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To cite this Article Hodge, Sue and Anderson, Bill(2007) ‘Teaching and learning with an interactive whiteboard: a teacher's journey’, Learning, Media and Technology, 32: 3, 271 — 282
To link to this Article DOI: 10.1080/17439880701511123
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17439880701511123

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Teaching and learning with an interactive whiteboard: a teacher’s journey

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A self-study methodology is used to explore the impact of introducing interactive whiteboard technology to a primary school classroom. Several key insights, described as ‘nodal moments’, provided the impetus for the teacher to review her practice, reconsider her students’ learning approaches and explore the relationship between the introduction of a new technology and the teaching and learning that was occurring in her classroom. In particular, she considers the nature of engagement and the ways in which the technology initially moved her away from an active pedagogy.

Introduction

While visiting a primary school in South Auckland the teacher/researcher collaborating on this research (Sue) viewed an interactive whiteboard (IWB) being used by the Library Media Specialist. She was instantly excited by the technology’s possibilities in her own classroom. Her first reaction was: ‘Now there are no barriers to learning!’ Sue had 12 years teaching experience, was teaching a Year 2/3 composite class (children aged 6–8) in a city primary school at the time of the research, and had felt the frustrations of having 28 pupils and 1 classroom computer for the children to practice their skills on and present their work. She used students as computer ‘monitors’ and ‘snowball’ teaching by confident children to complete tasks using the computer. Her school had no computer suite or pods of movable computers for classroom use.

Sue was struck by:

● The sheer size and presence of the screen that irresistibly commanded attention.
● The possibilities afforded for teachers to develop and reinforce curriculum understandings in a visual way.
The usefulness of the IWB’s gallery resources to cut out boring preparation.
- The way the large screen could be used to teach Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills speedily.
- The way a teacher could teach computer applications effectively, with everyone being able to view the screen at once.

Video footage of the IWB experience captured her original reaction and enthusiasm. She purchased her own IWB and data projector for school use. As the first teacher in her school to use an IWB, Sue felt it was important to research, through self-study methodology, the successes and difficulties faced in the early adoption of this technology. There were several reasons for this: (1) it would help refine her own teaching; (2) it would help the school decide whether to invest in this technology as a tool for teaching and learning; and (3) it would provide insight into the ways practitioners could maximise the potential of IWBs to enhance learning and minimise or manage any possible negative effects.

In line with the contention of Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) that the aim of self-study is moral—to gain deeper understandings and to ask questions which will be of interest to other educators—Sue’s purpose was, as Bullough and Pinnegar put it, ‘moving scholarship on and practice in teacher education forward and not merely assisting one’s own practice’ (p. 15). The broad research questions Sue asked focused on her practice:

1. What challenges, difficulties and successes have I faced in the establishment of the IWB technology in my classroom?
2. In what ways has IWB use impacted on me as a teacher and in what ways has my pedagogy changed over the course of the year?
3. What are my observations of the IWB’s impact on the learners in my class?

She hoped that the lessons learnt would be more widely applicable.

**Review**

There has recently been remarkable growth in the literature base associated with the use of IWBs in classrooms as the review earlier in this issue notes. Nearly all of this material relates to studies outside New Zealand since, although this technology was launched overseas around 14 years ago, IWBs have only recently gained attention in New Zealand. Much of the writing is not based on empirical research, although recently a number of useful studies (reported in the earlier review article) have been carried out in the UK.

In the IWB-use literature, claims about the efficacy of IWBs in education arise in two main ways. First, IWBs are said to have an impact on the area of learner affect, working in terms of increasing motivation and task engagement. Second, IWBs impact on the nature of resource presentation and on learning processes, potentially affecting the development of thinking skills, encoding and retention of information, and interaction between students. Changes in the nature of teachers’
work and issues such as training and technical problems are discussed to a lesser extent.

Positive changes in student motivation and task engagement associated with IWB use are commonly reported. Kitson et al. (2005, p. 252) reported such changes from research in the US, the UK and Australia, and Smith et al. (2005) noted key reasons for the engagement and motivation of learners and tied these to the effect of multi-media and multi-sensory presentation. In the specific area of teaching second language learners, Gérard et al. (1999) cited Vester (1994) in support of their claim that IWB use created excitement and a positive attitude to learning. Finally, Levy’s work in secondary schools drew on the views of teachers and learners in finding that ‘both learners and teachers perceive a significant role for the IWB in helping to motivate students, focus their attention, and stimulate involvement in whole-class learning’ (2002, p. 16).

