Teachers are digikids too: the digital histories and digital lives of young teachers in English primary schools
Lynda Graham

Abstract

In this article I consider the digital lives of a number of young teachers. Some are confident, competent movers in digital worlds, some are not. I wonder why, and look back at the teachers’ digital histories to see whether ways in which they learned about digital worlds affects their lives now. I identify three different routes to learning about digital worlds, and describe these with representative stories. Two are serious solitary journeys, one self-taught the other school-taught. Most teachers in these groups use digital technologies for work and for the business of life. The third route is playful social. Teachers in this group have experienced learning about digital worlds with fellow enthusiasts and in playful contexts. These teachers use digital technologies for pleasure as well as the business of life and work. I argue that it is important that young teachers and student teachers be given time on courses to think about and discuss their own digital literacy histories.

Key words: digital histories, digital lives, communities of practice, inset, Initial Teacher Education, primary teachers

Introduction

We know that a number of children now in our schools have moved confidently in digital worlds from their early years (Carrington, 2005; Larson and Marsh, 2005; Marsh, 2003, 2004, 2005; Marsh et al., 2005; Pahl, 2005). However, many teachers do not yet move with ease in these worlds, and do not find it easy to understand those inhabited by their pupils. I wondered whether this was true of our youngest teachers. Do they move confidently in digital worlds? I first talked with young teachers new to the profession about their present digital lives.

I also talked with them about their digital histories. I decided to do this because of my own experience of working with teachers on courses about the teaching of reading, where I had used insights gained from working with Anne Thomas (1995). Thomas realised that the ways in which teachers had learned to read might well affect not only their lives now as readers, but also their lives as teachers of reading, and so the lives of the children they taught. For this reason she made the study of reading histories a central feature of her reading inset courses. Insights gained from thinking about reading histories led many teachers to reconsider their own teaching. For instance, one teacher’s memory of how she had dreaded reading aloud in class helped her to grow in understanding about the teaching of reading. She decided to share her experiences with her children, who spoke of their astonishment: “She told us she really hated reading when she was our age and would count up how many children before her go so she could practice her bit more” (Graham, 1999, p. 112). The teacher’s honesty helped to create a genuine community of readers in her class, a community willing to engage with texts at an emotional level.

I wondered whether insight into teachers’ digital lives would similarly shed useful light on the ways in which teachers move now in digital worlds.

Method

I interviewed 23 teachers in the Greater London area, 18 females and five males. The teachers’ ages ranged from 22 to 34, and the children they taught between 4 and 11 years old. Interviews took place in the Spring term of 2006. Most teachers were interviewed in their schools, some at the end of the day, some during release time. The approach to interviewing was that of the informant interview, in which the aim is to “gain some insight into the perceptions of a particular person within a situation” (Powney and Watts, 1987, p. 18). I wanted to know what the teachers could remember about growing up in digital worlds at home and at school, and about their present digital lives. I asked semi-structured open questions.

Each taped interview took 20–30 minutes and was later transcribed. I then read and reread each transcript. As I did so I moved backwards and forwards between the raw evidence of the transcripts and developing themes and patterns (Powney and Watts, 1987, p. 105). The teachers’ stories that defied categories were to prove to be the most useful, forcing me time and time again to rethink my categories.
I kept an ongoing research diary, copies of email correspondence with my critical friend and notes of my reading around digital literacies. These data enable me to trace my thinking as I began to develop themes and patterns. Initially I made the mistake of trying to categorise too soon, using the teachers’ IT competences as criteria. However, Percirion, a 14-year-old Australian male student interviewed by Angela Thomas, stated:

“schools claim to be teaching ICT but they only do the I bit (information) and always seem to neglect the C (communication)” (Lankshear, 2006, p. 118).

I came to realise that in my early analysis I had done just this; I had analysed IT competences rather than look at the social nature of the learning around digital literacies. I began to recognise that affective learning was also common to some of the teachers’ stories: “it’s something to do with finding joy” (diary, 13 February 2006).

