So You Say You Want a Revolution?
English and Literacy Educators
Shaping Digital Futures

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Introduction
Currently, in Australia, there are a number of developments suggesting that some of the digital promises and challenges of the past two decades are being addressed. The most visible of these are the impending Digital Education Revolution that promises a computer for every student in Years 9 to 12 in Australia (DEEWR, 2008); the release of the Learning Federation’s Digital Learning Materials (Curriculum Corporation, 2007); and the accelerating proliferation of interactive whiteboards in classrooms across the country. Welcome as these may be, such significant financial investments in resources do not, in and of themselves, herald a revolution and will not necessarily improve educational outcomes. If, as the research suggests, it is the teacher rather than resources or policy that has the most profound impact on student achievement (Hattie, 2003), then resourcing and policy initiatives must engage with and support classroom teachers to shape, or indeed, revolutionise digital futures in classrooms.

Drawing on research undertaken with teachers of English (and by implication literacy), this paper identifies three threads that, drawn together, may provide opportunities for English and literacy educators to move forward to exploit and mobilise digital resources in order to meet the demands of the future. These threads are:

- playful, sustained professional learning
- equity, access and ‘plain-speak’
- engagement and collective advocacy

Rather than being simple step-by-step or sequential procedures, these threads represent conditions that may enable more rigorous and generous debate and equitable resourcing than we have typically seen in relation to digital technologies. It must also be acknowledged that in the midst of demands to look to the digital future, teachers and school communities are also having to respond to mandated assessment regimes, managerialist governance, and measures of performativity of unprecedented magnitude (Ball, 2003; Petrosky & Reid, 2004). There is neither the warrant nor space to adequately discuss here the complexity of the intersection of these competing demands on teachers, though it might be argued that the changing political, industrial and professional contexts for teaching in contemporary Australia have drawn our collective attention away from a discipline-inspired response to the deep impact of digital technologies.

The research: Going digital
The three threads described above are drawn from a doctoral research project, conducted across 2004 and 2005, that explored the changing professional practices and identities of
four South Australian teachers of middle and senior school English. Employing narrative and practitioner inquiry methods, the research investigated how digital technologies had shaped and were continuing to shape these teachers’ professional lives. The four invited teachers were mid-career/mid-life teachers who had been educated in a print-dominated world, well before access to computers, DVDs, digital cameras, the world wide web and similar digital technologies. I knew each of these teachers through my role at that time as Literacy Consultant for Catholic Education South Australia (CESA) and their participation in Digital Poetry, Multiliteracies and Visual Literacies workshops I facilitated at CESA indicated that each was embracing and experimenting with digital technologies in their classrooms. For these reasons, the four teachers were identified as ideal participants in the research.

The research included three phases. Phase 1 served as an important contextual study because it explored the historical construction of English teachers and digital technologies since the early 1980s, using flyers for national English and literacy teacher conferences as data. This phase highlighted the importance of engaging with our past to understand subject English (Beavis, 2003) and traced the tensions inherent in debates about the place of digital technologies within English since the early 1980s (Durrant, 2001; Kerin, 2005, 2006). These historical tensions continue to plague us in the twenty-first century and are evident within the data generated within Phases 2 and 3; they will be picked up and discussed within the context of this article. The teacher participants became engaged in the research during Phase 2. They were involved in four group meetings, including a full day in a computer lab to allow the teachers time and support to construct and share narratives reflecting on the influences of digital technologies on their professional practices and identities. These narratives included a script for a subsequent video re-enactment in the classroom; a Richard Attenborough style documentary; a visual essay; and a montage of screen captures from the film Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World (Weir, 2003) that served as a metaphor for an English faculty and its leader charting unknown educational waters. Phase 3 of the study involved three of these teachers in individual school-based interviews where they reflected on their most recent integration of digital technologies in English and literacy teaching and learning.

