Digital game-based curriculum? *My child* doesn't play computer games

Jeanette Hannaford

In the complex community of an international school, bridging useful connections between the home and the classroom is an ongoing challenge. While the desire for children to become knowledgeable, thriving contributors in our rapidly changing world could be claimed as a shared objective, parents and teachers often perceive the pathways that lead to this outcome quite differently. This presents challenges for educators, families, and, most importantly, students.

Technology and digital culture are sites in which differing attitudes between home and school are increasingly encountered. While many school leaders consider that a progressive use of technology signals a 21st century school, the views from the students' homes can be more complex and more confused. This article draws from observations made during a study into the digital lives of a group of pre-adolescent children in an international school. It considers the differing attitudes from the children's families, and suggests that schools need to understand parental positions around technology and digital culture, and reflect on these as they plan their digital future and train their teachers.

> Dear Jeanette,
>
> I wish you well in your research but Brett's schedule is very full and his current workload is challenging (we also have a strict rule of no gaming during the week) ... so I am very sorry that even though he is very keen he cannot commit to your project. Thank you for your understanding.
>
> Kind regards,
>
> Adina
>
> (All names used in this article are pseudonyms.)

Adina is representative of many parents I encountered whilst seeking participants for this research project. The research looked into the ways in which students at a large international school understood and located themselves within on and offline worlds. Like other parents at the school, Adina, the mother of Brett, an 11 year-old boy who repeatedly asked me if he could be a part of my project, is negotiating a complex mix of messages she receives from other parents, the media, and to some degree, the school, about the best way to guide and direct her children through the somewhat uncharted grounds of digital technologies. These parents typically manage this apprehension with family policies of digital access curtailment.

At the same time, while undertaking this project I found myself to be a magnet for a number of teachers who were interested in developing the use of digital technology in their practice and viewed me, a previous fellow staff member now researching on one edge of this vast topic, as an 'expert' in this area. When I mentioned that my thesis supervisor was a leading researcher into the potential use of video games in school curriculum, there was an overwhelmingly enthusiastic response and many staff spoke of an interest in taking their own practice further into this direction. Most of these staff were already competent technology users, the upholders of this knowledge within their community, who constantly sought to update and increase their expertise.

Others were not so assured, but perceived that increasing their confidence and skills in the use of digital technologies in their teaching practice was a marketable asset in the workplace. Furthermore, this was the message that the school management was transmitting to the teaching staff, for example, by funding multiple places at teaching and learning conferences focussed in this area, and by the very visible role that the school director personally played in prioritising the planning and updating of this area of the school's portfolio.

As a researcher exploring the digital culture of the student community, I was interested in what was going on to develop and promote digital technology use in the classrooms. But as I explored this, and at the same time spoke with parents about my research, it became evident to me that there appeared to be a noticeable gap between the positions of home and school in regards to attitudes and approaches to this topic. In this article, I record observations I made about differing positions taken within the parent body, and within the school body, with regard to digital technologies in children's lives.

My research set out to explore how 'third culture kids' (Useem & Downie, 1976) negotiate the different discourses they encounter through mass-media digital technologies, the home and the classroom. Discourses refers to the combination of 'language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity' (Gee, 2011 p.29). Over most of a school year, I gathered data about the digital lives of 20 students, aged between eight and 13 years, via student journals, interviews, informal chats, class observations, and a series of after-school computer clubs. I also interviewed a selection of the students' teachers and parents. Case study methodologies guided the overall design of the project. The data is currently being transcribed and collated.

Parent discourses

One of the initial points that emerged during the study was the central role parents would play in the research. Initially, as the research involved working with children, it was important to attain informed consent from both child participants and their parents. The role of concerned adults as 'custodians of the best interests of children' is complex, as adults are situated as both controllers

of childhood discourses and actors within them (Cherry, 2010, p.553). 'Good parenting' is an example of discourses embedded in socially constructed commonsense understandings (Aries, 1962). As earlier stated, within the community of this school, there was a body of (typically) white, western, English-speaking, middle-class parents who appeared to be of the opinion that there was a shared commonsense understanding that computer games were bad for children.

In order to display their 'good parenting' discourse, many of the parents in this group thought it was best to deny permission or at least to dissuade their children from joining the research project, even if the child wished to do so. An amusing paradox was that, as a fellow member of this English-speaking parent community, it was often assumed that I would share the view that digital play was 'bad' for children, and in fact confirm the parent's 'good parenting' in having taken this stand. Often conversations about the research were accompanied by gestures like head nodding, to indicate that as similar people we would be in agreement over these inherent dangers.