I realised too that the categories devised by Thomas (1995) for analysing reading histories might indeed be useful for analysing digital literacy stories: “would it be useful to look at what/where/who with?” (diary, 20 February 2006). I began to write narratives of each teacher’s story, and shaped a first piece of reflective writing to my critical friend. In her thoughtful comments, Vic Carrington wrote: “are you going to argue the importance of digital histories in the kinds of practices and attitudes that teachers bring to bear on their classrooms?” (email response from Vic Carrington, 20 September 2006). This comment was to be central to my thinking. I began to think about practices and affect. Still thinking about ‘joy’ I wrote: “Maybe if I look more carefully at those without a joyful route into the digital world it would help?” (diary, 2 February 2007). And finally, “I think my analysis is getting somewhere: I can use the established markers ‘getting on with lives’ (Davies, 2006), self-orientated/school-orientated (Lankshear, 2006). Fun deep play I can explore (Meek, 1982). But it’s also about peer learning . . . initiation into digital worlds by experts of similar ages/cultures” (diary, 3 February 2007).

My categories for digital literacy stories began to emerge. Two categories marked affect – serious or playful – and two the degree of collaboration – whether alone or with others. As I considered each of the transcripts in the light of these serious/playful/ solitary/social categories I began to realise that the playful learners were generally social and that the serious learners were generally solitary. My three categories emerged: two serious solitary routes, self-taught and school-taught; and one playful social.

For deeper exploration I then selected two case studies to represent each group.

- The serious solitary self-taught group is represented by one teacher whose route was self-taught in an office workplace, and one self-taught in the school workplace. These were the two journeys common to this small group of teachers.
- The serious solitary school-taught group is represented by one teacher who now moves competently in digital worlds because of school teaching, and one who is more hesitant. These two examples are representative of the journeys of other teachers in this group.
- The playful social group is represented by one teacher whose introduction to joy in digital worlds was through computer games, and one who entered through chat rooms. Each of the other teachers in this group took one of these two routes.
- Finally, Melanie’s story is representative of those teachers who are moving from one group to another. Like Melanie, many of the teachers interviewed are on a learning journey about ever-changing digital worlds.

Findings

The first category I identify is serious solitary self-taught. These teachers’ journeys into digital worlds were in order to ‘get on’ in worlds of work. Two representative stories follow, those of Katie and Chris (all names are pseudonyms). All four teachers in this category are female, and their ages range from 29 to 33 (Table 1).

Katie is 30 and an NQT. In her gap year she did a course on touch typing and then worked in an office for several years. During this time she bought a computer and taught herself how to use a word processor. A couple of years ago she bought a mobile phone “for emergency use only” and still has it switched off most of the time. School provided Katie with a laptop with Internet access and she began to use it for her work as a teacher. She also started to use the Internet for home use, to order pizzas and to look up cinema times. Recently she has started to bank on-line and used the Internet to book her wedding in Los Angeles. Katie is just beginning to move in digital worlds and to adopt aspects of these worlds that make her professional life and her life at home easier (Robinson and Mackey, 2006). However, she takes on new ideas slowly: It takes me a while to get things.

Chris is 29 and an assistant head teacher. Unlike Katie she remembers some ICT at school: the concept keyboard in the juniors and GCSE business studies at secondary school. However, she did not find business studies engaging as; it was all about data bases . . . not a link with real life. When she left home for university her parents bought her a mobile phone for emergency use only. It was always switched off except for a weekly call home. She bought herself an electronic typewriter to write essays at university and although there was a
computer suite with Internet access, her research for essays was mainly from books and journals. Eight years ago she bought her first PC for home use but I hadn’t got a clue how to use it and it’s still in my parents’ house. Recently Chris was given a school laptop and she taught herself skills to teach the children. The kids make you, the older children really push you to do it, and they challenge you. Now she uses a computer at home but it is: purely functional, practical, searching to find things out for work. I hate buying things on the Internet, though I have used it occasionally to buy books. She has email access at home, though: I’m not good at checking email, I’d rather speak. Chris’s use of her mobile has now changed: It’s on all the time now, I txt, it’s quicker, easier, instant.

Katie and Chris decided to engage in digital worlds in order to ‘get on’ in the world of work: Katie initially in office work, Chris in her work as a teacher. Both were self-taught, both worked hard to acquire new skills and both still find: It takes me a while to get things. I suspect their stories are similar to those of many of their older colleagues. Katie and Chris are ‘outsiders’ not yet completely at home with new technologies and digital texts (Lankshear and Knobel, 2003, p. 32), although they are beginning their journeys. They are instruction book users: they use instruction books to access digital worlds (Robinson, 2006).