Within the literature, classroom IWB use is seen to have a potentially positive impact on several aspects of information processing by students. Levy (2002) argues that IWB use can support the explanation of concepts and ideas and facilitate interaction and activity within the classroom. Gérard et al. (1999) supported the latter assertion arguing that IWB use stimulates oral interaction and the exchange of opinions and ideas (citing Abraham & Liou, 1991; Chapelle et al., 1996). Argument seemingly based on cognitive theories of multimedia learning (for an outline see Moreno & Mayer, 2000) provides support for the value of the multi-modal presentation possibilities inherent in IWB use. Again, Gérard et al. (1999) and Levy (2002, p. 16) provide examples.

Since IWB use may incorporate World Wide Web-based material, or layered IWB presentations, it is useful to record the cognitive difficulties of working with such material. Astleitner and Leutner (1995) identified three problems pertaining to use of unstructured media such as web pages. They are: (1) goal attainment (students can miss important information and spend too much time browsing irrelevant information); (2) spatial disorientation (students may have difficulty with web navigation—the ‘lost-in-hyperspace’ problem); and (3) knowledge acquisition (threatened by learner cognitive overload). The first problem is particularly relevant to web pages; the remaining two problems are of concern for general IWB use unless there is thorough and effective planning.

Some evidence suggests that IWB use assists the organisation and execution of class lessons. In their examination of the use of IWB technology in teaching second-language learners, Gérard et al. (1999) found that the technology assisted teacher’s organisational skills through the function of recording work undertaken on the whiteboard, while Smith et al. (2005) suggest IWBs support teacher’s planning and the development of resources. Solvie (2004) highlights the usefulness of the board in preparing literacy lessons, with component parts easily navigated once the lesson is started. However, she reminds teachers that it is important to keep the ‘focus on literacy and language learning and not on the tool’ and points to the need to ‘model this through my attitude, words and actions’ (p. 4). Glover et al. (2005) echo Solvie’s focus on the pedagogy of IWB. Those authors urge a two pronged approach to pedagogic
change focusing on ‘an interactive approach to learning and teaching and the integration of the technology and media into lesson planning’ (p. 158).

Finally, a particularly noteworthy criticism from Smith et al. (2005) is that although the literature in the field is ‘overwhelmingly positive about the impact and the potential of IWBs, it is primarily based on the views of teachers and pupils’ (p. 91). In their view ‘There is insufficient evidence to identify the actual impact of such technologies upon learning either in terms of classroom interaction or upon attainment and achievement’ (p. 91). However, those authors also call for empirical evidence that will enable the processes of teaching and learning with IWBs to be more fully understood, and suggest as a useful starting point consideration of the reality of the intersection between technical and pedagogical interactivity (p. 101). It is at this intersection that this study is sited.

Method

The methodology employed in this research is distinctly qualitative. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) highlight the debate that exists over the robustness, validity and reliability of qualitative studies. They underscore that the very word ‘qualitative’:

implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on process and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasise the value laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 13)

In terms of validity, the emphasis is not on a ‘single standard of truth’ using the terminology of Ellis and Bochner (2000) but rather a verisimilitude that ‘evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable and possible’ (p. 751). Bullough and Pinnegar have commented on the question of validity (2001, p. 13, citing Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and claimed that the introduction of naturalistic and qualitative methods into education has caused the traditional notion of validity to be redefined as ‘trustworthiness or accuracy’.

On the thorny question of reliability, Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 751) have this to say: ‘Since we always create our personal narrative from a situated location, trying to make our present, imagined future, and remembered past cohere, there’s no such thing as orthodox reliability in autoethnographic research.’

