I am currently in my fourth year of teaching. I studied Primary Teaching at the Australian Catholic University in Canberra and upon completion I moved to the Northern Territory to work in an Indigenous Community school in Central NT. After a year, I moved up north to Gunbalanya in West Arnhem Land where I am currently working as a homeland’s teacher. Homeland’s schools are small outstation schools in tiny communities where people have made a choice to live out on their traditional homelands. Manmoyi, where I teach, is a small community that has a strong focus on keeping their culture and traditions going by passing on knowledge to the children.

I teach between ten to twenty-five children from Preschool to Year twelve. They all have very low literacy and numeracy levels. The only time my students speak or practise English is at school. Outside of school they use their local language, Kunwinjku.

When I arrived, technology at my homelands school was limited to a few rundown laptops past their use-by-dates and a data projector. There is no Internet and no Interactive White Boards. So, when our school decided to purchase some iPads for the hub school, I quickly put my hand up to be involved! We got a set of 10 for each of our two homelands schools. The iPads were an instant hit with the children who sat down and immediately began to explore and work out the many apps on them.

The touch screen interactivity and engaging visuals of the iPads meshed well with my students’ kinesthetic and visual learning styles. Those students who usually found it hard to concentrate in class were engaged in apps and practising concepts learned in class without even realising! An example of this is a phonics app called Pocket Phonics. This is an engaging, fun app that allows students to practise and learn letter sounds, formation, and blending and segmenting words. Students can sit down and ‘play’ the app and be learning and consolidating new things autonomously. Students who could not read were also able to listen to and read eBooks independently and then record and listen to themselves reading the text.

My action learning project
Initially I wanted to do so much in my action learning project! However, it became important for me to focus this desire in terms of (i) a tangible goal I could work towards, (ii) a realistic project given my geographical location and subsequent technology access and (iii) what would be most beneficial to the students I work with. For these reasons, I decided to focus my action learning on the use of iPads as a support for literacy activities within my classroom. After reflection and discussion with my mentor, Lisa Kervin and Helen Chatto (principal, Girraween Primary NT), I decided to particularly focus on how iPads could be used to help develop my students’ oral language.

After establishing and confirming the focus of my project I then set out to find quality apps. This involved reading articles, corresponding with my mentor, searching the internet and trying out a number of apps. I also had the opportunity to make a school visit to Girraween Primary in Darwin to observe how they incorporated iPads in literacy experiences in their classes.

With each app I planned possible learning experiences, and implemented these with my students as I carefully observed their responses. My own observations throughout my learning experiences coupled with feedback received from the students and from my mentor enabled me to reflect upon the particular app and learning experiences for my students. And of course, after this process I’ve re-entered the teaching and learning cycle with new ideas!
The following profiles some apps that I found particularly useful with my students.

**Book Creator**

Book Creator is an app that enables students to create eBooks. Students can add text, photos, videos and they can also make voice recordings. My students were able to write something and then record themselves reading it. We made books about things that were happening in the community. For example, we wrote one about our work with the local rangers and visiting biologists, setting up motion sensor cameras and looking for cat tracks to record feral cat presence around the community. This then led to us creating books about feral animals that live around the Top End. We also created another book about an excursion to Darwin.

Book Creator was also useful for reading groups. While I read with one group, the other groups were asked to read their texts independently. Book Creator enabled me to create eBooks using each group’s focus texts. I did this by taking photos of each page and then recording myself reading each page. These then became a model to support their own ‘independent’ reading with the vision that they would move away from needing to listen to the recording as they became more confident with the text. This strategy also helped provide me with time to work intensely with a group of students which is important in a class with such diverse reading levels.

The students moved forward with the app as they created a different kind of class library. The students recorded themselves reading favourite books and these were made available. I found that if other students wanted to read a book, but were not able to read it independently, they were able to listen to a recording created by a peer and follow the text. This has become a really supportive experience for my students, both in the creation of the recordings and also through the access, they were each provided, to a range of recorded texts.

**Puppet Pals**

I found Puppet Pals to be a useful app to use when working on narrative texts. The ability for students to take photos to use as their backdrops and to then create their own characters by cutting them out from existing or created images was incredibly supportive for my students. An ongoing frustration, teaching in an Indigenous community, is finding resources that the students can connect with. The features of this app helped the students make connections between classroom activities and their community which motivated them to continue wanting to participate in the learning experiences.

Puppet Pals was a useful tool to engage the students in retelling. The students used the app to record retellings of events that had occurred and stories we had read as a group or independently. Listening back to the retellings gave me tremendous insight into the students comprehension of what was being retold. Listening to these also gave me direction for what we needed to focus on next to support their ability to comprehend.

While my focus was on oral language development, I found Puppet Pals was also a good pre-writing strategy. The students were able to use the app to plan out and practise their story before they began to write. Engaging with this gave them a plan that they could revisit and listen to as they wrote their story. Some students listened to sections of their puppet pals’ story multiple times to help them write. The student writing was much more extensive and comprehensive when they engaged with the app in this way.

**iMovie**

This movie making app allows students to create movies and photo stories using videos, photos, music, text and voice recordings. We used this app extensively in the classroom to create movies about things such as culture, healthy living and retelling shared experiences.

The concept of ‘shame’ in Indigenous culture can be an issue in the classroom. For many Indigenous people, speaking in front of an audience, being singled out in front of other people, whether it be for praise or ridicule, is an extremely uncomfortable, embarrassing experience. This shame can inhibit student ability to participate in class discussions and practise speaking English. Another positive of iMovie, or even just the camera app in general, is it allows students to record themselves practising speaking English and to make mistakes without being ‘shamed’. It also allows them and the teacher to listen back and correct mistakes in their language.
This app provided a useful tool to assess each student’s oral language development.

Again, I found that my focus on oral language also supported writing activities with my students. As we moved into more of a focus on factual and persuasive texts, iMovie became quite useful as a lead-up for their writing. For example, one week we were learning about Rheumatic Fever, a quite serious and common preventable health issue in Indigenous communities. In iMovie we created headings for our text (Symptoms, Treatment and Prevention) and then the students recorded themselves speaking about each heading. They then used these headings and the videos as a basis for writing their own texts. As my students are EAL/D students they have a lot of difficulty remembering new information learned in English and verbalising that information. So when it comes to writing about a certain topic that the students have been learning, many of them struggle to write anything as they cannot remember the language that was learned. By recording oral language in iMovie, they were able to go back to it to refresh their memory and then practise rather than relying on me to come and help them.

What I have learned
Over the course of my action learning project I have found iPads to be very effective and versatile learning tools for Indigenous students. Their portability allows them to be used in out-of-classroom activities and they are great for small group work and differentiated learning.

The focus of my project was on oral language. While there is an enormous range of apps available, the quality does vary. However, when I found a ‘quality’ app, the opportunities for literacy learning were rich and exciting. I found that my students were engaged and were more autonomous in the development of their oral English when they were using the iPads. I felt the students were prepared to take risks in demonstrating their language development and ability. In addition, the recording facilities and play-back ability provided instant feedback as they listened or watched what they had created. I felt opportunities to use the iPads also added to the feeling of community within my classroom as students shared their work products with each other. The range of work samples that the children created provided useful assessment tools that helped me gauge their oral language ability and development over the course of the project.

Overall I have enjoyed undertaking this action learning project and I feel that I have grown as an effective literacy educator who has an interest in technology. As teachers, it is important that we are also learning and developing our teaching practices. Constant changes and improvements in technology open up new doors for innovation and improvements in teaching.

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