‘Primary teachers' practices in a demonstration school: The pedagogical uses of websites’

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In recent years, technology has cemented its place in society as an artefact of our social world and in education the pattern of Internet use has the potential to change the professional identity formation, individually and collectively, of teachers who use it.

Because teachers are accountable to school councils, governments, colleagues, parents and the community at large for the students in their care, researching how the Internet is used and revealing the individual rationales that underpin some of the day to day choices we as teachers make is important.

This study of the teachers’ discursive practices, carried out in an Information Communication and Technology demonstration school, seeks to understand their site practices in the context of reality. Each of us has a pedagogical past or ‘historical self’ that acts as an agent on all we say and do in everyday life. The differences in how teachers interpret and utilize Internet websites may reflect to what degree this plays an ‘active’ role in determining a teacher’s classroom practices.

Teachers might therefore use this study, in the future, as an analytical tool to rethink their personal educational journey in terms of a transformational model based on ‘culture and agency’.

Introduction

In recent years, technology has cemented its place in society as an artefact of our social world. In education, the pattern of Internet use has the potential to change the professional identity formation, individually and collectively, of teachers who use it. The introduction, integration and the development of technology as a teaching and learning tool in the primary classroom has over the past decade profoundly altered the ‘tools of the trade’.

I undertook this study of teacher practices in an Information Communication and Technology (ICT) demonstration school in order to better understand how individual teachers have responded to the technology made available to them over the past decade. Although my specific area of interest is primary science and the Internet websites used to underpin this project were directed towards the teaching of primary science, I believe the manner in which the Internet websites were utilized by the teachers in my study is reflected in other curriculum areas and is relevant to teaching practices in general.

As individuals, human beings are capable of perceiving the same piece of information differently from each other. In the classroom, the occurrence of varied student responses to an apparently straightforward single instruction is proof of this. This unique identity is a characteristic that stems from an ‘historical self’; shaped by a lifetime of personal experiences, beliefs and knowledge and it is this pedagogical past that acts as an agent on all we say and do throughout life. The differences in how teachers interpret and utilize Internet websites may reflect to what degree this ‘historical self’ plays an ‘active’ role in determining
a teacher’s classroom practices. To this end I employed Positioning Theory as the analytical research tool.

The concept of Positioning Theory, developed by (Davies & Harré, 1990) attends to the ever changing dynamics of social relationships where participants actions; in this instance the classroom practices of the teachers using the Internet, can be understood through the analysis of their day to day conversations or discursive practices.

An individual teacher’s professional identity is a direct response, either active or passive, to the ever changing co-construction of social life. A social framework that includes the possible relationships the teacher has with the technology itself and the degree of influence his/her historical self holds sway, at any moment. The acts/actions being played out in the social world in which a teacher exists, have the power to ‘position’ that person with respect to the broader social structure. What teachers say, in conversation, about what it is they actually do, at a given moment in time and space, enables the researcher to better understand the reality of their professional world.

Literature Review

Computers in education – a contested territory

Today’s school children are used to regular changes in ICT. It has become an accepted part of their daily lives. As a consequence, access to the Internet is commonplace in most classrooms. Behind the scenes, however, the use and validity of ICT in the classroom has been a highly contested issue. Discussing the impact that technology has had on education, (Cuban, 2001) in his book, ‘Oversold and underused: Computers in the classroom’, questions the basic motives and principles underpinning the usage of technology in schools today. While acknowledging that technology reflects a cultural shift in society, Cuban postulates that many teachers’ ‘commitment to using technology in their classrooms often grew from their deep-seated belief in the importance of technology in their children’s futures’ (Cuban, 2001, p. 57) rather than a belief that computer technology was a core necessity for learning. He goes on to describe software packages, complete with their clear instructions to schools in a misguided belief that the teacher’s only requirement, or duty, is to integrate the program into the daily class routine.

Cuban’s fieldwork showed that teachers used computers (the Internet included) far more extensively as a personal planning tool, rather than as an active element of classroom instruction. He claims that many teachers have had computers forced upon them by over zealous administrators. Cuban also states that technology has often been introduced without consideration for the personal levels of expertise, the individual educational requirements and the levels of technical support needed.