However, Chris is aware that her children approach digital worlds differently. She invites them to help her and play around in order to find out how to do things on the computer. Interestingly, Chris herself is just beginning to play around with her new mobile phone. When she got it, she did not use an instruction book but instead just played around to find out how to use it, and in doing so discovered how to use the txt facility. She rarely uses the camera on her phone and never the Internet, though: One of my ‘techie’ friends usually shows me how to use things that they think I should be using to communicate with them! Chris’s journey into the digital world of mobile phones is becoming a little less serious, a little less solitary and a little less self-taught.

**Serious solitary school-taught**

A second group of teachers all started their journeys into digital worlds through ICT teaching at school. Eleven teachers are in this category, nine females and two males. Their ages range from 23 to 33. These teachers are serious solitary school-taught. Two representative stories follow those of Pam and Fran (Table 2).

Pam (27) did business studies at A level and found I was good at it. She then chose to go on to study business operations at college and designed databases, learned about modelling systems and spent 1 year of the course in the workplace on the computer 8 hours a day. Later, travelling in Australia she used her skills, taking work in an Internet café. Now she uses her school computer to keep in touch with friends through email every day, and the school Internet for booking travel and looking for flats. She is a competent, practical mover in digital worlds.

However, some in this group are still timid movers in digital worlds despite much teaching of ICT skills. For

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Serious solitary: self-taught</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender and Name*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: four female.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age: 30.5 years.</td>
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*For case study teachers only.

<table>
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<th>Table 2: Serious solitary school-taught</th>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender and Name*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total: 11: 9 female+2 male.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean age: 27.5.</td>
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*For case study teachers only. |
Note: As Melanie moved from solitary serious to playful social, she is not included in Table 2 or Table 3.
instance, Fran (30) had 2 hours a week of training in Excel and word processing at her secondary school. However, she did not then use email at university as I didn’t have any training on the Internet so I didn’t know how to use it. Fran had grown up in a world in which skills were taught, and had become dependent on this teaching. After university she did a course on computing at the local college, as it would look good on my CV, it was a useful skill to have. Now she uses the email a little, mainly for business stuff, and the computer at school for school work.

None of the teachers in either of the two serious solitary groups engaged in social digital worlds such as the worlds of computer games or chat rooms. For some this was because these worlds were not tempting. For instance, at university Carol: was often involved in the gathering, and watching people playing games, but I never had the urge to get involved myself. It was a lot of shoot-em up games, lots of racing games . . . All the boys seemed to like the football games where they had to be part of a team and play against each other . . . I think play stations for a long time were very much orientated towards males. Several others were not tempted by chat rooms because: they seemed a bit dodgy to me. Some had access to computer games at home, but it was a solitary activity: I played it to pass time, but I preferred a book or to watch TV. In terms of engagement in learning to read and write, Smith called it choosing whether or not to join a ‘Literacy Club’ (Smith, 1985, pp. 133–137). The serious solitary school-taught group of teachers decided not to engage in a ‘digital literacy club’ of computer games or chat rooms in childhood or teenage years.

Nevertheless, most of the serious solitary school-taught group now move competently in digital worlds. They have learned about the world of ICT in a traditional world of school, a world perhaps harshly described by Barbara Rogoff as one in which knowledge is transmitted “as if children were receptacles and knowledge were an object” (Rogoff et al., 2001, p. 6). These teachers have little experience of engaging with playful digital texts. They also have no experience of using the affordances of digital technologies to engage in communities of learners.

From serious solitary to playful social

Melanie is 34 and has taught for 10 years. Like Katie and Claire she engaged in digital worlds first as a serious solitary learner, a conscientious teacher eager to ‘get on’ in the world of work. However, she is now completely at ease in digital worlds. When I interviewed her she was at home with her young baby on maternity leave and so the interview took place with the baby in the sitting room. Thinking back to her earliest memories of digital worlds she remembered only that she had little interest in computers as a child: When I was at junior school my younger brother was given a second-hand computer. I had no desire to go on it. She has no memory of computers at school. At university, assignments were handwritten and research was from books and journals. It was only when doing her PGCE after university that for the first time work assignments had to be typed. Melanie used the word processor at college, and made use of the optional training sessions offered by the technician. On finishing her PGCE she bought herself a second-hand computer with Internet access: I realised computers were the thing of the future. She used this computer to write letters, and to send emails to friends from university and to her cousin abroad. Finally, she found chat rooms and discovered the joy of making virtual friends: I loved it! These virtual friends, friends she never met, were to be the friends that introduced her to the world of digital imagery: I learned how to send images by email, through tutoring in the chat room. These were the friends who were Melanie’s hook into digital worlds.

