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Chapter 3

Teachers researching their teaching
learning through practitioner inquiry

If being an educator in the 21st century centrally involves the capacity to inquire into professional practice, then the notion of inquiry is not a project or the latest fad. It is a way of professional being.

Alan Reid (2004, p. 5)
This chapter focuses on how you can reflect on your practice and engage in ongoing professional learning as a language and literacy teacher. We are working on the assumption that you think of yourself as an intellectual (Giroux 1988) who is critically engaged in your work, even though it can be incredibly difficult to maintain such a stance at the current moment, when teachers are being put under enormous pressure to improve educational outcomes. The emphasis placed by standards-based reforms, as proposed by Linda Darling-Hammond (2004), on improving performance on the part of both teachers and their students can sometimes undermine teachers’ capacity to critically reflect on their teaching, especially when they feel pressured to ‘teach to the test’ in order to improve their students’ results in standardised tests such as NAPLAN.

Yet a moment’s reflection is enough to recognise the importance of teachers affirming their status as intellectuals and engaging in inquiry that might provide a perspective on such reforms.

People often use the term ‘professional development’ (PD) when referring to the learning that teachers need to do. Other people prefer to use the term ‘professional learning’.

For a discussion of the currency of the terms ‘professional development’ and ‘professional learning’, see the opening sections of Brenton Doecke, Graham Parr, Sue North with Trevor Gale, Michael Long, Jane Mitchell, Jennifer Rennie and Judy Williams (2008).

‘Professional development’ brings to mind one-off PD sessions delivered by so-called ‘experts’. Teachers who attend such sessions may find them stimulating, but when they return to their schools they often encounter difficulties in implementing this new knowledge, especially when it comes to persuading colleagues who have not shared their learning about the need for change. Such ‘one-offs’ often fail to acknowledge the context-specific nature of the issues with which literacy educators grapple in their school communities. ‘Professional learning’, on the other hand, signifies on-going collaborative reflection (Schon 1983) that is grounded in those communities, that emerges out of teachers’ day-to-day professional practice and shapes it in significant ways, as teachers continually endeavour to extend their students’ language and literacy.

Many people argue that for rich forms of professional learning to happen, schools and education systems need to adopt a view of teaching and learning that supports practitioner inquiry or school-based research conducted by teachers into their own practice (Cochran-Smith & Lyle 2009; Doecke, Parr, North et al. 2008; Parr 2010). This would mean thinking of yourself as belonging to a ‘community of practice’ and committing yourself to exploring the complexities of teaching with your colleagues, by talking, listening to and collaborating with one another, and reflecting on your work together.
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The phrase (‘communities of practice’) is associated with the name of Etienne Wenger. See Etienne Wenger (1999).

In this chapter you will find three stories of practitioner inquiry arising out of three different school contexts. The schools involved use different words to name their approach to practitioner inquiry, including ‘action research’, ‘participatory action research’ and a ‘whole-school approach’. We will honour their descriptions in the stories that follow.

Action research has a long history, dating back at least to the early twentieth century. According to Stephen Kemmis, Robbin McTaggart and Rhonda Nixon (2014):

Different kinds of action research have emerged across different fields for many reasons, often because of the nature of the problems they confront... Because of the diversity, action research sometimes occurs under different names... [which] share some common key features. Each rejects conventional research approaches where an external expert enters a setting to record and represent what is happening. (2014, p. 4)

Action research recognises the capacity of people working in specific settings to actively participate in research in order to improve their practices (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon 2014). It is systematic, integrating ‘action’ with ‘research’ in an effort to bring about positive educational change. It acknowledges the power of teams of teachers collaborating together in order to identify and address issues in their professional practice. Teachers generate research questions relating to their practice in order to guide their inquiry into a shared area of concern. The cycle of action research involves teachers planning, taking action, observing and collecting evidence and reflecting on the effects (intended and unintended) of their initiatives, then modifying their practice in light of this new knowledge and planning what to do next (see Figure 3.1).

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**Fig. 3.1: Action research cycle**
All three stories presented in this chapter mobilise elements of action research. However, the schools concerned adapt those elements according to the context of their school communities.

The cycle of planning, acting, observing, collecting evidence and reflection followed by a new cycle of planning etc. is a common feature of action research projects, but action research has evolved over the years and has been adapted in many ways. See Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis (1986), for an early and very influential set of arguments about the value of action research in school settings. Stephen Kemmis (2005) has revisited the question of action research and the importance of practitioner inquiry. For an argument about the application of Stephen Kemmis's idea of 'knowing practice' to the work of literacy educators, see Brenton Doecke, Bill Green, Alex Kostogriz, Jo-Anne Reid and Wayne Sawyer (2007).

Rosa is beginning her third year of teaching and is commencing at a new school that has just begun promoting practitioner inquiry as form of professional learning. Adam is a new graduate who has recently taken up his first teaching position at a school that has adopted a whole-school approach to classroom-based research. The final story presents Julie and Sophie, who have been teaching for five years in a school that has adopted action research as a school-wide initiative. We will explore how these teachers engage in professional learning within the different contexts of their work, learning about their efforts to investigate issues of importance to them and their students, the innovations they take and what they learn from them.

The language of practitioner inquiry will be evident in all three stories. A whole-school approach to professional learning, participatory action research, the action research cycle, collaborative learning, community of learners, observation, planning, taking action, inquiry based learning, feedback, reflection – all these terms illustrate how teachers are thinking about the different ways that they can research their own practices.