Resistance was displayed in a number of ways. In one case I spoke to a parent who claimed that her daughter, Ruth, would not want to take part in the research as she was not really interested in computer games. It appears that this assertion was in fact not true; Ruth's mother perceived however that it was important to conform to the community position that digital game-play was not in the best interests of children.

Ruth's mother was very focussed on her own career and, connected with this, courting the approval of the school community was of high importance to her. The realities of how Ruth occupied herself in her free time were either unknown to her mother or were simply, for reasons that can only be speculated about, tolerated. Whilst Ruth was not permitted to become an official participant in the study, she in fact became an important silent partner to the research. Over the course of the study the many hours Ruth spent playing 'Minecraft' impacted on the life of her friend Caroline, who was a participant of the research. Caroline and Ruth spent a lot of out-of-school time together, but the nature of their play changed as Ruth became more and more involved with her digital life, whilst Caroline retained her fondness for their previously favoured outdoor pursuits. Caroline spent much time discussing the changing course of their relationship with me, and her confusion about Ruth's behaviour. I have no doubt that Ruth would have been an eager research participant, if her mother had not been wary of the effect of Ruth's participation on her image as a parent.

The example of Adina and her son Brett, discussed at the start of this article, illustrates a more typical way in which parental resistance to the project was displayed. Adina was fearful of the implications of her two teenage sons experiencing 'too much' digital experience. As a part of this, her intelligent Grade 6 son was determined to have a 'very full workload' as an excuse for non-participation in the research. In fact, the workload given at the school

is tailored to be comfortable for students who are still building their English language competencies. For Brett, as with the majority of children in this community subsection of competent English speakers, the work is quite manageable and such parents frequently ask staff to give their children more homework. Even though she would not allow her son to participate in the research, Adina agreed to be interviewed about her son's digital life, from her perspective. This quote highlights the lengths Adina goes to to restrict the time her sons play digital games:

> I have boys that are probably more gamers than sporty. I would on occasions tell them to go outside and I would lock the back door and say, "Play..."

In contrast to Adina's action of locking her sons out of the house, another 'good parenting' discourse frequently encountered within this particular community was the value of using a negotiating style with children, and a resistance to imposing decisions about what they can or cannot do. There was a tendency for parents to suggest that their children were making their own independent decisions not to participate in the study (as with Ruth) while anecdotally their children were reporting different versions of the situation. An example of this unclear ownership of decisions can be found in the following section of an email correspondence in which a father explains that it had taken time for his son to accept the family decision not to let him participate in the project's computer club:

> I am very sorry of being so late to answer, but I had big discussions with my son concerning his participation to the activity. The problem is that he likes very much playing electronic games and he is trying to dedicate the most possible of his free time to this. Of course, I know that this is the usual problem with most of the boys at this age, but from my side I try to reduce this time (not always with big success). From our discussions I understood that x saw the Computer Club as an opportunity to play, one more hour per week, electronic games. For not bothering you with many details, it was just yesterday (I didn't want to impose him anything. I wanted the decision to be his own) that he accepted not to participate to the activity.

In this situation it may be confidently inferred that the decision not to participate in one more hour of 'computer play' per week, was in fact imposed on the child and eventually accepted by the child, rather than it being 'his own' decision.

Understanding and reinforcing parental positions

Media panics about the dangers of the internet have been well documented (Buckingham, 2000). The parent of one of the research participants, brought up such a media-influenced conversation at the start of our interview, even though

it was not directly connected to the opening question. The agitation in her movements and the fast, emotional manner of her speech, demonstrated the very grave concerns that she held. She was obviously very anxious about the possible long-term dangers of internet game-play for her family:

> ...the only thing that I'm thinking about computer games, I mean you see a child of 17 or 18 is going through a school and killing people, and they have done this computer games in the computer and I mean these are critical situations and you think what your son is doing on the internet.

I already knew the parent's fear of digital technologies in her children's lives, having been a teacher to one of the sons. This particular family had been in the school for a number of years and there is the possibility that the parent had discussed these issues with numerous members of the teaching staff over time.

While I have seen little evidence of the school promoting a positive attitude about the potential benefits of technology-based play and learning, despite the evident increase of its use in the school classrooms, there have been official and non-official negative messages about digital technologies disseminated. At the start of every year, the primary school technology support teacher produces a family guide to internet safety for all students. While this is a responsible undertaking, this action reinforces the notion of danger to already worried parents. Non-official negative messages from the school are also evident.