The relationship between teacher practices and the use of technology in the classroom

The research that has promoted the Internet and its potential as a teaching/learning tool over the past decade, has caught the attention of (Wallace, 2004), a researcher with a special interest in how technological development is impacting on classroom practices and professional development. Wallace appears to support Cuban’s views. All too often, Wallace claims, experienced teachers, confronted with the implementation of the Internet, suddenly ‘felt themselves thrust into the role of novices’ (Wallace, 2004, p. 482). Wallace alludes to the sheer quantity, and variety, of resources available to teachers once they are connected to the
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Internet. Citing the example, relevant to my research, of a teacher, using the web to access information, for a science lesson, she observes that teachers do not necessarily need to have a deep understanding of the technology. What they must have, however, is a ‘specific knowledge of how this technology can be used with these students to accomplish this purpose’ (Wallace, 2004, p. 450).

Wallace asserts that ‘the Internet shapes and is shaped by classroom practices’ (Wallace, 2004, p. 447). In Wallace’s view, how the Internet is ultimately used by teachers, as an affordance (Gibson, 1979), depends ‘on how they position themselves with respect to the affordances’ (Wallace, 2004, p. 447).

Defending a similar viewpoint, (Lim, 2004) states that ‘the use of the web has become an essential part of teaching and learning in Australian schools. Nevertheless, many students lack the knowledge of how to evaluate the reliability of web-sourced information’ (Lim, 2004, p. 38). Although his article pertains to secondary school students, it targets the learned habits of students from primary schools. Students who may well have had their first learning experiences with ICT whilst at primary school under the guidance of teachers who may not have had the necessary skills in place to properly instruct students in how to use the Internet effectively. Lim suggests that the origins of these inadequacies may be rooted in funding and/or other staffing issues at the institutional level.

The Internet, as a tool or artefact of our social world, can be viewed as the means by which a myriad of visual and textual cultural resources can be accessed and there seems to be a popular assumption that the vast majority of teachers now utilize the Internet as a teaching/learning resource. As researchers for the Apple Classrooms of Tomorrow (ACOT), (Sandholtz, Ringstaff, & Dwyer, 1997) viewed the Internet as a teaching/learning resource that had the capacity to change social reality. In recognizing this, Sandholtz et al. believed technology as a ‘strong tool’ in the classroom. They qualified this by stating that ‘teachers must change the way they teach ... teachers need to become facilitators’ (Sandholtz et al., 1997, p. 174).

If the utilization of the Internet is a reflection of teaching practices and if these practices are still firmly rooted in the past; both pedagogically and historically, then the advent of technology in schools frames a new challenge; a challenge to teachers to become agents of social change. But these views of the technologically minded will be at times at odds with school purposes and policies already in place.

**How is this school responding to its responsibilities and duties?**

It must be remembered that the school in which this study took place has been deliberately set up to invent the methods for others to follow. For this reason, the teacher has to be studied in the context of his or her social world. The Internet, for instance, needs to be studied as a tool or artefact of that world (Miettinen, 2006), if we are to gain a deeper understanding in the context of the educational process unfolding within. How an individual relates to the technology in question will ultimately affect that individual’s site practices (Schatzki, 2002).

The school ensures that teachers are all trained or ‘physically educated’ in the necessary technological methodology. However, one must keep in mind that, initially, these teachers were engaging with the unknown and therefore the necessity to become familiar with the newly introduced ‘tools of the trade’ may have affected their response and/or agency.
According to Schatzki, ‘social orders are thus the arrangements of people, artefacts, organisms, and things through and amid which social life transpires, in which these entities relate, occupy positions, and possess meaning’ (Schatzki, 2002, p. 22). The agency/actions of teachers are an integral element of a school’s social order. Teachers’ actions are often ultimately echoed in the deeds of our students. Understanding how a teacher identifies with the Internet, as an artefact, is significant if we are to better understand the social practices of this demonstration school.

Schatzki argues that a teacher’s site-based view of a social world encompasses and can be expected to reflect his/her private pedagogical history as well as cultural order and ‘practices’, providing that they fall within the parameters of a stable and understood code of practice. However, Schatzki’s practice theory gives little attention to the broader reality of social change and the ensuing intellectual adjustments involved. This school had its basic site components shaped by external expectations. As a consequence, Schatzki’s site-based ontology will not inform the full analysis of teachers’ stories.