**Reflection and discussion**

What forms of professional learning have you experienced?

Do you feel that this learning has shaped your professional practice in significant ways?

What do you make of the difference between ‘professional development’ and ‘professional learning’? How might teachers be best supported to engage in ongoing learning?

What kinds of professional learning have had most impact on your work as a language and literacy teacher? Think about the nature of that learning and the kinds of insights it generated into your professional practice.
Rosa joins a community of inquirers at a new school

It’s late January and Rosa has just joined the Year 5/6 teaching team at Eastern Primary School (pseudonym), in a middle-class suburb in Melbourne. She is beginning her third year of teaching. Four of the five teachers in the team are also at the start of their third year of teaching, but she is the only one who is new to this school. The fifth member of the team, Heather, is an experienced teacher of twenty-five years who holds the position of the school’s literacy coordinator. Rosa is surprised to learn that Sienna, with whom she will be team-teaching, has taken on school coordination of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), even though she also has only two years of teaching behind her. That would never have happened at Rosa’s previous school, where the lead teachers were given coordination roles, and most of them were about the same age as her parents.

She raised this with Sienna, whose reply made her think again about the nature of professional learning:

The school’s policy is to empower everyone to make his or her job more efficient, meaningful and rewarding. There’s a belief in the value of tapping into the expertise, ideas and effort of everyone – we’re actually obliged to step up and contribute to one another’s learning – teachers, students, all the community. So I’ve felt pretty good that my ICT expertise has been recognised.

Rosa found Sienna’s confidence inspiring, if a little intimidating. Over the holidays Rosa had read through the induction information manual for new staff, when she had been intrigued to read that the school adopted a model of ‘Participatory Action Research’, drawing on the ideas of Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart (2005).

While Rosa recalled learning about participatory action research in some of her university units, she had found that such an approach was far from the norm at her last school. There the teachers had done PD sessions on areas of interest, sometimes together and sometimes individually. On their return to school, they had been obliged to present to the rest of the staff about the PD they had undertaken. But while Rosa sometimes found these presentations interesting, she wondered whether these new ideas really had any impact on the professional practice of teachers at the school.

Her new school’s induction manual informed her that practitioner inquiry involved teachers ‘wondering’ about how to improve aspects of their work with students, and then working to deepen their understanding. The students’ learning was meant to be matched by teachers’ learning. One was a condition for the other. Just as teachers were seeking to develop their students’ capacity to be reflective and
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imaginative, so they were working to develop their own capacity to engage critically and imaginatively in their work. Working collaboratively with colleagues, they would be able to move beyond ‘taken for granted’ ways of doing things. ‘Yes’, Rosa, thought, ‘it was because so many things were “taken for granted” that I was often so frustrated at my last school.’

Rosa learnt that her team was to begin developing their ‘combined research question’ at their next meeting. She had maintained the habit of keeping a journal from her university days, and so in preparation for this meeting she began writing down her reflections about what a good question might be. Heather dropped by Rosa’s classroom and gave her files containing samples of her students’ work and their assessment results. The students had been asked to write a letter to their new teacher, indicating their strengths, interests and learning goals, as well as their hopes for the new school year. These were also included in the files. Before she left, Heather drew Rosa’s attention to some assessment results that showed that many of the incoming Years 5/6 students could be further supported in making meaning from texts. The assessment showed that their capacity to infer meaning from texts could be strengthened. She remarked:

Think about how important the capacity to infer is for children. They are bombarded with texts that they read, watch and listen to. Texts trying to sell them something or persuade them of something – on TV, on the internet – everywhere. They will start to turn 13 this year and then they’ll also be on Facebook (if they aren’t already). I will be arguing for this to be our research question at our next team meeting.

In preparation for meeting her new class, Rosa eagerly opened the files and sought out the letters from her new students. The first one read:

To my new teacher

We got new iPads last year but we didn’t really do that much with them at school; just used apps for spelling and maths and stuff. I think that we should use the iPads more for reading books that you like and discussing them and reflecting on them with other people like in a book club – even with people not at our school. We could make our own books and films – not just using stuff that’s already on the iPads.

As she leafed through the other letters, Rosa saw that many of the students mentioned the under-utilisation of the technology that they had been given. The range of interests was far-reaching, and their learning goals included many relating to social skills as well as subject-specific goals. The students were also preoccupied with the
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challenge of dealing with a range of different subjects and the associated reading and writing that they would be required to do at secondary school next year.

Rosa wanted to let the students know that she had read their letters. She was also keen to prepare for the meeting of the Year 5/6 teaching team, where they would start working towards identifying a research question. She made an entry in her reflective journal, when she was amused to find that she was asking more questions than making plans.

Things on my mind. Staff are saying that the school could improve on incorporating ICT in meaningful ways – especially in literacy. I wonder what this means exactly. Heather thinks that the kids need more work on inferring. Why? I’d like to know more. The kids have a huge range of interests and I don’t even know about their capacities yet. They are frustrated at the way they are using technologies. How can I find out more? I am really interested in this overlap between the technologies and literacy; and it seems the kids might be too.

You can see that her reflective journal is a crucial way in which Rosa sustains a conversation with herself about the complexities of her professional practice from day to day. Professional learning doesn’t only occur in semi-formal settings when teachers meet together to discuss their practice, but it can be prompted by your day-to-day work, as you attend to the interactions that occur in your classroom.