Now digital literacies are central to Melanie’s life at home with the baby: the computer is switched on at all times and I use the Internet for everything, tickets, holidays . . . I hardly use the phone . . . I email friends . . . She downloads all her music from i-tunes on the Internet, and burns her own songs onto CDs. She owns a digital camera, and uses it to download, edit and send photos. Melanie is completely at home in digital worlds though she only entered it in her 20s. With the help of friends and virtual friends, she discovered digital worlds that were not only useful but fun.

Prensky calls those who enter digital worlds in late childhood or adult life ‘digital immigrants’ (Prensky, 2001) who are learning digital literacies as a ‘second language’. He believes that digital immigrants will not achieve the fluency of digital natives. However, Melanie’s story is leading me to question this assumption. Her route was at first that of a ‘digital immigrant’, a serious solitary learner but she now moves in digital worlds for ‘pleasure’ (Robinson and Mackey, 2006, p. 211). This playful, social engagement in digital worlds has enabled her to move confidently, competently, joyfully in digital worlds. She is not a ‘digital native’, but she moves in digital worlds now with ease.

Meek argues that, in learning to read, children who see reading only as work will struggle to become fully literate (Meek, 1982, pp. 81–85). Melanie experienced fun and delight in digital worlds through her engagement in chat rooms: her engagement in digital worlds is now playful. She uses digital literacies for fun as well as for work.

Playful social

Melanie is now a playful social ‘insider’ in digital worlds. Insiders are people who not only understand the technology but use it to ‘get on with’ their lives (Davies, 2006, p. 162). The playful social teachers in my study entered digital worlds in the company of friends,
virtual friends and siblings. Seven teachers are in this category, four females and three males. Their ages range from 22 to 34. Here are two representative stories, those of Alan and Dianne (Table 3).

Alan is 28 and in his fifth year of teaching. Unlike Melanie he was introduced to the computer early, at the age of 6. His older brother led him into the world of computer games and Alan was hooked. He loved playing with him and ever since that time has played computer and x-box games. At home, from the age of six, Alan had access to a computer for games and later in secondary school, access to the Internet. He was apprenticed to the world of digital literacies by his older brother, and shared his brother’s passion for computer games. As he played he became increasingly skilled at using the computer. By junior school he was appropriating the skills developed through this apprenticeship to forge his identity with a particular group of friends. The group created imagined worlds together, as they played football and tennis games, taking on the personae of heroes in imagined worlds. At secondary school and university he continued to take part in social games such as football tournaments . . . it’s like playing snooker, the game doesn’t need your full attention, you socialise between turns of 10 to 15 minutes.

Alan has very few memories of computers at junior school, though: there was a trolley with a computer that was wheeled into the classroom . . . it was never as exciting as I thought it would be . . . I think we did spellings. He decided on computer studies as an option at secondary school, not for the course content but in order to have access to computers that would print out song lyrics. Alan and his friends used the facilities of the computer room as they forged their identities as members of their band.

Alan is completely at home in digital worlds. Unlike Melanie who is home based most of the time at the moment, he moves between school and home with his mobile phone on at all times to keep in contact with friends and family, using talk rather than txt: I prefer to talk to people. He uses email, but only occasionally for work-related activities. His passion is still for music, and at home he has worked the video player into his stereo system. He uses the Internet to download music, and has recently been given an iPod: which I treasure. He listens to his music on this iPod as he travels to and from work. At home he uses the Internet for shopping including through eBay, and for buying tickets, travel, research and browsing the football scores. He uses his digital camera frequently, and edits and downloads his own photos. Asked about playing computer games at present, he blushed and admitted: I do when I’ve got time on my own . . . about once or twice a week . . . I play ‘football manager’ . . . I find it really relaxing . . . I wish I could play more. In the holidays I meet up with friends and then we play football tournaments. Now he plans to travel and has set up a blog to keep in touch with friends and family.