This paper draws on Phases 2 and 3 of the project and includes aspects of the stories the teachers told to each other or to me. While not claiming that such stories are ‘truths’ or universally applicable (Kamler, 2001; Britzman, 1994), their value lies in their capacity to ‘open doors of possibility in the corridors of the everyday’ (Game & Metcalfe, 1996, p. 64) in what can often be a solitary and even secretive profession (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). A critical, rather than romantic, perspective enables an unravelling of aspects of professional and institutional practices that otherwise may appear to be ‘commonsensical, obvious, natural, given or unquestionable’ (MacLure, 2003, p. 9). Within the context of the broader resourcing and policy directions so often imposed on classroom teachers from beyond the door or school gate, such narrative inquiry also provides an avenue for ‘pricking the consciences of readers by inviting a re-examination of the values and interests undergirding certain discourses, practices, and institutional arrangements found in today’s schools’ (Barone, 1992, p. 143). The power of the stories produced within this research and the data from interviews lies not so much in their uniqueness, but rather in their resonance with the stories and experiences, both good and bad, readers may have heard or experienced themselves over the years. The intention of this article is to open up for re-examination ‘familiar discourses, practices, and institutional arrangements’ and consider how the threads proposed here might enable English and literacy educators and their local communities to not only engage with but also help shape a digital educational revolution.
Playful, sustained professional learning

The teachers who participated in this research have had to learn to use digital technologies ‘on the job’, and with an average age in the mid to late 40s are representative of the aging teacher population in Australia. When asked about how they began to develop their skills with digital technologies, each made reference to learning at home or somewhere ‘out there’ beyond their school settings. One teacher commented that being on parenting leave several years earlier had provided her with the opportunity to playfully experiment at home:

I just think I had the time to play at the right time … It’s just this constant sense that you have to perform … you don’t really get the chance to play.

Other teachers commented on how they learnt new applications when they were free of the demands of daily teaching and administrative work, and notably most often during school holidays:

The reality of teaching is that you don’t get a couple of hours or you keep saying, ‘Well, I’ll wait until next holidays and it’s something that never ends, yeah?’

And:

I sat at home one night, opened the software up and very quickly worked it out … It was in the holidays so it wasn’t like anything else was due or it was linked to anything … I was just clicking to see what it did.

And:

Gee, I wish I had the time to go and play with the computing things!

Notions of ‘playing’, taking ‘a couple of hours’, ‘dabbling’ or ‘just clicking to see what it did’ when teachers could find or make opportunities suggest that extended time out for professional learning in digital literacies is perceived as a luxury within institutional settings. Failure to allocate time for such professional learning for teachers only serves to deepen the digital gulf that exists between teachers and the tech-savvy ‘aliens in classrooms’ identified fifteen years ago (Green & Bigum, 1993). This ever-expanding gulf between the digital experiences and literacies of students and teachers can have wide-ranging and deleterious effects on relationships and pedagogies within classrooms (Lankshear & Knobel, 2000; Carrington, 2006). If digital skills and literacies are valued, and massive financial investment in digital technologies by governments and school boards suggest they are, then it makes sense to ensure that there are skilled, engaged teachers to effectively mobilise and integrate those technologies.

The location of professional learning was also something each of the teachers commented on, and the common theme here was that if it related to digital technologies, it most often occurred off campus and in the absence of colleagues. The four teachers all agreed that it was beneficial to have the opportunity within the research – and in prior digital literacy workshops at CESA – to have full days for more sustained engagement and discussion:

The chance to step out of the school space into a sort of space where people are just thrashing around with this and having a go I think. It was really good, that sense of play.

And:

Just that whole thing of being able to be here for a whole day and just really…It means I get to learn one thing, you know, like you go so often to conferences where you get an hour of this and an hour of that, and you might be lucky to get a little play, but never so extensive.

These full-day experiences, with their focus on literacies and pedagogies, were in contrast to shorter demonstrations in schools that focused on how to enter data in school management systems or reporting software which served managerial purposes rather than pedagogical or student-focused goals. Also, common to these observations was the sense of play at the heart of their learning with digital technologies: these teachers variously played, dabbled,
clicked or had a go, and these pedagogical qualities are not consistent with the traditional linear one-size-fits-all professional learning they have commonly experienced in their schools.