Reflection and discussion

Have you experienced different approaches to professional learning at the schools where you have worked? What approaches have appeared to be effective? What approaches have been less effective? Can you say why? How important do you think it is for a school to adopt a whole school approach to professional learning?

You can see that Rosa has already learnt a lot about her students by reading the letters they have written to her. This has prompted her to think about a topic that she might research. Can you name a moment when you have begun to think differently about your work as a language and literacy teacher because of the writing your students have produced for you? You might also like to reflect on what you have learnt by observing students and listening to their conversations.

At the team meeting, team members tabled and discussed a range of evidence as a way of informing their decision-making, including test results, examples of student work, the students’ NAPLAN (National Assessment of Program – Literacy and Numeracy) results, the letters from the students and notes from parent–teacher interviews.
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held at the end of the previous year. Heather showed them student text responses that highlighted the need for deeper work on making inferences and reading more critically. Rosa looked at the range of evidence and saw that there was indeed a need to develop strategies to enhance their students’ capacities to make meaning from texts. However, she also felt at a disadvantage, as the other teachers all knew their students, whereas she was a newcomer to the school. While she had looked through the students’ files, their reports and test results, as well as reading their letters about their interests and frustration with the way ICT was being used in the school, she wanted a clearer picture of them – particularly as readers. She felt a little diffident about contributing to the discussion, but she nonetheless wanted to say something.

I was thinking of giving them a homework task where they had to tell me on film how they see themselves as readers. That would help me get to know, and learn more about them as learners. And maybe how I can help them and further support their learning. It would also give them a reason to use the technology – in a meaningful way.

The team responded enthusiastically to Rosa’s idea, deciding that they would all give students this homework task of creating a short movie. To scaffold the activity they decided to ask the students a set of questions: How do you see yourself as a reader? What are your strengths? What would you like to improve? How can your teachers support you to improve your reading?

As a way of analysing the students’ movies the teachers decided to initially focus on three students from each class. They planned to present these students’ responses to the questions at their next team meeting. Teachers were each to choose a student whom they considered to be ‘struggling’, a student ‘working at a reasonable level’, and a student who was ‘sophisticated’ in terms of his or her reading comprehension strategies. They were hoping that this would give them rich insights into how literacy learning was being experienced by students in their particular school community.

The following week the team viewed student responses to the task together. The student movie responses highlighted the varying levels of engagement with reading amongst the students. The teachers noted that many students whom they felt were ‘struggling’ gave signs of being utterly disengaged from print literacy practices. They simply failed to see them as meaningful. The teachers began to wonder whether they could explore the use of digital tools as a means of addressing these students’ negative attitudes towards reading, with a view to ultimately improving their reading capacities. Rosa was enthusiastic about this new direction, as it matched perfectly her interest in the way new technologies could support literacy learning.

The team developed plans for teacher and student learning that they hoped would lead to student engagement with reading through digital tools. This included
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goals for student learning and actions for teachers to take in order to develop their understandings of the rationale for using a range of digital tools, as well as in an effort to build their confidence in employing them to enhance literacy learning. The teachers refined these plans continually, showing a growing understanding of the issues with which they were grappling.

Within this reflective phase of the participatory action research cycle the teachers engaged in collecting and analysing evidence about the students’ progress in literacy. During fortnightly literacy team meetings teachers worked collaboratively as they discussed and developed understandings and engaged in professional reading in the areas of multimodality and comprehension.

The literature on multimodality is vast. A good starting point would be the essays in David Cole and Darren Pullen (2010)

Team members undertook to become expert in the use of various technologies and took responsibility for sharing their learning with other team members. All team members kept reflective learning journals, as did the students. Teachers tracked and monitored students and brought evidence of their progression to each meeting in order to consider strategies for further intervention. The team developed the following research question as a focus for their professional learning:

How can the integration of digital technology further develop students’ capacities to make meaning from texts?

The team’s focus was now on improving students’ reading comprehension through using digital tools while engaging in an inquiry. The team designed an inquiry topic for their students that would provide a vehicle for them to answer their research question but also excite the students’ interest:

Imagining the future. How will contemporary technology change our world?

The Year 5/6 teaching team put their inquiry into action through the introduction of literacy contracts. Teachers developed a number of activities, including comprehension-based tasks related to the inquiry topic. These comprised ‘must do’ and ‘can do’ tasks, offering students a choice about how they went about conducting their inquiry. They developed intranet sites for each class, which linked to information such as contracts and home-based work.

Students read about, responded to and analysed texts about various technologies, such as smart phones. They listened to and analysed texts on iPods and iPads, read, played and critiqued internet games, and over time became engaged in analysing and writing weblogs (blogs), and creating glogs (interactive online posters) and wikis (that allow users to add or edit content), producing a range of texts in various forms.
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Rosa and the other Year 5/6 teaching team employed observation through the use of cameras to record students and teachers working. The recordings were then replayed as a prompt for both teacher and student reflection. The recordings and observations became yet another type of evidence of student learning. As Rosa explains:

Teachers make a video recording of a group of students discussing literature including the sharing of thoughts, ideas and analysis of a text. The class watches the recording and gives feedback on the quality of discussion. We’re seeing the complexity of understandings grow … and their capacities to articulate them.