In terms of the third pillar of quantitative research, generalisability, it is critical to remember that in qualitative research this does remain a concern but, as Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 751) suggest, ‘not in the usual sense’. Winograd (2002, p. 349) advises that the aim of this type of research is not the creation of any new claims to knowledge but, rather, a representation of experience so others may ‘imagine their own uses and applications’. Bassey (1999) describes this as fuzzy generalisation, reporting that ‘something has happened in one place and that it may also happen elsewhere … There is an invitation to “try it and see if the same happens for you”’ (p. 52).
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The aim of this autoenthographic study, in the words of Ellis and Bochner, is:

to promote dialogue ... The stories we write put us into conversations with ourselves as well as our readers. In conversation with ourselves, we expose our vulnerabilities, conflicts, choices and values ... In conversation with our readers we use storytelling as a method for inviting them to put themselves in our place. (2000, p. 748)

For the remainder of this ‘Method’ and the ‘Findings’ sections, Sue tells her story.

As a teacher, undertaking self-study in the classroom context for the first time, I have found Bullough and Pinnegar’s (2001) general guidelines on self-study writing to be very valuable and illuminating. Their guidelines clarify the ways in which researchers can ensure their written efforts move from mere private experience to legitimate research.

My study is necessarily value-laden and personal. My aim was to honestly record my experiences and reflect on the experience of using IWB technology. I scrutinised my philosophy of teaching, reflected honestly on conundrums and how my pedagogy was affected over time. The burden of using the technology as often as I could was sometimes excruciating. At other times, I felt euphoric at seeing the learning that was occurring. I experienced times when the teacher–learner roles were completely reversed. I have striven to capture my positive and negative experiences, reflect on these experiences and highlight issues that are important to all practitioners.

Data gathering and analysis

I adopted the following data gathering methods in this study: the capturing of personal experience through journaling (I kept a handwritten journal for three terms); the use of artefacts such as my saved daily lessons; video footage of my first encounter with the use of the IWB technology; and email correspondence with my collaborator discussing issues which became central to my understanding of the effects of the technology on teaching and learning. I used these data as the basis for interpretation of my experiences over the course of three terms (eight months) and to answer the questions I posed at the beginning of the study.

Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 750) recommend the keeping of ‘as many sources and levels of story recorded at different times as possible’. My journal began on Friday, 28 January, when the IWB was installed in my room, and concluded on the last day of term 3, Friday, 23 September. For the first two terms, I strove to record our use of the IWB and noted issues or breakthroughs on a daily basis. I reviewed each day’s recorded lessons on my laptop and added written reflections on issues that had arisen and how my use of the technology was changing. In the third term, I chose instead to review my IWB use at the end of each week and reflect on highlights and new understandings. Key questions and issues inevitably cropped up throughout my journal and I tried to link my reflections back to my research questions or commentary in the literature. Readings I undertook further redirected my thinking and informed my classroom practice.
Email messages about IWB use generated during my data gathering were collected and reviewed. The issues which arose in the course of my frequent communications became part of my entries and reflections in my journal. Each journal entry was carefully read to determine its links to perceived challenges, difficulties or successes, and the various dimensions of these that related to the two broad categories of teaching and learning, throughout the three terms. Themes of experience within these categories were generated and are illustrated from the data in the following section.

Findings

Becoming expert, sharing control

Knowing how to use the IWB well seemed central to using it successfully in the classroom. Finding time to understand the IWB, practice on it and add useful content were constant pressures throughout the three terms. I received a minimum of training at the outset but I had the ‘manual’ and my personal enthusiasm to help me until the first of my four official training sessions.

>I’ve read through the manual but it’s all so much to take in I’ll just go slowly and ease into it with the children. (Sunday, 30 January)

Entries on 4, 7 and 18 February record my attempts to learn to use the IWB, my successes and failures and my desire for training. My first training session was on 7 April. For three hours we explored IWB use. As I noted, ‘the best part was getting more practice at downloading content—we added the “trend-setter” house from the numeracy site’. At the end I noted I was ‘completely mentally drained’.

I constantly put pressure on myself to add content (Thursday, 17 May): ‘Time, time, time—I could take a week off and simply download and save content’. Other entries on 23 June, 17 August reiterate this perceived need. In hindsight, there was no need to become so obsessed with adding content in advance of my needing it. As my skills grew, I proved that I could easily access useful material as needed.