Allan Luke (2004) argues that ‘the challenge facing teacher education, curriculum and school reform is not to find, standardise and implement “one true method” ’ (p. 90, original italics), and while this was directed at teaching and learning in classrooms, it might equally apply to professional learning with teachers. Constraints on time, resources and attention, coupled with or produced by increased managerialism (Sacks, 2001), create an environment of streamlined, packaged, remote or online professional learning that leaves little space for sustained engagement and support with digital technologies, or concurrent dialogue with colleagues. Given the rapidly changing digital landscape and increasing imperatives to transform education for the twenty-first century (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Gee, 2003), a priority should be the design and provision of playful and sustained professional learning in relation to digital technologies that takes into account the pedagogical needs and diversity of teachers, students and institutional contexts.

Equity, access and plain-speak

The second strand – equity, access and plain-speak – is constructed from the strongest and most emotionally charged responses from the teachers. It was also where institutional contexts most significantly influenced the daily practices of the teachers as they attempted to integrate digital technologies within their English curriculum and classrooms. One of the teachers enjoyed easy access to fixed computer labs as well as mobile wireless trolleys, professional and prompt technical support, and the full support of the leadership team to develop new approaches and redesign curriculum. In her narrative, she used a metaphor of space travel to illustrate the excitement of her changing literacies and pedagogical practices, and this is related to her ease of access to technology and troubleshooting support:

    It is reassuring to know that when I get myself into difficulty in the English computer classroom, I can steadfastly rely on a higher authority to teleport me from the jaws of disaster. I do not find this at all threatening; rather, it adds to the thrill of each new adventure, knowing there is someone there to bail me out.

This teacher had embarked on digital poetry, critical analysis of websites, and simple film projects that would not have been possible without reliable access and generous technical support, and this generous digital environment might have influenced her when she commented

    I want something challenging professionally. I don’t know how people stay in teaching if they don’t change…that sense of ‘I’m still doing what I did thirty years ago’.

While the other three teachers were keen to engage with digital technologies, their experiences were more problematic and one repeated barrier was accessing and understanding technical support within the school:

    (I was) pestering whoever the expert was in this school, and going outside to get training …

And another teacher lamented how hard it was to borrow a CD burner she needed (in 2004, these were not standard features on PCs in her school):

    You’d swear that you were dealing with atomic bombs the way things are!

Concerted efforts were made by another teacher to learn the technical ‘lingo’ so that she could understand the language of the technicians in the Information and Technology (IT) department and be taken seriously by them. As she approached the IT office one day, she
heard, ‘Here she comes again!’ and was flattered, but hardly surprised, when she learnt that she was the only untrained IT person in her school that interacted frequently with their department. However, this same teacher was selective about who she approached:

I just fly past him completely because you try to talk to him; that’s impossible. He just kept telling me what you couldn’t do, so I just ignored him!

Whether it was access to technical support, hardware, or ‘plain-speak’ they could understand, three of the four teachers described daily challenges relating to accessing timely and informative technical advice, and believed that these factors were major deterrents to the integration of digital technologies within their educational settings.

Of the four teachers, one in particular became disillusioned and frustrated by her lack of access to technology and resistance to change within the school:

An email came out a few weeks ago. ‘The IT rooms are fairly well booked. Nothing I can do about it. Don’t complain.’ I felt like a big stick was being waved at me. You know: Go away! So I did. I feel the despair has gone up a few rungs. I really do. And look at how much money has been spent on other things around the school, and I can’t get my kids into a computer room.

This email communication is indicative of the powerful role of technical staff who manage access and respond to requests and complaints from teaching staff. The improvement of teaching and learning, curriculum and pedagogies must drive the renovation of school policies and procedures, and while technical and managerial staff should be involved, such work must redress current inequities and barriers that restrict access for some to digital resources and ensure effective, timely technical support for teachers.