Through watching the films and the discussion they stimulated, Rosa and the Year 5/6 teaching team observed that the initial impact of these changes was a deepened engagement for all students, regardless of the level of their capacity to handle print literacy. Students who had been disengaged from reading were willing, even eager, to undertake the technology-based reading tasks which were part of their literacy contracts. However Rosa reflected that while the students were engaged, they continued to need explicit teaching and support in developing more complex reading capacities such as inferring. As she wrote in her journal:

There’s been a big change in student engagement. They are all very excited and desperate to be able to use the technology … The students who aren’t quite able to do inferential reading need more support and assistance. Even though the technology is helping to engage them, they still need support in looking for inferences. They are happier to try though.

When Rosa’s students were given the task of reflecting on the technological tools introduced and how they supported their vocabulary development and capacity to infer meaning from text, a student whom she had previously considered to be ‘struggling’ wrote:

I now know how to infer because I like the articles and like I know not all the answers are in the text, sometimes you’ve just got to think about the words and they may tell you a little clue but you’ve got to use your brain skills and work it out yourself … think about what you know about the world and other stuff you’ve read.

Heather oversaw periodic testing and recording of student comprehension against a standardised test. In comparing the results collected over time, the team observed a marked increase in aspects of their capacity to comprehend print texts. However in discussing the test results, teachers recognised that students had learnt things that the test instrument failed to explore. Rosa and her team expanded their own
understandings of literacy in moving from a focus on print literacy to a focus on
digital literacies. They wanted to give proper attention to the modes present in the
multimodal texts (New London Group 1996; Cope and Kalantzis 2000) such as the
way visual and audio dimensions contributed to the overall meaning of a text.

For a theoretical rationale for teaching ‘multiliteracies’ see the New London Group
(1996) and also the edited volume on ‘multiliteracies’ by Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis
(2000).

Proponents of ‘multiliteracies’ argue that becoming ‘multiliterate’ requires students to
develop proficiency in meaning-making in linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial and
multimodal designs, with multimodal being a combination of the other modes.

As Rosa explained:

We’re looking at digital literacies but we’re not assessing the new skills that come
with digital literacies, such as interpreting pictures and inferring or reading between
the lines of what music in a text is implying. The writing on its own doesn’t always give
you the full story but when that picture is added or when that sound effect is added, or
when that music is added, it creates a whole new meaning.

Rosa and her team’s learning went beyond addressing their research question. In
the process of undertaking their investigation, they developed expanded notions of
comprehension and literacy. They reconsidered what constitutes comprehension in
contemporary times when ‘readers’ (or would it be more accurate to say ‘viewers’?)
are making meanings from texts that involve an interplay between spoken and written
language, visual images and audio. They had begun to consider the additional
literacies required when students work in a digital environment.

You have seen from Rosa’s story that the inquiry in which she was engaged in-
volved strong collaboration between teachers. This was a feature of the culture of the
school at which she was working. The cultures of schools are unique. The next story
provides another example of inquiry-based professional learning as embedded in a
whole school culture. In this school the principal and assistant principal are commit-
ted to developing a culture where people talk openly about their teaching, promoting
the idea that they all belong to a ‘community of learners’.

Adam moves from being a graduate
to part of a community of learners

At the end of November Adam was ecstatic about being the successful applicant for
a graduate teaching position in a Year 3/4 class in a rural school in Victoria. There
were 16 teachers on staff, including ten classroom teachers, the principal, Shane, and his assistant principal, Sally, as well as Lisa, a part-time literacy coach, and three specialist teachers. Throughout January, Adam spent several days preparing for his new class and familiarising himself with the school’s policies, including their Annual Implementation Plan. He learnt from discussions with Shane and Sally that the school was currently embarking on a whole-school approach to inquiry-based teacher professional learning. At the same time, the school was working on a whole-school approach to school improvement. This involved a cluster of schools within the regional network, with each participating school being required to select a whole-school focus for improvement.

During the first weeks of school, Adam came to realise that inquiry-based professional learning was new to all staff in the school, not only to him as someone who had just arrived. Previously, the school had sent individual teachers to professional development sessions (PDs) that were specific to particular content areas. Some teachers went to PDs around literacy, while others attended PDs on numeracy and ICTs. However, during the past six months, prior to Adam’s appointment at the school, the leadership team, in collaboration with all members of staff, had agreed to undertake a ‘whole-school approach’ to professional learning. Shane and Sally both emphasised to Adam that he was a member of an active ‘community of learners’. This meant that they were all learning: the principal, the assistant principal, everyone.

The concept of a ‘community of learners’ was not new to Adam. He had read and discussed the theories around community of learners in his initial teacher education course, and he had observed how some schools applied this concept during his professional experience placements.

If you are interested in the ‘community of learners’ concept, you might like to read Barabara Rogoff, Eugene Mastusov and Cynthia White (1996) Etienne Wenger’s (1999) concept of ‘community of practice’ is also relevant here, as is Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991).

However, this had largely been with respect to how you can establish a sense of a ‘community of learners’ in classroom settings, involving teachers and their students, not with respect to the possibility of generating collaborative learning among a whole staff.

During terms one and two staff meetings no longer took the form only of addressing administrative issues, but were dedicated to whole-school professional learning and collaboration around the teaching of literacy.

Prior to the first staff meeting, Sally asked the teachers: ‘What do you want to know about, what do you want to learn?’ Adam also noted that:
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Sally added questions to get us thinking about why we want to learn about particular things and how they relate to our teaching and learning.