Dianne is 23 and in her second year of teaching. Like Alan, she remembers playing computer games with her older brothers at the ages of seven and eight. We had a computer at home . . . my brothers had a tape and they had to load the games on. We didn’t do much academic work on there, just games. They would buy the games and we would all just play . . . shooting games, platform games like Mario. When she was 15, Dianne’s parents bought her a mobile phone. Like Katie’s mobile, this phone was bought for keeping in touch and in case of emergencies. However, it soon became integral to Dianne’s social life, as she quickly built up a network of friends she could txt and chat to. At the same age, her secondary school began to expect pupils to type homework, and so Dianne’s parents bought a second computer, this time with Microsoft Office, so that Dianne and her brothers would be able to type school assignments. Dianne realises that she was lucky to have computer access at home as this enabled her to experiment more and then you just learn that way, experimenting. At secondary school Dianne stopped playing computer games . . . we grew up and had to get on with work. Although Dianne no longer plays games she feels the experience was important to her: It got me used to different buttons on the computer, just how to work a computer. I don’t think it did me much harm.

At 15 Dianne was to discover a different way of using the computer for fun. The school introduced her to the Internet and to email: emailing at school started off with work assignments, but the more you got used to emailing, the more you understood what it was about. You started emailing your friends and you’d start going to chat rooms. As they were for Melanie, these chat rooms were Dianne’s hook into digital worlds. They became a central part of her

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dianne</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>34</td>
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Total: 7: 4 female+3 male.
Mean age: 26.7.
*For case study teachers only.
Note: As Melanie moved from solitary serious to playful social, she is not included in Table 2 or Table 3.
life at school, 6th form college and university. All had large computer suites, which was crucial as Dianne did not yet own a computer with Internet access, and needed this access for the on-line life she was developing with friends and virtual friends. At university it was also essential for her studies as tutors corresponded with students through email: as that was the easiest way to get in touch with each other on school experience.

Digital worlds are central to Dianne’s life. She has owned a mobile phone now for 7 years: I don’t think I could function without it, I’d feel a bit lost . . . If I left it at home I’d have to go back to get it. Dianne’s mobile is on all day, every day, at home and at work in school. She uses both txt and talk: in the day she mainly txts, because people are at work, but in the evening especially when everybody’s got free calls she prefers to chat. She also uses her mobile to take and send photos and videos. She plays music on her phone, though she doesn’t download her own because I think it’s a bit of a rip-off the prices they charge for the software. She doesn’t use the phone Internet facility though I have done previously, just to see how it worked. I tested it out. Dianne is a fluent and discriminating user of mobile phones. She is able to read all the facilities and to make considered choices about which are fun or useful to her. Dianne’s phone is integral to her life. She uses it to connect with friends and uses multiple modes of communication: txt, voice, image, moving image and music. She uses her phone to forge her identity as a young woman with a particular group of friends, taste in music and passion for particular images.

Email is also central to Dianne’s life: she has used it for 8 years since secondary school. It’s a whole part of my life now, I don’t know that I could function properly without it . . . I check my email a few times every day. She makes use of the messenger facility and uses the Internet at school and at home, for shopping, banking, buying cinema tickets and booking holidays. She has her own iPod and downloads music for it from the Internet. Two years ago she bought her own digital camera, and downloads and edits her own photos. Although she doesn’t own a SAT NAV, when she’s unsure of a route, she makes sure she borrows her father’s car, which has one.

### Important people, texts and places

In order to clarify the significant influences on digital lives, I found it useful to adapt the questions devised by Thomas for analysing reading histories (Thomas, 1995). These questions are:

- **Who** was/is important to you in your journey as a reader?
- **What** books were/are important?
- **Where** did/do you like reading?

My questions about digital histories are:

- **Who** was/is important to you in your journey into digital worlds?
- **What** ‘texts’ were/are important?
- **Where** did/do you access these worlds?