The 'toxic childhood' media initiative promoted by the mainstream English press, and surrounding the text of the same name by Sue Palmer (2006), was read, discussed and promoted to both staff and parents by a close-knit and influential group of teaching staff when the book was released. This action gave institutional authority to this crisis argument, and its circulation via classroom-door conversations gave it an emotion-fuelled credence. This stance also vindicated the personal resistance of many of these teachers to develop their own digital skills. A confident and progressive user of technology in the classroom discussed the conflicts he felt within his collegial community:

> I'm finding, I guess there's a bit of a tension with using these tools in this particular environment at the school. I think there's a lot of, you know, there's a lot of folks that are scared to use the technology umm, there's a tension point there. I don't know if you want to talk about that ... how will I put it? Well, I think there's a feeling that if some teachers are using these 21st century tools in the classroom and outside of the classroom, umm there's a feeling that there is a pressure to conform, so that every teacher is using a particular platform and some teachers aren't comfortable with using these tools or its just another thing for them to learn.

These tension points need to be addressed through a thoughtful promotion of good teaching practice rather than a pressure to conform, as the use of

technologies in the classroom is, in itself, not necessarily indicative of good practice.

Classroom observations

I made a total of 38 classroom observations. These were divided between nine teachers – six from sole-teacher primary classrooms and three from single-subject secondary classrooms. My prime purpose was to observe the actions and interactions of my student research participants. The classroom observations were mostly undertaken without prior warning and participating teachers had agreed that I could come and observe classroom work, It eventually became my habit to turn up at the door and ask if it was convenient if I observed the class at that moment in time.

Technologies were used in 60% of the classes I observed. These were interactive whiteboards, which all classrooms are equipped with; the classroom computers that are found in primary classrooms; and laptops, which are kept in mobile trolleys and can be booked by a teacher to use at a particular time. I classified the use of these technologies into two broad categories, passive and production. Passive use includes such activities as watching films and viewing websites, images or documents; productive includes researching, and writing/creating.

Two of the nine teachers I observed used no technological tools for teaching in the classes I witnessed (although both teachers spent the dominant amount of their time working on their personal laptops during these lessons whilst their classes carried on with set tasks). Three of the nine teachers used technologies in all lessons observed, although, this does not imply that these lessons were of a higher quality. While one teacher used technology for a variety of reasons and was actively teaching and guiding students during lessons, the other two were presenting more poorly-prepared lessons.

For example in one secondary class I observed, the teacher wished to show the class a map but had not previously bookmarked a page to display. As he searched for a map, the Google Image search page visible to all on the interactive whiteboard, he muttered to himself, "which one will I trust?" This comment struck me as showing some disrespect to the faith that parents must place in teachers, given their fears of this 'dangerous' medium. There also seemed to be a frequent use of digital texts as time fillers. For example, one teacher showed three episodes of *Horrible Histories* in a row during one 40-minute lesson, while the other showed extensive clips from popular films (*Gladiator* and *The Life of Brian*) during two subsequent lessons on Roman history. There was little teaching surrounding these viewings. In both cases, more productive ways of using Web 2.0 capacities may have been utilised. The extensive use of technology in these two classrooms also seemed in contrast to the many reports I received from parents and children about the restriction of access to the internet and to digital technologies in the majority of family homes.

So every now and then I go and switch off the wifi in the house. Yeah, so we try to have a balanced approach. (Adina)

Conclusion

To support the literacy practices of today's children and prepare them for their digital lives in the future, parents and teachers need to work together. Children themselves are aware of the important role that technologies hold in their lives, and their informal play can in part be seen as their own preparation for this changing face of literacy (Hannaford, 2012). In the process of recruiting participants for my research into children's digital lives, I spoke with many parents and was struck by the wariness with which much of this group approached anything to do with technology, digital game-play and the internet.

Robson and Butler use the term 'tectonic plates' to describe groups that live in informal segregation rather than cultural integration. Marsh (2009) takes up this imagery with reference to the 'tectonic plates of home and school', suggesting that children often are more progressive digital producers and consumers in their home than at school (p201). I agree with this, but in addition, in this recent experience I found that in certain sectors of this affluent international school community, there was a noticeable divide between home and school with reference to attitudes about technology and digital culture, with more consistent concern about the possible negative implications of these being shown by the parent community. This divide needs to be addressed. How to manage this effectively in a culturally diverse community needs extensive thought and discussion.

The unique community of an international school, often experiences limited exposure to parenting discourses. Two main areas of such information are local friendship groups, often based around the children's friends or national allegiance ties, and the official school body. Whilst in this school there was some official communication with parents over digital play, it leaned towards the danger discourses only.

Additional official texts framed by a more positive position about the benefits of digital play might also be provided. Also, parents should be offered clear and transparent information about the ways in which some staff are incorporating digital technologies into their classrooms and curriculum, to help build a shared vision across the whole school community including staff, of good practice and ways to prepare students for their digitally active futures.

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