Such questions prompted self-reflection and rich collaborative discussions. It was such a change not to be talking only about administrative matters. ‘Why are we doing what we are doing?’ was the question that drove discussion at the meeting. After staff responses were collated, it was agreed that the focus for whole-school improvement and professional learning would be on literacy, and that initially special emphasis would be given to developing individual literacy goals incorporating the use of ICT. This focus was discussed with the year level unit leaders, then further planning occurred at year level unit meetings. Staff shared ideas as to how best to implement the focus at each specific year level. Adam contributed to the discussions with his colleagues during the Year 3/4 meetings. He drew on his personal knowledge and experiences gained throughout his university course and from his professional experience placements.

The first few staff meetings in term one were dedicated to looking at the data from the children’s literacy assessments alongside teacher judgments about their students’ literacy as they emerged from their day-to-day classroom observations. They were using data gathered from a number of different sources, and reflecting on how to interpret it in order to set goals for student. Adam recalls that:

> We did a lot of talking in the after-school meetings about how to use the data and about grouping students ... we looked at previous scores, anecdotal notes, and previous NAPLAN data for grade fours. We sort of brainstormed different ways and looked at different things to challenge our thinking and also how to improve our literacy teaching practices.

As part of this whole-school approach, Shane and Sally informed the staff that, in their role as school leaders, they were going to observe teachers in their classrooms at least twice a week. They would also meet with them individually once a fortnight to discuss the literacy data relating to their students and the rationale for selecting specific goals for literacy. Not surprisingly, Adam felt extremely anxious about the idea of these ‘data meetings’. The thought of meeting with the principal and the assistant principal ‘kind of freaked me out’. But he told himself that he wasn’t the only one being observed. Shane and Sally were also going to be observing the classrooms of the most experienced teachers, saying that this was an opportunity for everyone to reflect and to learn.

Prior to his first meeting with Shane, Adam prepared all his literacy data on the children in his class. He used anecdotal records, NAPLAN results, PROBE test results
and student work samples in order to develop an account of each child’s progress. Adam recounts that during the meeting:

Shane wanted to know … specifically who might be the ones who are struggling, who are our extension students? Who are those that can get lost … you know the ones in between … so basically we were looking at the students who were capable but weren’t moving much … not much growth. Shane wanted to know why and pinpoint why and what we could do to move them along.

So far, so good. Although the meeting had been a little daunting, Adam felt that it had been productive, helping him to look at data in order to focus on ‘specific students that you might overlook’.

Reflection and discussion

In this particular whole-school approach to inquiry-based teacher professional learning, student data were used as a basis for improving student literacy outcomes. What do such data really say about your students’ literacy development? Why is it important to collect a range of data?

What is your experience of engaging with standardised test data, such as NAPLAN or that generated by other tests? How do you think such data compare with the insights you gain from your day-to-day classroom observations?

After the first term, Adam reflected further on the value of his meetings with Shane and Sally, and he came to feel that they had provided a good opportunity to build a relationship with them.

But Sally then informed Adam that she would be observing his literacy session during week four of the term, and again Adam felt a bit anxious. The whole thing began to remind him of his pre-service days at university, when he felt that he was being watched all the time. Once more he drew comfort from the fact that this was a ‘whole-school practice’, where even the most experienced teachers were to be observed. Adam had planned a session that incorporated individualised literacy learning goals for each child. He reflected on all the information presented at staff meetings regarding grouping students, incorporating the insights he has gained in his meeting with Shane. He was hoping that things would go well.

During the lesson Adam noticed that Sally was taking copious notes and that she was taking photos using her iPhone. He guessed that these notes and photos would be used as prompts for discussion in his next data meeting with Shane. But he still felt a bit uncomfortable, and he felt that he should make his discomfort known to Sally:
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Adam: I can see you're writing. What are you writing?

Sally: I'm just, you know.

Adam: Can you please tell me now? I don't want to go for the next 45 minutes doing something that you think I should have changed.

Sally: Well, I can see those boys are not really focused on what they're doing in literacy and I would probably now go and target some literacy learning goals for those kids first.

It was good that Adam spoke up, because after this session, Sally herself thought again about the protocols that she should follow when observing teachers. She acknowledged the need for teachers to be able to 'discuss the observations promptly and not to wait a week, they want immediate feedback'. Sally also realised that these observations were a time for building relationships and targeting specific professional learning needs of every teacher in the school. Staff were at 'different levels of their [learning] journey', and any feedback she gave to them should recognise that.

Reflection and discussion

These days, teachers are observed many times, not only in their teacher education programs but throughout their careers. Do you feel that such observations are valuable? What is required for effective classroom observation? What protocols do you think ought to be in place when observations occur? Have you observed many other teachers teaching? What have you learnt?

Adam also enjoyed his conversations with Lisa, the school's literacy coach. As part of his four hours of allocated planning time per week, he attended weekly meetings with her. During these meetings, she provided professional readings and suggested useful strategies to trial in the classroom. Lisa also took videos of Adam's teaching and made observational notes. They discussed these notes during the meetings, when further planning took place. In one particular meeting, Lisa asked Adam whether there was anything specific that he wanted to know about a particular student and possible ways that the student's literacy learning goals could be addressed. This led to a very rich discussion of the individual needs of students. Adam was also aware that the students in his class needed to be more aware of their own literacy learning goals and the need for the Year 3/4 students to take more responsibility for their own literacy learning.