An entry on 17 August hints at my progress in retrieving images to motivate the children:

I showed the children mosaic examples from Ravenna in Italy and we printed some example pictures of mosaic fish. The children were gob smacked … Preparation has become much faster for me I notice I can do it easily in the morning; quite a turnaround from the sweated sessions at home in term one.

As I became more skilled, I turned my attention increasingly to the children’s access to the IWB. In term 3, this question was uppermost in my mind, having realised in the break between terms, the importance of such access. I highlighted this critical point in my journal and noted in Week 1 (Monday, 25 July–Friday, 29 July):

>I’ve made a conscious effort this week to involve the children … Writing on the surface is still problematic … we have had more success with drawing as they make quick sketches quite happily and confidently. We used this technique for responding to poetry.
In the second week of the term the children took turns constructing concrete poems. I recorded: ‘The personal physical engagement by the children has created interest and a very good standard of poetry writing. I cannot recall having such confident poetry writers in year 3 before’.

In Week 4, however, I was still worrying that ‘time and access and student training is still problematic for me’. In Week 5, I observed:

The notable feature of our IWB use this past week has been getting the children writing and recording more and teaching two children how to turn text and numerals into type … KS constructed the 4 time tables and ‘hid’ the answers. He was very pleased with his efforts.

By the end of Week 5, I made the comment: ‘I can see that I have definitely given more hands on control to the children’. Several examples of the children using the board occur in Week 6 of the third term. I was much more proactive in maximising the children’s time on the board and they were more expert in its use.

Engagement and motivation

The IWB intrigued the children in my class. I noted on 4 February: ‘The children have been captivated by the IWB—as soon as they have their eyes on it, it commands complete attention’. In the early days I used it to enhance our Maths games (Friday, 15 April): ‘There is no question that it engages children and they enjoy the interactive nature of the board. Activities can be planned or spontaneous—we love the spinner and timer’. The games seemed to create heightened interest and were memorable partly because of the interactivity involved in using the IWB and the visibility of the tools at our fingertips.

Repeatedly, I commented in my journal about the way my student-teachers or I could make learning novel or tap into the imagination of our learners. Using the World Wide Web to gather art resources was extremely useful for enhancing our learning about art-making (8 April): ‘The Cubist painting for our motivation session proved a hit. … Everything is so much bigger and more exciting than holding a book’.

The strength of the board is that the high quality images draw the viewer into another world. It has more immediacy than a book. It involves, or seems to involve, all the senses … it commands instant attention and engages the viewer. (Friday, 10 June)

In the second and third term, several entries highlight a big personal issue for me—the lengthy time my children were sitting on the mat in term one. I did not appreciate this as an issue at the time I recorded the following (Friday, 15 April): ‘We have neglected handwriting!! Thinking has consumed us and the electronic storybooks are longer and more time consuming than the regular big books’.

An email from my critical friend on 10 May struck the first note of caution about such engagement. I wrote in my journal on Monday, 16 May:

I’ve decided to break sessions into motivation using the board and then small pairs or groups to stimulate talk and exploration. More hands on this term so children don’t sit for too long even if they are seemingly ‘engaged’. Need to find articles on engagement.

On 18 June the issue was still uppermost in my mind:
it is a valid issue for teachers who use this technology to guard against... They should not be used for whole-class behaviour managing. My greatest worry though remains how distracting it could be when I take small groups but to date this has not been a significant issue.

Part of my holiday reflections (11 July) were in response to an article by de Castell and Jenson about new economies of attention. They wrote:

Goldhaber metaphorically construes intense attention as a species of enslavement: Someone who ‘enthrals’ an audience is in a real sense temporarily making the audience members her ‘thralls’—or, slaves. … On this view agency drops out and bewitchment takes over. (Castell & Jenson, 2004, p. 389)

It begged the question I noted in my journal: ‘Did we all become slaves in term one?’ The insight leading to this question was a critical, ‘nodal’ moment in my consideration of IWB use.

Thereafter, I was constantly thinking about engagement and carefully structured the length of time I (or an invited guest) used the IWB. My entries on 29 July and 5 August are interesting: ‘My time-keeping is more focussed and children are not sitting for the lengthy periods they initially were in term 1’ (29 July).

