our conclusions. The two pieces encompass different aspects of the project, reflecting our different roles in the research team and personal approaches. Amanda is a Casual Research Assistant who has worked with us throughout the work in schools and with teachers. Jo is a Chief Investigator on the project, so has been involved with the project since its inception and design.

Amanda reflects:

I felt the teachers were enthusiastic and engaged, from the interviews and my own observations they enjoyed the chance to discuss their projects with me and the rest of the research team, and share them with the other teachers. They were proud of their achievements and how their programs worked in the classrooms. I found myself wishing I could give more of my time to the teachers and be more actively involved with their classes and programs. One teacher suggested he would enjoy team teaching some of the lessons with me, which would have been an exciting and rewarding experience for the both of us, but time was an issue. The academic world often does not allow space for the research to become shared in this way. The potential professional development for the teacher researcher (and the academic researcher) in team teaching some (even one) classes in the research project and then reflecting on this experience after the class are clear. Here the classroom research merges with the theoretical underpinnings of the research as the teacher and researcher share the experience and reflections. While this research did share the process to a certain extent, I feel this deeper involvement would be even more beneficial to both parties.

Jo reflects:

As researchers applying for funding, you can get caught up in your arguments about why you need the money, and end up believing that getting the money for the different aspects of the project will solve the various problems that are conceptualised within the project design. However, research of this nature is about the people, and when it is working with teachers, it is about people who are working within an institutional context, with so many variables and pressures. I worked closely with the regional school, and driving the relatively short (in Australian geographic terms) distance, I thought constantly of distance, of how I myself (when I taught in Ballarat for nine years), always told everyone that the road from Melbourne to Ballarat was longer than the road from Ballarat to Melbourne! When you are in the 'centre', you don't need to travel to the 'edge'.
Again and again my involvement in this project reminded me of the complexities of the teaching moment, of how much is brought together in that single moment of time, and how much is at stake every day in every classroom. The complexity of teachers’ work and the limitations placed upon them by the structures and strictures of schooling make it difficult for teachers to find spaces in the day to breathe, let alone think deeply about their practice. The highlight of the project for me was to be able to help teachers develop their own theoretical frameworks and provide them with some space to reflect, research and redesign.

Methodology is key to the success of research projects, and we have been generally successful with the design of Literacy in the 21st Century: Learning from Computer Games. The relationships with the partners – Australian Centre for the Moving Image, the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English and the DEECD – and participating teachers have been a highlight of the project, and their involvement has provided a more nuanced and complete set of data. We would encourage other researchers to design long-term projects with a strong teacher researcher component, but advise them to ensure that schools that might be interested are aware of the benefits of participation as well as the costs. These projects need to have teacher release funding built into them, and it is worthwhile to consider how the actual release of teachers can be supported beyond the provision of money to buy them out. Our project has uncovered some of the affordances and challenges of using and researching the use of computer games in the classroom. We hope that others are inspired to share the journey.

References