During the next few weeks, Adam set up a class blog outlining the process for selecting specific literacy goals. He invited students to list the specific area of literacy
that they felt they needed to work on, asking them to provide a reason for choosing this goal. He then set up a template asking students to write down their goal/s, stating when they achieved the goal/s and providing evidence for how they had accomplished them. He then set up a timetable schedule inviting students to nominate a ten-minute timeslot to meet with him to discuss their literacy learning goals. He would then meet with the students to ask them to reflect on the way they had achieved the goal and whether they had found the process useful to their literacy learning. Adam also provided each student with feedback during this meeting. One student commented:

If you have a goal then you keep setting your goal, it’s just yeah you try harder to achieve your goal.

Another student remarked:

If a few people are working on the same goal, you can work in groups... so people are doing different things... so instead of doing stuff you already know how to do, each person’s doing something challenging and working on their goal.

When asked how they achieved and provided evidence regarding their specific literacy goals, one student reported that:

So my first goal was to write more complex procedures and so then I typed in my action... I recorded how I achieved that by using our iPads and there’s an app called ‘show me’ and I did it on that so you record it and you can draw on it. It’s like a whiteboard on the screen that you can draw on it. And you can record what you’re drawing and what you’re saying.

Adam was ‘gradually learning and gladly teaching’, and he was pleased to share his students reflections on their literacy learning, as well as his personal reflections on his own learning with other members of the Year 3/4 unit team.

The unit team meetings provided opportunities for learning for everyone. It was exciting for Adam to know that some of the more experienced teachers had adopted some of his ideas and comforting to know that learning was happening for everyone. During one particular unit team meeting, one of Adam’s experienced colleagues shared with him that:

You are always questioning yourself to make sure that you know that you’re doing the right thing... and I think we’re now a lot more open with the kids about what we’re doing and why we’re doing it.

Another colleague made this comment:

There is so much I have learnt now being a teacher, things that we didn’t get when we were children sitting in classrooms... and now we say ‘ahh that’s why we learnt that’, but the children in my classroom are actually having those discussions now. They get the point.
As the year progressed, the whole staff continued to share their learning experiences during whole-school staff meetings. Adam observed that these sessions were not only about learning from other teachers but also provided an opportunity for the leadership team to reflect on and share their own professional learning. For example, Shane had recently been to a 'celebration day meeting' with other principals in the region. This day was an opportunity for principals to share and celebrate the work that their schools had been doing to improve student literacy outcomes. Shane shared what he had learnt and discussed ways in which this new learning could be applied within the context of the current learners in the school. Sally also shared her experiences of a professional learning session she had attended at another school. Specifically, this session was about the curriculum standards for language and literacy levels. As a result of this session, she shared with the staff her interest in linking the whole-school focus of developing individual literacy goals with the curriculum standards levels. Sally talked about the importance of the whole school community understanding the language of these levels. As a result, the staff worked through adapting the literacy levels outlined in the curriculum standards documents into 'Kidspeak', under Sally's leadership and support.

'Kidspeak' was one way that students could understand the language of the expected literacy outcomes of a particular year level and how these could be applied to their own literacy learning. It wasn't long before 'Kidspeak' was adopted throughout the school. Adam worked with his students around their individual literacy goals and supported them to align these with some of the literacy levels, where appropriate. He also set up his class blog so that parents had access to it, thus enabling them to know about the literacy goals their children had selected.

**Reflection and discussion**

Have you experienced professional learning as a 'whole-school approach'? What are the benefits and challenges to a 'whole-school approach' to professional learning? Do you feel that you should justify all your professional learning goals with reference to your school's priorities?

You can sense that all the professional learning at Adam's school was directed towards improving students' literacy outcomes, often as demonstrated by standardised test data. Do you feel that professional learning should always be justified in this way? Is there a direct link between professional learning and improved student outcomes?

The next story looks at the way teachers can pursue their professional learning by implementing an 'action research' cycle. Teachers are not the only ones who have
adopted this well-known approach to situated learning. Professionals working in other institutional settings, such as health care, have also implemented action research in order to understand the complexities of their work. 'Action research' can be implemented with one or two colleagues, or it may be adopted by a whole school in order to bring about change.

**Julie and Sophie combine action and research**

Julie and Sophie teach in a regional primary school in Victoria. They have both been teaching for five years. Julie and Sophie's school joined a three-year long professional learning program that took on an action research approach to teacher professional learning. The approach at Julie and Sophie's school reflected many of the same features as the approach used at Rosa's school, including the phases of planning, acting, observing, collecting evidence and reflecting (see Fig. 3.1). You will also notice that aspects of their experiences are similar to Adam's professional learning. Julie and Sophie's school had similarly embarked on a 'whole-school approach' to practitioner inquiry as a key dimension of professional learning.

Julie and Sophie's school knew that one-off PD activities rarely lead to sustained change in teaching practices, whereas practitioner inquiry approaches to professional learning that is ongoing had been shown to lead to sustained change in practice (Blackley & Wells 2009; Comber & Kamler 2005; Darling-Hammond et al. 2009; Villegas-Reimers 2003). The school leadership team saw this ongoing action research approach to professional learning as an opportunity to trial what was, for them, a new way of creating sustainable change in pedagogy at their school.