The responsibilities of teachers

My attempt to understand ‘how and why’ teachers utilize Internet websites assumes that teachers ‘are capable of exercising choice’ (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 35) and, indeed, are not only actively responding to the structures that are in place but also contributing to the social construction of knowledge. If this is the case, the notion of personal agency must be considered. As an exponent of the ‘postculturalist research paradigm’ (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 35), Harré supports this view that each individual contributes to the situation in terms of intentionality as a representation of their active agency. He perceives learning to be a social interaction in which language is a crucial part of the game. This discursive psychological approach looks closely at the conversations of those involved in order to clarify, through the ascription of grammar, how each person perceives him or herself in relation to their social world. People ‘are constantly engaged in positioning themselves and others. The concrete forms of positioning differ according to the situation in which they occur’ (Harré & van Langenhöve, 1999, p. 30).

Teachers’ responses to the structures that are in place there

Howarth explores the notion of personal agency observing that ‘communities have certain representations imposed on them’ (Howarth, 2001, p. 233) and that ‘no representation is unchallengeable’ (Howarth, 2001, p. 233). Every individual and every sub-community that may develop, within the institution, has the right to contest this. ‘Communities connect personal histories, individual loyalties and private attachments, as well as embody cultural practices, shared meanings and common values. Communities provide the basis for many of the cultural aspects of social psychological phenomena – shared differences, individuality and agency’ (Howarth, 2001, p. 227). In schools, teachers see themselves as active agents for change in children’s learning. An individual’s capacity to express communal powers by defending or challenging a representation, points to his or her standing at any given point in time within that particular community.

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1 Schatzki defines and differentiates between order and practice. He defines orders as ‘arrangements of entities’ (Schatzki, 2002, p. 22) - for example, people, artefacts and things, whereas ‘practices are organized activities’ (Schatzki, 2002, p. 22).

2 In contrast to Theodore Schatzki who conceived that ‘to be “positioned” is to take up a place among other things, a place that reflects relations among the things involved’ (Schatzki, 2002, p. 19). Harré’s positioning theory attends to the speakers’ psychological locations in symbolic interactions in discursive practices.
How teachers, in this demonstration school position themselves with, and use, Internet websites affords us a social representation of their chosen identity in this school. Their practices also provide us with an insight into the underlying social nuances and interactions that influence and shape these identities (Bailyn, 2002).

**Methodology**

**The framing of an ontological study**

I am interested in the interaction of teacher and material agency, both personal and social, and the semiotic interactions in everyday conversations that shaped both teachers’ identities and organizational practices. This research study looks ‘to the specific, to understand in the particular something of the world in general’ (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 149).

To fully understand site practices in the context of reality, Harré argues that we must ‘drop our theories of what might be going on, and to look at what people are doing, in context, and in the full concreteness of their situations’ (Harré, 1995, p.136). This then is an ontological study exploring basic meanings. The ‘day-to-day goings on’ (Harré, 1995, p. 136) of each individual teacher, as he or she exists as a functioning entity, within the context of the school is the ‘reality’ of which Harré speaks.

This ontological focus in the research enables me to consider how individual teachers construct their identity around their practices with the two websites in question and within the broader framework of the school, itself. This group of teachers has an extensive range of technological resources and Internet websites that can be integrated into their team’s curriculum planning.

**The social identity of a demonstration school**

Schools are communities but this school is socially represented as a particular type of demonstrating community. The shared identity of the teachers constitutes their everyday practice both intentionally and unintentionally. The question of how working at such a demonstration school becomes meaningful and maintain meaning for the individual (Howarth, 2001) is also vitally important in this study.

Harré observes that ‘the common material object, a non-living individual that occupies space and time …[in this case the computer and Internet websites]… is capable of interacting with human beings’ (Harré, 2002, p. 22). He further suggests that whether the material object ‘is passive or active is largely story-related’ (Harré, 2002, p. 23). In other words, how a teacher responds to the technology, as an artefact in the social world, is carried in the storyline of that individual’s conversations. The public and private storylines are the conversational interviews held with individual teachers involved in the research study. The diagram, below, is representative of this in that it seeks to visually explain the probable tensions that exist within a community in relation to what is actually occurring.
Figure 1  Harré s Position/Act-action/Storyline Mutually Determining Triad (Harré & van Langenhöve, 1999)

**Positioning Theory and the conversational interview**

‘An interview is a conversation in which two people talk about a theme of mutual interest’ (Kvale & Steinar, 1996).