Three teachers also experienced significant barriers to accessing facilities for their classes. There was a consensus amongst them of a hierarchy of access that dictated that senior classes had priority over the middle years, and that Computing, Science, Maths and Media were given priority over English and humanities subjects. Timetabling processes common across these three schools meant that English classes (and other ‘soft’ learning areas) had limited access to vacancies and only after permanent allocations for a range of Computing, Science, Maths and Media subjects had been scheduled, and this was irrespective of curriculum design or rationales. The difficulty for one teacher was that there were no vacancies during her scheduled English lessons across a full academic year, even though she had developed innovative, theorised curriculum plans:

It’s seemingly impossible for me to do anything in the computer rooms! One teacher has only 4 students and he is happy for me to go in there (to share) but I’m not teaching like that anymore. I’m not taking scraps. I’m pretty angry. As a rough estimate, we’ve probably got 70% of that resource being used by less than 1% of our school community. They’ve got an absolute monopoly on it. I see it as the Sciences versus the Humanities. Yeah, and what frustrates me the most is that (a) they are not even being used for the purpose and (b) in a lot of cases there’s four or five students in there … It’s the Year 12s down.

In reference to recent technology upgrades in her school, another teacher described how senior Maths and Sciences classes took up all bookings in the new labs, while the older technology was passed down the line to English and middle years classes, perhaps based on an assumption that word processing might be the digital limits of English:

What happens is that all the old stuff goes down into those other labs where the rest of us can have access. (Laughs)

Attempts by faculty coordinators to address inequities in access were not effective, and this was sometimes despite sympathetic hearings from principals:

We are trying to change it at the moment but it’s hard to change, and Admin want to change it, but it’s all blocks from other faculties with vested interests.
The teachers believed that colleagues from other faculties (and at times from within the English faculty itself) did not understand the changing nature of subject English, and one claimed that she repeatedly had to defend her position when questioning technology booking systems:

*You’re an English teacher, what the hell do you need to be in an IT lab for – go back to your classroom and read a novel.*

These observations suggest that within schools, English teacher identities and practices are seen to be more closely aligned with traditions from the mid-twentieth century (Peim, 2003) than with contemporary environments and texts that are both print and screen based (Kress, 2006), and that English and literacy educators can not assume their colleagues appreciate how and why they need access to and support with digital technologies.

**Engagement and collective advocacy**

The first two threads call on schools and systems leadership to address inadequate provision of professional learning and ensure greater equity and access in relation to technologies and support. This third and final strand is perhaps more challenging for English and literacy educators because it demands a more active and collaborative approach to rethinking and renewing teaching and learning from within the field. Across the narratives and interviews, references to collegial support and dialogue were constant, and often suggested that there were pockets of resistance within English faculties:

*Some people are willing to throw their cap in the ring. A lot of people just stand back and watch, aren’t prepared to get involved.*

More confronting for one teacher was the hostility she met from a colleague when describing some film-making she was about to embark on with her Year 10s as a result of a short story they had read in class.

*The person’s response was well that’s not English, and adamantly that English is about novels and literature – filmmaking is the job of IT people.*

Doecke, Locke and Petrosky (2003) argue that resistance to critique is evident within the profession and that ‘custodians of a literary tradition persist’ (p. 107), while Nettelbeck (2003) uses a seafaring metaphor to claim that ‘most English teachers would like to anchor their ships in the safe harbour of literature, cling to the now moribund cultural heritage model of learning rather than venturing out into an anarchic and untravelled world’ (p 68).

Tensions and resistance within the faculty were more problematic for those teachers charged with faculty leadership who were attempting to lead change but were also having to appease those colleagues who wanted to preserve English as they have always known and taught it:

*I’ve just had it, because it’s like I feel like I’m always having to be really diplomatic, always wearing the masks … Actually I feel a little concerned at the moment with teachers in the faculty who are saying ‘Just leave me behind, just don’t bother with me because I don’t want to be made to do this’.*

In contrast, comments from those who were not faculty leaders commented on how they were constrained and kept in check by faculty and school-based requirements that privileged traditional print texts and did not make provision for multimodal digital texts (such as films or digital poems). School-based requirements generally included novel studies, a range of print genres, a film study, creative writing and so on, but digital texts or literacies were not mandated features of the curriculum:
Because we are so constrained to have to do the same thing from Years 8 to 11, the only bit of freedom I get to be creative is in my (Year 12) class.

And:

‘... teach your novel, teach your film, teach your poetry, make sure they write three essays.’

Such structures and the organisation of curriculum and assessment around common print texts replicates subject English in a print-dominated world and favours reproduction of the canon over the design of new texts and knowledge, despite changing communication practices and the affordances of digital technologies (Kress, 2002).