The teacher professional learning program at Sophie and Julie's school involved three 'knowledge creation' days that focused on developing skills with learning technologies that could be used to enrich the teaching and learning in classrooms. This was followed by one day devoted to designing the research questions for their school. The school's action research project was conducted throughout the school year. They had decided to investigate the question: 'How can we use communication web spaces in the form of edublogs and wikis to build partnerships to personalise learning for our students?'

Julie and Sophie were both teaching in the junior unit, which consisted of two classes with 24 students in each. They became actively involved in the action research cycle of planning, acting, reflecting, observing and moving on to the next cycle of planning in the process of working with their students. They looked at their practice and identified an aspect of practice that they felt they needed to improve and then implemented the cycle. In Julie and Sophie's case, their area for investigation was a whole-school decision. Julie and Sophie's experience of participating in action research told them that, even though there is an expected sequence of steps, it is
often a messy process. That is the nature of things when investigating the complexities of teaching and learning.

Let’s hear what Julie and Sophie have to say about what they did in their own words:

Our junior unit decided to look at ways to better integrate literacy with our inquiry unit which we called, ‘Lights, Camera Action!’ We also wanted to build stronger links with our parents. We decided to get our students to create movies to get our parents to use online blogging to give them feedback.

By integrating the teaching of literacy into their classes’ inquiry unit, Julie and Sophie sought to provide a real purpose for the students’ writing and the creation of multimodal texts. This also provided an authentic context in which to help the parents take a more active role in their children’s learning by developing their skills in providing constructive feedback to their children’s writing and the creation of multimodal texts in the form of movies.

How to begin? Julie and Sophie knew that effective teachers ‘start where the students are’ so they decided to collect data directly from their students.

We asked the students to use their journals to reflect on their attitudes towards writing. We asked them to reflect on the following questions.

How do you feel about writing?
What are you good at in writing?
Is there anything that you don’t like about writing?

We then surveyed the students to find out what they knew about feedback. In the survey we asked a series of questions:

What is feedback?
What does it look like?
What kind of feedback is most useful to you? Why?
What kind of feedback is least useful to you? Why?

With this information, Julie and Sophie were in a position to plan to more fully engage their students through the creation of their movies. They were also committed to combining this activity with the use of online communication technologies to assist
parents to provide their children with constructive feedback about the movies that they created.

We thought that one way to incorporate our inquiry unit called ‘Lights, Camera Action!’ with literacy and to provide the context for feedback was to ask the students to create movies. To do this we used an online movie creation site, which allowed our students to design and create their own movies. It provided students with the choice of background settings, characters, sound effects, movements, voices and themes. Students typed out their scripts in the online movie site and then used the tools available on the site to transform their scripts into movies.

Creating movies places a wide range of demands on students’ literacy capabilities. They have to decide on the topic, the setting for the movie, the characters and the storyline. How should the characters be introduced? How might the conversation between characters be developed? What will happen in the movie to make it interesting and maintain the audience’s interest? What sort of complication will happen? How will this be resolved? All these aspects need to be portrayed through the characters’ gestures, movement and the words they ‘speak’. The children have to plan in details the structure of their movie and also make decisions about camera angles and camera movement. When will they take the camera in close up? When in the script will they pan the camera out? Making movies is not ‘easy’. Creating multimodal texts is complicated and challenging work. As Julie remarked:

During the movie-making process we expected our students to use feedback from their audience to continually improve their movies. To facilitate this, the movies were uploaded to the class blog where we encouraged parents to provide feedback to their children about their movies.

The decision to use a blogging site that allowed interactive communication was a powerful way to set up educational conversations within the school community.

At the start of the project the principal at Julie and Sophie’s school ensured that all the staff understood the school’s priorities. He stated that:

I want our school to develop strong partnerships between teachers, students, families and the wider community through the use of blogs and wikis. These web spaces can support us to become a learning community. All our classes will be able to share their work with an interested audience, therefore offering a diverse landscape in which to showcase our students’ learning. Families love to hear about what their children are doing at school and this offers us a new way to do this, a way that can be accessed easily in and outside of school.
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Julie and Sophie used edublogs to encourage their parents to be part of a collaborative learning community to support the students.

We used edublogs as our web space provider for the online site. It allowed teachers and students to upload a variety of media such as images, movies and sound recordings. Feedback comments were posted on the class edublogs site and monitored by the teachers. It was like a class webpage with the bonus of interaction between parents, students and teachers through posting comments.

Because Julie and Sophie's inquiry-based professional learning was part of the bigger school project, they took the opportunity to set up sharing and learning experiences for other teachers across the school.

We set up our edublogs site and then provided in-service sessions for other teachers on how to use edublogs effectively within their classrooms. An in-service day and several Professional Learning Team meetings were devoted to supporting the implementation of edublogs right across the school. Once edublogs was established as our site for communication, students were introduced to it and encouraged to access their class pages from home with their family. Parents were told about the site at parent-teacher interviews, in the mornings before school and through a letter.

Parents were encouraged to use edublogs as a tool to provide their children with constructive feedback about the movies they were creating. The teachers introduced the online movie site as a means to engage children in the inquiry unit and to enhance their writing and ICT skills. Through the use of the interactive white boards, teachers were able to demonstrate and model how to use the movie site and how to develop a conversation between characters in the movies. The students then had the opportunity to explore and experiment with the program before being asked to write their first script. Extra support was given to a small group of students who found the process challenging.

