Technology under construction: A case study of iPad use in an Australian primary classroom

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Stories of technology use are often decontextualised, with no location in place, time and the broader socio-political context (Selwyn, 2010). This paper attempts to locate technology use within both a wider and a local context, and through this to explore the multiple ways that iPads are contextualised in an early years’ literacy classroom as they interface with the aspirations of a classroom teacher, the ‘push’ of commercial content, the institutionalised practices of early years’ literacy education, and a conservative government policy environment. It tells a story of a technological artefact as it is contextualised and recontextualised within a particular educational setting. It also tells a story of a ‘first year out’ teacher’s negotiation of diverse and often conflicting pressures to implement particular pedagogies within her classroom and the implications of these for how the iPads are produced.

The paper examines the policies and practices that currently characterise a particular field of education – early years’ school literacy education – and how these manifest in a particular setting – a Preparatory (Prep) classroom in a small government-funded school located in rural Victoria, Australia. Although early years’ literacy education is historically, and continues to be, a highly contested field (Snyder, 2008), current policies in Australia (as in the USA and UK) tend to support centrally-mandated, standards-based curriculum frameworks comprised of stipulated ‘essential’ knowledge and skills, which are enforced via regimes of teacher in-service training, teacher-administered assessment, and external testing and reporting. In Victoria, this tendency has manifested in the Early Years Literacy Program (EYLP) (Ohi 2008), a program focused heavily upon traditional print-based skills. While the policy rhetoric (State Government of Victoria, 2007) urges the uptake of ‘flexible and creative learning’ and curriculum statements support a ‘focus on digital learning’ and identify ‘the creative and productive use of technology as an indicator of a successful learner’ (MCEETYA, 2008), this rhetoric is overshadowed by an assessment and accountability regime that is based on a traditional encoding and decoding view of literacy (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Thus the broader policy context of technology use within early years’ literacy teaching and learning is one characterised by contradictions and tensions.

The case-study that forms the basis of this paper focuses on the use of iPads to support literacy learning in the Prep classroom and explores the positioning of this technology, the teacher and the students with relation to broader contextual tensions. The stated vision of the school principal and the reported intentions of the Prep teacher are analysed and comparisons are made between these visions and intentions and observed and reported classroom practices. The case study draws on teacher and student interviews, classroom observation data and student-generated digital and print-based artefacts to tell a story of the teacher’s negotiation of a range of contextual factors that oftentimes she experiences as constraining her practice.

Within this story, the iPad devices are seen to be constructed and produced in numerous ways as an educational technology. They variously appear as a game station and medium for surreptitious play, a surface for practicing print-based skills in writing and reading, a vehicle for interactive books, a pallet for the creation of personalised, culturally meaningful products, and a channel through which products can be shared and communities can be formed. The
paper presents an analysis of usage based on the relatively *open* or *closed* form that the technology takes, where relatively open iPad applications support any number of learning activities that involve students’ production and communication of knowledge. Such applications position the learner as a producer, an active community member and, at times, a teacher. They support the strategic movement between applications, driven by the needs of the production process. In contrast, relatively closed applications direct the learner through a pre-specified, self-contained content, positioning the learner as a consumer. We argue that the use of open applications, and the movement between applications at the service of a user-driven production process, is similar to what is seen outside of school, in students’ homes and communities, where users move seamlessly between applications, modes and channels (Davidson, 2009; O’Mara & Laidlaw, 2011). This particular manifestation of the iPad is consistent with contemporary understandings of new literacies and 21st Century learning, but is a poor fit with current early years’ literacy programs that focus on the development of more traditional print-based literacies and which position teachers as receivers of curriculum and students as consumers of content or even as products themselves who manifest various levels of performance against centrally-determined standards.

In the context of this case-study, the paper explores wider questions about the nature of educational technology in use, and how our perspectives on technology as it pertains to education contain assumptions about the roles and relationships found in classrooms. The paper draws on concepts that one of the authors (Lynch, 2002; Lynch, 2003) has previously argued provide useful lenses for understanding how new technologies behave within educational settings, and that provide generative teacher- and student-centred explanations of their use in context.

**References**


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