It is interesting to look closely at the people, texts and places that were and are significant in the lives of Alan, Dianne and Melanie (Table 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Melanie</th>
<th>Friends, cousin</th>
<th>Own computer with Internet: letters, emails</th>
<th>Own home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virtual friends</td>
<td>Internet: chat rooms</td>
<td>Own home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older brother</td>
<td>Computer games</td>
<td>Home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends at junior and secondary school</td>
<td>Computer games</td>
<td>Home, friends’ houses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Song lyrics</td>
<td>Computer room at school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers, friends</td>
<td>Computer games</td>
<td>University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents/friends</td>
<td>Mobile phone</td>
<td>Home</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>Chat rooms</td>
<td>Everywhere</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School, 6th form college, university</td>
<td>School, 6th form college, university</td>
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Internet facilities at school and college for access to email and chat rooms. Dianne’s final significant place is interesting. It is quite simply everywhere. Everywhere that she goes her mobile goes. She has constant, everyday access to digital worlds. In Japan mobile phones are called keitai which means “something you carry with you”. They are a “constant, lightweight, and mundane presence in everyday life” (Ito, 2005, p. 1). Teachers like Dianne keep their phones switched on all day in the classroom (on silent). They are, literally, bringing their outside worlds into the world of the classroom.

In their experiences of the digital worlds of social computer games and chat rooms, teachers such as Melanie, Alan and Dianne are learning in communities of like-minded others. This exemplifies learning through collaborative participation with others in activities of mutual interest. It is supported by a conception that:

“learning occurs through interested participation and that to understand new ideas, people need to observe, and participate in their use in an involved way” (Rogoff et al., 2001, pp. 13,14).

These stories are representative of those in the playful social group. All the teachers in this group are confident, competent users of digital technologies. All talk about significant others in their histories: older brothers, friends and virtual friends. All entered the worlds of computer games and chat rooms for fun and for social contact: physical contact in the world of social games such as football tournaments, virtual contact in friendship chat rooms. Like Alan, three started playing social computer games with friends and older brothers from the age of 7 to 8, and still play when they can today. Ruth (22) started playing computer games with her boyfriend at the age of 14–15: “I was addicted to Monkey Island, me and my boyfriend, spent hours on it. Then at university she and her housemates entered the world of SIMS. Ruth blushed and looked awkward as she admitted: We were addicted to SIMS . . . when you were sorry for yourself on a Sunday when you’d been out the night before as a group, we would talk about it. It was fun.

Some teachers in the playful social group experienced computer education in the sixth form. It was very badly taught, not interesting, to be honest they didn’t teach me anything new. I just picked it up from picking up Excel and Word at home. Some were expected to use the Internet at university. I did environmental science . . . I’d not used the Internet before. I used it for word processing, Excel. I had no training, they kind of expected it . . . “Put it in an Excel spreadsheet, come up with some graphs”. They didn’t really explain how to do it, they just expected you to do it, and you just went off and did it . . . they are kind of self teaching anyway.

Most of the playful social teachers’ learning about digital worlds was outside the classroom. Some was in school, but it was for subversive use, for example for access to chat rooms and to print out song lyrics. Lankshear suggests that rather than distinguish between the physical sites of home and school, a more useful distinction is “the locus of selection of purposes mediated by new technologies”. Is the purpose selected by the school or is it selected by the user? The use made by Alan and Dianne of school technologies was not ‘school-selected’, but ‘self-selected’ (Lankshear, 2006, p. 112).

We have seen how Ruth (22) engaged in the social world of SIMS at university. She was the only teacher who spoke of some playful, social engagement in the worlds of school and university learning. For instance, at school she was encouraged to type out poems for homework. With her friends, Ruth worked to present these poems using painting programmes on the computers at their homes. The task was set by the school, but their own purpose was to playfully outdo each other’s creative designs. We used the programmes to type up poems, basically to show off. Their secondary school also encouraged the girls to make power point presentations for lessons: We used sound effects, peers helped, the better they were the better you’d like yours to be. If we look back to Lankshear’s (2006) suggestion that we look at the selection of purposes mediated by new technologies, we see here a fusion of school and self-selected purposes. The school tasks were to type out poems and to create power point presentations. The girls’ aims were to outdo each other as they played around with designs for the typed task and with sound effects for the power point presentations. Engagement was social and competitive. This talk was similar to Ruth’s discussions in the playground and at home around computer games.