Throughout the writing process, students gave each other feedback about their storylines. Once the students' movies were completed and embedded into the edublog, parents and friends were able to post comments on each student's page. The students also presented their movies to the class on the interactive white board. The students used the 'Three Stars' and a 'Wish' method of feedback to respond to each other's movies. The 'Three Stars' represented three positive comments about the movie and the 'Wish' was expected to be a more critically analytical response that gave constructive feedback. Throughout the feedback process the students were encouraged to reflect on their experiences in their learning journals.
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The teachers used reflective journals throughout the duration of their inquiry to reflect on any changes in their literacy pedagogies that they were experiencing. The writing of reflections in their personal journals combined with regular reflective conversations gave Julia and Sophie the means to think through the changes they were making and to modify their practice in light of those reflections. They regularly discussed what was working, what wasn’t working so well, and possible changes that might improve the literacy teaching and learning in their classrooms.

One entry in Sophie’s journal read:

> Now that everyone has received feedback on their first attempt at a movie, we are going to get them all to set a personal goal before writing their second script. The goal might be about any aspect of the movie. It could be how long their movie is, or getting them to make sure it makes more sense to the audience, or how engaging it is for the audience, or any other things that have come up in the feedback.

They repeated the process of writing and producing a movie, when once again they encouraged parents and family to give feedback. Julie and Sophie were aware that writers rarely write one perfect copy. They understood that writing is a process in which you plan, write rough drafts, edit and polish— all in an effort to create a final product for publication. Creators of digital texts are no different to any other writers. They need opportunities to work on and improve their creation over time.

To conclude the inquiry unit on ‘Lights, Camera Action!’, Sophie and Julie organised a movie premiere for the students to celebrate their achievements with family members. This movie premiere also provided opportunities for Julie and Sophie to reflect further, observing the children’s achievements and planning for the future. You can learn an immense amount from the writing and other artefacts that students produce.

Both Julia and Sophie observed that student engagement in their own writing was improved by embedding writing into the inquiry unit of ‘Lights, Camera, Action’. Crucial to this was the creation of multimodal texts and the feedback from parents as the audience. In doing this they incorporated an important, but sometimes forgotten, aspect of literacy work in which students share their work with a wider audience in mind (Buckingham 2007).

**Reflection and discussion**

You might now like to devise your own action research project. What aspects of language and literacy learning do you feel you would like to investigate? You might like to nominate one or two of your ‘blind spots’ for inquiry as areas where you feel that you would like to improve your understanding of language and literacy. It is
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obvious that Julie and Sophie were taking some risks in what they were doing, but that is in the nature of inquiry. There would be no point in an inquiry if you knew all the answers in advance.

You can see that, in addition to their interest in the potential of digital technologies, Julie and Sophie were concerned with questions that have traditionally preoccupied teachers of writing, namely how to inject into students a sense of purpose that might motivate them to write, as well as how they might benefit from feedback as they engage in the writing process. Perhaps you might focus on one of these topics for your inquiry. Do you feel that your students are always engaging in authentic, meaning-making activities when they produce school writing? Does this matter? Do you feel that digital or multimodal technology might be used creatively to enable them to engage in authentic communication with a larger audience?

Conclusion

Teachers who see inquiry as part of their 'professional being', as Alan Reid (2004) puts it, have much to contribute to an understanding of the complexities of language and literacy in school settings. Over the years both the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association (ALEA) and the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) have done a great deal to promote the value of practitioner inquiry, publishing stories and other accounts of classroom-based research in their journals. Sometimes this has taken the form of reports about action research that has been implemented as part of a whole-school policy, as with the stories contained in this chapter. It should also be noted, however, that much of the material published by classroom teachers has not necessarily been generated through implementing an action research cycle, but is written from the standpoint of reflective practitioners who are thinking critically about their day-to-day work. They haven’t made significant interventions or changes to their teaching in the way that Rosa, Adam, Sophie and Julie have done.

The history of practitioner inquiry is larger than that of action research. If you are interested in thinking further about the kinds of knowledge teachers are able to produce by reflecting on their practice, you might find it interesting to read Joe Kincheloe’s (2003) book about teachers as researchers. A famous early example of advocacy for the centrality of classroom inquiry is the chapter on 'The teacher as researcher' in Lawrence Stenhouse’s (1975) book. For studies with a focus on language and literacy, which also emphasise the importance of writing as a form of inquiry, see Graham Parr (2010) and Brenton Doecke and Douglas McClennaghan (2011). The STELLA project, mentioned in previous chapters, also provides valuable of examples of English literacy teachers writing about their work.
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The teachers may have been prompted to write about an insight that became available to them as they were observing their students engaging in classroom talk. Or perhaps they are writing about something they have learnt from the stories their students have produced that has made them re-examine their assumptions about the best way to teach writing.

Another important element, after all, that the preceding stories have in common, in addition to being examples of 'action research', is that all the teachers involved kept journals about what they were experiencing. You may or may not find yourself working in a school that supports the kinds of collaborative inquiry into language and literacy in which Rosa, Adam, Sophie and Julie participated. But wherever you are, it is important to engage in reflective practice. Keeping a journal, as well as other forms of writing, is an important way of sustaining a reflective stance vis-à-vis the challenges you face as a language and literacy teacher.

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