One teacher revealed that the opportunity to engage in dialogue and debate within the research project highlighted for her how infrequently she had opportunities for ongoing discussion and shared reflection with her school-based colleagues, so she decided to disrupt the usual faculty meeting agenda:

_I was trying to get some ideas for this unit, so I thought I would ask my colleagues because we were all sitting there together as craftspeople: I like to think that when you get a really good batch of English teachers together, it’s as good as having a bunch of surgeons together. You don’t save lives, but you do get a momentum! I loved that. I just loved it! Because we are usually talking about curriculum, never what we are actually doing, so sometimes I’m starved of a vibe and a buzz about my craft … That’s the first time we’ve had that kind of discussion in a faculty meeting, for all the years I have been teaching. It sounds hilarious, but I don’t ever get to talk to anyone about this._

The excitement and dialogue she managed to generate on that occasion led her to consider declaring in a future meeting that she would no longer teach the novel: not because she actually intended abandoning the novel, but she felt that this would generate the debate she needed to clarify her own thinking as well as engage her colleagues in debates about the changing nature of subject English. The four teachers shared the view that such conversations were rare within their schools and one teacher observed that bells, routines and duties ensured that they ‘would only be very incidental or they may start but not continue on, you know, seeing it through to the end’.

While generous provision of digital technologies and related professional learning are vital for teachers who wish to expand notions of subject English to include digital texts and production, the argument is made here that these may well be wasted without the support of like-minded or interested colleagues who will engage in debates and the development of new textual and pedagogical repertoires. Further to this, English teachers who collectively advocate for textual and pedagogical change, fairer resourcing, timely technical support and appropriate provision of professional learning may achieve a more substantial shift in local school politics and beyond. For the teachers in this research, a sense of isolation in the past had hindered their creativity and impetus, yet once they had established a network and shared aspirations, they felt more able to speak up, and this was evident in the disruption of business as usual in the faculty meeting, and another’s refusal to ‘take the scraps’ and share a computer room.

**Conclusion**

Across this paper, I have argued that a Digital Education Revolution, or indeed a quieter shift in orientations to subject English that values the texts of page and screen, demands a new approach and improved conditions for teaching English in local contexts. Firstly I suggest that professional learning pedagogies for a digital age should allow teachers time to playfully engage with technologies for extended and sustained periods of time. In the second strand I maintained that regardless of the quality of the professional program, equitable access to technologies and technical support are critical, and directly influence what a teacher and his/her students are able to accomplish. Finally, in relation to the third
thread, I explored issues of professional isolation and proposed a renewal of teacher solidarity and collective agency to examine the changing contexts and nature of literacy and English teaching and learning in a digital world, and to then educate others who may or may not be English teachers themselves. The brief, sequential development of this argument does not adequately represent the complexities and tensions that will continue to permeate discussions of how best to proceed into the twenty-first century. However, the intention here to identify key elements that apportion responsibility across schools and systems and remove the burden of change from those teachers who are attempting to forge a way forward despite the inconsistencies or inadequacies in relation to professional learning, resourcing and collegiality.

It is my hope that these threads will be considered and debated by classroom teachers, school leadership teams and those who manage digital resources in school, and that the goals of professional renewal and improved educational outcomes for students in schools will precipitate collective goodwill and more equitable and sustainable school policies and procedures. One of the teacher’s claims that 70% of the school’s digital resources were being used by only about 1% of the school’s population may have been exaggerated for effect, yet schools might take up the challenge of quantifying access across learning areas and year levels to ascertain who is using computers, and who is not, or conduct an audit of professional learning over recent years to measure the school’s investment in teachers’ digital literacies. These moves do not mean that print texts lose their value, or that teachers who are firmly committed to more traditional approaches to teaching English or literacy have nothing to contribute. On the contrary because print and screen texts and literacies enjoy symbiotic relationships that can be explored, critiqued and enjoyed in English and literacy classrooms One of the teachers captured this interweaving of traditional and digital texts neatly in her narrative: Really I want print texts and ICTs to be all beautifully woven together in some sort of complex fabric …

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