Time on mat—it is obvious that we have lost the initial ‘enslavement’ which affected us in the first part of the year. Motivation sessions or recording sessions are shorter and routines like handwriting have returned. Small groups use the technology successfully yet other tables of children work away at learning tasks without their attention being constantly diverted back to the front. (5 August)

Enhancing learning

The IWB was used to teach ICT skills, thinking skills, software applications, and general learning skills such as note-taking and note-making. The children became more interested in the use of the internet and became very knowledgeable about finding and book marking sites, and mining them for useful information. Before a class trip to a bird sanctuary I experimented with shared reading time:

to learn more about using websites and processing information, I made this week’s big book the Tiritiri Matangi website. I copied the island’s image and book marked the site. We read about the history of the island and generally saw how we could navigate the site, finding the bird list and accessing each bird of interest. (Monday, 20 June)

ICT skills were embedded in this new shared book experience and the children developed comprehension skills and website navigation skills in tandem. We used the IWB’s screen shade tool to effectively limit the size of text to be processed, thus also limiting cognitive overload, and the lost-in-hyperspace problem noted by Chen and Dwyer (2003). We made identification slides that allowed the children to match the bird with its name. This manipulative feature of IWB, which capitalises on ‘ostensiveness’ (Smith et al., 2005) and promotes kinaesthetic learning, does seem to help learners in their knowledge acquisition. Students were well prepared for our excursion.

Thinking skills were infused into learning by the making of Hyerle’s thinking maps (Hyerle et al., 2004) and adding them to my content section in the resource gallery.
(Friday, 5 August): ‘Use of the technology to develop higher order comprehension skills. The use of the Hyerle thinking maps continues everyday, modelling and cementing the children’s comprehension skills’.

Possibly, the most marvellous use of the IWB was in newsboard sessions, part of our oral language and skill-building programme as inquirers. Over the course of the year, I moved from having the children exclusively present current event news to finding a topical news item twice a week which I presented using partial disclosure and visual images to spark discussion and develop predictive thinking. Occasionally, we added a video clip and this stimulated discussion and aided writing:

Another really interesting day using the SMART Board … I had a Herald front page photo of a house that collapsed in the flooding but my student teacher suggesting connecting to the internet and downloading the previous evening’s lead [television] story about the State of Emergency. The class was captivated—no one had seen it so they were extremely interested. (Thursday, 19 May)

Teacher’s work

The software, I used for the IWB, enhanced teaching by being an extremely effective tool in my daily planning. I was able to be prepared in a fraction of the time, with better visual resources from a variety of places. I was more thoughtful when constructing lessons and concept progressions. I focused on presenting learning intentions more consistently and setting up the success criteria charts for the children to construct with me at the appropriate time: ‘Learning intentions this week I started putting these on the notebook pages’ (18 March). Doing this, I commented on 7 April, seemed to make my lessons ‘more detailed’ and helped groups that were working independently. Having all the charts ready each day contributed to smoother lesson flow as well. Also, the realisation of the way the IWB could banish mundane teacher tasks was breath-taking (Friday, 4 February): ‘Fabulous feeling that I’ll never have to rule up lines [again]…’.

At the beginning of Term One, I did not think about recording the day’s work but the first week in April, ‘I was … using the IWB most of the day in different lessons. I’m much more adept at adding pages and setting up for the day’. By the middle of the year, I could confidently get resources that were useful and streamline my daily board set up: ‘I downloaded the place value houses today (from nzmaths.co.nz) success! …’ (Friday, 18 May). ‘Great time saver! The prior preparation of slides helps keep the lesson flowing so no time is wasted going into the galleries’ (Monday, 7 June).