The simple act of the conversation empowers each participant with a degree of agency; the power to speak on behalf of themselves and with purpose. In this particular instance, the conversations reported involve two teachers from a common community of practice conversing about what it is they do and why they think they do it! Positioning Theory is used to examine the dynamics of these relationships. Harré advocates that the storyline personifies the joint construction of how an individual positions him/herself with respect to the social structure.

My research attempts to portray an accurate view of teacher practices in a technology rich school environment. Prior to this study, I had enjoyed a long and close relationship with the teachers involved in the research, and this enriched the conversations that enabled me to obtain authentic dialogue.

How and why teachers utilize Internet websites assumes that teachers ‘are capable of exercising choice’ (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 35). In doing so, Harré argues that they are not only actively responding to the structures that are in place but are also contributing to the social construction of knowledge.

This study looks at how each individual teacher constructs their identity around their practices using two contrasting styles of Internet websites; one directive and one exploratory in style.

**The dynamics of social relationships**

Harré suggests that people operate within the four quadrants of self; the private/public, the individual/collective. Positioning Theory is used to describe the dynamics of these relationships. The ‘available acts’ as perceived by different individuals, create the story-lines. Harré believes that people behave in the manner they do because in the conversation they position themselves, and others. In doing so, they afford us the psychological spaces to respond. For this reason, the group hierarchy is an important element of Positioning Theory. How the individual perceives, and is perceived by, the group, has agency that carries weight within the school community.
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Figure 2  Harré’s recognition of the conversation’s position between the public and the private and the individual and the collective, (Fawns, 2005)

Human agency also implies that individuals have and do make choices. The word ‘choice’ essentially suggests that one is entirely free to choose independently of any other influence. However, in reality, this may not be so. The process of ‘decision making entails the personal, yet moves beyond the personal to larger interactional matters … from an internal speech … to a communally based, socio-political conversation’ (Carbaugh, 1995).

‘Pronoun vocabulary’ as an analytical tool

Each of the six teachers involved in the study discussed with me, in recorded individual conversational interviews of approximately forty-five minutes in duration, aspects of their day-to-day teaching experiences using Internet websites. Although the focus of the websites was aimed at the teaching of Primary Science, it was envisaged that the dialogue would cross the bounds of other curriculum areas. The interviews were of a conversational nature and teachers were encouraged to talk rather than answer formal questions. Each interview was then transcribed and returned to the participant in question for comment and/or authentication before being analyzed for common and/or contrasting themes.

By looking at the transformation of the overall conversation and analyzing pronoun grammars such as ‘it, you, I, us and we’, that are naturally located within the conversation (Mulhauser & Harré, 1990) I was able to follow changes in agency within the dialogue. It was intended that the narratives would reveal how individual teachers see, or ‘position’, themselves in relation to both the technology at their disposal and the teaching community in which they function. From this, the perceived rights and duties of an individual and the sense of ‘oughtness’ (Linehan & Mc Carthy, 2000) can be gauged.

Whether we are aware of it or not, each of us is consciously or unconsciously responding to a range of complex issues. Issues such as moral obligation, accountability, duty of care, self-confidence, time management, availability of funding and need for group acceptance.

Each ‘snapshot’ of dialogue had the potential to expose some of the ‘real life’ community tensions that confront these teachers with regards to their teaching practices.
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Authenticity and ethical issues

This research study aims to present an authentic view of the practices in the school. In discussing certain features pertaining to qualitative research studies, Eisner (1991) speaks of ‘the self as an instrument’ (Eisner, 1991, p. 33). ‘The way in which we [the researchers] see and respond to a situation, and how we interpret what we see, will bear our own signature’ (Eisner, 1991, p. 34). Eisner recognizes that it is the researcher’s role, as far as possible, to present meanings, as they were jointly constructed in the dialogue, to present an account of a situation from the person/agent/actor’s perspective, not to judge the situation.