Secondly, Ruth’s engagement in digital worlds at university included some playful, social elements in the worlds of ‘school-selected’ learning. Everybody had a laptop, and was confident with a computer. Nobody did anything not connected. There were computers everywhere! Emails between you and the tutors were commonplace, any information was via email, you had to be totally on it, uni really drummed it in, where lectures were, whether they were cancelled . . . Was this laptop network simply an organisational tool, or did students engage through digital technologies in a community of learners? Ruth’s experience suggests that she felt part of a community of learners. We did everything. We put our presentations on the computer, emailed stuff to lecturers through email. My English tutor was ICT crazy! We had a webspace, posted our presentations on the webspace then everybody accessed it. It was good doing it like that; you had a lot more time to go through it. I did this project ‘Calais’ and everybody accessed it! It was fun. I’m not scared at all, nothing fazes me. It’s just how I’ve been brought up.

Ways forward

The teachers in the playful social group have experienced learning in “communities of practice” (Lave and
Wenger, 1991): primarily communities of social computer gamers and of chat room users. Will playful social teachers be able to bring their understandings of playful, social digital worlds into their teaching? It is possible that these young teachers will find the gap between their out-of-school digital worlds and the worlds of the classroom too great a chasm to bridge. Maybe they will feel that learning in ‘communities of practice’ is valid for play but not for learning in the classroom. Worlds of computer games and chat rooms are worlds of popular culture (Marsh and Millard, 2000). Will playful social teachers feel that these worlds are suitable for the classroom?

The next stage of my research addresses these questions. Currently I am spending time in classrooms of playful social teachers, investigating how these teachers are able to find ways of making their classrooms communities of learners–communities in which the learners, both teacher and pupils, take on new learning through the affordances of digital technologies (Graham, 2007).

In the study reported here I found one instance of learning in a ‘school-selected’ community of practice: Ruth in her community of learners at university. In a recent review of research and projects about teachers learning with digital technologies, Futurelab look for examples of successful research and projects using the affordances of digital technologies. One successful project cited is ‘Talking Heads’, an email support network for head teachers in England. This sought to be the ‘virtual space’ where all head teachers could engage in dialogue.

“The affordances of the technology . . . encouraged them to engage with the learning community, be more reflective and helped them develop their abilities” (Fisher et al., 2006, p. 42).

The authors state: “It is likely that head teachers entering into the Talking Heads community were already ready and willing to participate” (p. 41). For Ruth it was different: use of the virtual space was compulsory at university. However, it does seem that Ruth did feel part of a community as she used the affordances of the university virtual space to engage in communication with tutors and to share work with peers. The extent to which this then helped her to become more reflective or develop her abilities as a student teacher, although a fruitful area for future research, is outside the scope of this study.

In order to understand the digital worlds of children, Knobel and Lankshear suggest that teachers look outside the classroom. “We think teachers should be encouraged to engage in research of digitally mediated social practices in contexts beyond classrooms” (in Larson and Marsh, 2005, p. 98). One small step would be to help teachers to be explicit about their own digital literacy histories. In doing so they would begin to look at their own lives as children in digital worlds.

- Is my journey into digital worlds serious solitary, self-taught or school-taught?
- Is my journey playful social?
- Is my route changing over time?

Opportunities to think about and discuss ways in which students and teachers learned (and are still learning) about digital worlds might help students’ and teachers’ developing understandings about the digital lives of their pupils. Playful social teachers have much to share with colleagues; made explicit, their digital literacy stories enable them to draw on their own “funds of knowledge” about digital worlds (González et al., 2005, p. ix). Shared with others, these experiences might well help develop understandings about the digital worlds of their pupils. For this reason alone it would be useful to introduce digital literacy histories into courses for young teachers, both in initial teacher education (ITE) and in continuing professional development (CPD).

However, there is another important reason to include the study of digital histories in teachers’ ITE and CPD. This is the first generation of young teachers to have had the possibility of playful social learning in their digital lives. Alan and Dianne learned how to engage in the world of computer games with communities of fellow enthusiasts – family and friends, not by being taught through the transmission model of learning that we tend to experience in school settings. Playful social teachers have first-hand experience of learning in communities of practice, exemplifying a socio-cultural theory of learning. This argues that “Humans develop through their changing participation in the socio-cultural activities of their communities, which also change” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 11). These playful social teachers learned about computer games by being part of the ever-changing worlds of social computer games, in the company of fellow enthusiasts. Opportunities to think about and discuss ways in which students and teachers learned and are still learning about digital worlds might help teachers understand the digital lives of their pupils. It might also make a contribution to these teachers’ growing understandings about theories and practices of learning.

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