The IWB was also effective for supporting learning in small group sessions or for one-on-one conference work. In June, I was using the IWB much more wisely for individual problem-solving work when children were stuck, for example, in their writing:

The Hyerle thinking maps formats came in useful today for two of the reading groups, for planning our vermi-liquid business … and for 1:1 plot problem solving for one of the students to see the plot events and how they build to her story climax. It did energise her—we printed out a copy for her draft writing book. I am making more use of the board in small group work and in some 1:1 teacher conferencing sessions. I need more ‘hands on’ by the children. (Thursday, 30 June)
Discussion

A major personal success for Sue was becoming a much more confident user as time passed. The four training sessions helped her gain more practical knowledge and this had an exponential effect on the ways she could use the board. Once the technology was ‘tamed’ she was able to move forward and exploit it to better enhance learning by developing the children’s thinking skills, creativity and independence (Smith et al., 2005, p. 99). Daily preparation was less time consuming. The problems referred to by Astleitner and Leutner (1995) were counteracted by teaching specific internet navigation skills and by use of the shade screen to allow children to concentrate on small sections of text at a time. Sue learned that it was not the technology but the way she elected to use it that was important, echoing similar observations by Smith et al. (2005, p. 99) and Solvie (2004).

The introduction of the IWB did, in the early days, impact negatively on her teaching. At the beginning teacher and students were drawn into lengthy whole-class teaching situations until Sue reflected on what was happening and reinstated her usual pedagogical practices. As the year progressed, she developed a more critical appreciation of the way the technology use altered her pedagogy and was in conflict with her philosophy of teaching. Appreciation of the caveat by Glover et al. (2005) for teachers to ‘match’ pedagogy with technology use was a significant part of her personal learning. The trap of reverting to whole-class teaching, with its inherent danger of closing learning down, became evident. ‘One way’ presentations were consciously avoided, along with the trap of falling into the role of teacher ‘sage’ who dispenses knowledge.

As this work and the IWB literature shows, engagement is clearly a positive feature of the technology. However, engagement is also potentially problematic for teachers and learners. The intense attention that Sue witnessed led her to ask questions of the extent to which her students were enslaved by the technology, less able to ‘operate, manage, channel, conserve, and control their own attention as an increasingly required commodity over which they retain and exercise sovereignty’ (de Castell & Jenson, 2004, p. 389). She reminded herself of the need to integrate visual material with active learning activities that optimised the power of the IWB to engage the learners yet retained pedagogical approaches that facilitated learning.

De Castell and Jenson’s (2004) work on attention also highlighted the impact, on learning, of multi-modal tools to which students have access. They argue that the unimodal text-based orientation of much current school learning offers diminishing returns to teachers and students (p. 383). The IWB enabled Sue to expand her teaching tools and design learning activities with greater visual impact as the year progressed. She was able to plan and facilitate learning within a negotiated curriculum in exciting ways. She felt able to bring the outside world of the great art galleries into the classroom, and explore microscopic worlds of a visiting scientist with the children, effectively dissolving the walls of the classroom. Then, the effect of group experience in which all learners view the same image (Smith et al., 2005, p. 95) and discuss what is happening at the same time enhances the spirit of inquiry and strengthens the class learning community.
Conclusion

‘Nodal moments’ as Bullough and Pinnegar (2001, p. 16) term them, ‘moments central to teaching and learning to teach’, formed the basis of personal reflections throughout the journal. ‘Taming’ the IWB allowed Sue to exploit it for learning; recognising and acknowledging her concerns about engagement started a journey back to a pedagogy appropriate for her students; seeing the limits to learning enacted by her need to control the IWB provided the impetus to investigate ways in which her teaching would enable student use. These moments, the context in which they occurred, and their implications have been set out here in the hope that, in the way they have assisted Sue’s understanding of her development as a teacher, so they will contribute to the way in which other teachers come to perceive and understand their own practice. Our hope is that this narrative will, as Ellis and Bochner write:

provoke readers to broaden their horizons, reflect critically on their own experience, enter empathically into worlds of experience different from their own, and actively engage in dialogue regarding the social and moral implications of different perspectives and standpoints encountered. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 748)

Notes

1. The joint authorship of this paper recognises the collaboration of the authors throughout the study and while writing this article. Parts of this article use the first person to preserve the teacher’s voice and provide the sense of immediacy, engagement and authenticity with which the original research report was imbued.

2. In this section, all text in italics is from the first author’s journal or other data source.

Notes on contributors

Sue Hodge is a teacher at Epsom Normal Primary School. She has a particular interest in the role of the Library Media Specialist in schools and plans to undertake research investigating aspects of that role in the near future.

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