I am not, and can never be, transparent in the research study. Because I entered each and every interview with my own personal views, the interpretation of any conversation is always at risk of being misinterpreted. Reporting, as dialogue, exposes such unconscious bias to the reader. I was well aware that personal interpretations could colour the data and lead to a lack of authenticity. For this reason the collaborative agreement struck with the teachers is less of a ‘data extraction exercise’ (Wagner, 1997, p. 17) and more of a clinical partnership or co-learning agreement.

Discussion

Technology as an artefact of a social world

Harré observes that ‘the common material object, a non-living individual that occupies space and time … [in this case the computer and Internet websites]… is capable of interacting with human beings’ (Harré, 2002, p. 23) and vice versa. Harré defines these tools as the ‘material stuff’ (Harré, 2002, p. 23) in a classroom. According to Harré, a teacher’s professional responses to, and interactions with, Internet websites at any particular point in time, positions not only the teacher with respect to agential power, but also imparts the material object with a comparable degree of agency.

Agency versus structure: intention or necessity

Teachers are accountable to school councils, governments, their colleagues, parents and the community at large for the students in their care. Professional responsibility is both complex and multi-faceted. The presence of the Internet, as a tool or artefact of our social world, does not necessarily signify that it will be used in accordance with the school’s public ethos, or, if indeed, it will significantly alter a teacher’s practices. It may simply be that, in some instances, teachers have ‘repackaged’ old practices in the guise of technological know-how.

Davies and Harré (1990) argue, ‘stories are located’ (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46) within a number of different discourses, and thus vary dramatically in terms of the language used, the concepts, issues and moral judgements made. The teachers’ storylines reveal how individuals, like actors on a stage ‘present themselves as agents or patients’ (Harré, 1995, p. 136) depending on the ‘role’ they are acting out at any particular time.

In analyzing the conversations, ‘using the notion of positioning as a contribution to the understanding of personhood’ (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46) it became evident that although this group of teachers shared a common professional space and were closely connected with respect to the technological experiences they had had as a consequence of the school’s ethos, their individual practices differed significantly.
The use of pronoun vocabulary and social agency

Harré suggests that most educationalists, including teachers, are generally behaviourists. The nature of their profession quite possibly entrenches them into this line of thinking. The exposure and understanding of individual rationales that underpin some of the day to day choices we as teachers make as to how ICT is used in the primary school classroom today, may give us a broader understanding of human life and enable us to view teaching practices from a different perspective.

The use of the ‘first person’ pronoun I, in a conversation, is an expression of commitment and suggests personal agency on the part of the user, while the use of you signals a psychological distancing from responsibility. The ‘royal we, as in, ‘We prefer these websites …’on the other hand, may assign responsibility to a higher power, thus signaling abdication from any personal responsibility. During the course of a conversation, an unintentional shrug of the shoulder followed by a comment such as, ‘Well, that's the way it is!’ may convey to the listener a great deal about what ‘ought’ to be happening and what is actually happening. Apart from locating the speaker as a patient in the conversation, the dialogue also reveals how the individual has positioned him/herself as part of an older institutionalized practice with respect to his/her perceived ‘rights and duties’ (Davies and Harré, 1999, p. 35) within the broader framework of this teaching community.

Progress, as a consequence of change

Goodman (1995) argues that ICT has produced change without difference in conservative teaching methods but ‘social progress’ implies change and the journey this demonstration school has made, over the past decade, may be hailed proof of this. Government and school policies can be modified, new programs can be formulated and equipment purchased, but it is the extent to which educational institutions, school communities, and/or individual teachers, embrace or resist change (Miettinen, 2006), that will ultimately determine future teaching practices.

‘Studying the dynamics of the relations between teachers’ personal practical and professional knowledge’ (Clandinin, 1996, p. 25), affords the researcher an intimate glimpse of individuals actively constructing their social world, at a given point in time. Not only can we develop a realistic understanding as to how a teacher relates to or engages with, a particular website, we also gain the capacity to relate to what is being valued at that moment. Positive reflection on the timbre of ‘self’ and fellow colleagues, in any teaching community, should be seen as a valued opportunity. The primary teachers, in this study, certainly valued the opportunity to reflect on their working life. It enabled them to reflect on the prediction and/or management of social change in the broader teaching community through the experiences of their ‘lived experiences’ at this school.

Taking responsibility as a means of moving forward

The utilization of Internet websites as an artefact or tool in the teaching affords the teaching fraternity many opportunities. However, for this implementation to be truly effective, teachers need to view learning technologies as an affordance over which they have a responsibility.

Harré and his followers argue that ‘taking responsibility for an act is something I do, not something I know or discover about myself’ (Harré, 1995, p. 124). The ‘actually’ of what is being afforded when people and artefacts are brought together, is dependent upon how an individual responds as either an agent or patient. Harré contends that by ‘studying the ways
we present ourselves as agents by discursively embedding our actions in the agentic framework, we must not fail to attend to the ways we have of presenting ourselves as patients’ (Harré, 1995, p. 122) and the social reality of who, or what dictates the use of technology in this demonstration school has its origins firmly rooted in the social relationships embedded as pronoun grammars in everyday discourse.

Each of us must continually ask ourselves:

- what can ICT do for me and my students
- how can ICT enhance my teaching practices
- what changes must I make to my current teaching practices in order to facilitate change?

The social and psychological aspect of 'making sense' of one's world is extremely complex and has connotations on a number of different ontological levels, at both the community level and the personal level. Each individual is responding to a fickle interplay of the moral, contractual and professional obligations and each response is both causal and affectual, within the context of its setting.

The teachers at this school are required to demonstrate new educational rules. This approach emphasizes the significance of embodied skills and 'know-how' as well as the tacit nature of conventional rules and knowledge related to them. The rules applying to using the new technology, like the i-Cam, are emergent in the discourse of accountivity. This research study assumes that the teachers justify their actions, after the fact, by referring to culturally available legitimizing 'accounts'. This thesis deals with accounts rather than representations and these are shown as being dialogically produced.

Teachers at this school can demonstrate, both to one another, first, and to others, later, how to engage in the new language game of teaching under new rules with the new tools. The websites have to enter the teachers' socially constructed purposes.

This study demonstrates a means of understanding what agency would be needed to transform prevailing routines and create new activities (Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005). In their discussions of discovery learning’ in science, often the teachers function more as patients than agents, in relation to the technology. The collaborative creation of specific uses for particular websites, as mediating artefacts to cognitive models, is essential for organizational learning and for the creation of new joint activities.

Individual teachers at this school show, in various settings and to varying degrees, that they understand that websites can be seen as scaffolding a wide range of broader experiences. Internet websites can frame new meanings for scientific investigation and develop new views of the application of scientific knowledge and alternative forms of engagement with the world of science. Commonly, however, the teachers abdicate responsibility to the technology and the child, or the family.
Conclusion

Nowadays, ICT is routinely used in most primary school classrooms, offering all teachers a wealth of educational experiences across all areas of the curriculum. However, as the data in my research study shows, many teachers, even in an ICT demonstration school, do not actively pursue the opportunities afforded them, preferring instead to adhere to teaching practices firmly rooted in their pedagogical pasts.

Those that do, or believe they do, often follow a constrained path; unwittingly adapting technology to meet current classroom practices rather than venturing forth to explore and forge new forms of methodology.

Although individual school policies, funding and time management issues are commonly cited as causal factors, the origin of the problem may be far more complex and deeply rooted. Schools, as a facet of the broader educational systems provide the framework in which we conduct our professional lives. As individuals, each of us is subject to a complex fusion of personal and social agency on a daily basis and it is the ultimate choices we make as a result of this that determines our actions or agency. We position others or are positioned by others!

To be actively agential, teachers in the twenty-first century must not only acknowledge and embrace technology; they must learn to exploit it! Rather than passively viewing technology as a tool to make a teacher's life easier, we must continually strive to devise ways to employ ICT innovatively; not only in the area of primary science but across the broader curriculum.

In our professional role, we encourage students to be risk-takers; to use their initiative, regardless of the consequences! As students of the technological age, teachers, too, must pursue this line of thinking if we are to utilize ICT to its full potential. We must forge a new professional identity in which educationalists and individual classroom teachers alike are actively agential in co-constructing an ethos of 'current best practice' for the children in our care.

Teachers might therefore use this study, in the future, as an analytical tool to rethink their personal educational journey in terms of a transformational model based on 'culture and agency'.

References


