<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Exploring the ideological mediation of an out-of-school digital storytelling workshop</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Kate T. Anderson and Prudence Wales</td>
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<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td><em>American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, Denver, Colorado, 30 April to 4 May 2010</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Paper Title**  Exploring the Ideological Mediation of an Out-of-School Digital Storytelling Workshop

**Author(s)**  Kate T. Anderson, National Institute of Education, Singapore

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Exploring the ideological mediation of an out-of-school digital storytelling workshop

Kate T. Anderson

Prudence Wales

National Institute of Education, Singapore

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Corresponding author: Kate Anderson: gourdo246@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores a post-empowerment view of designing for learning by examining how our participation as researchers and facilitators in an out-of-school digital storytelling workshop with a Singapore community center was mediated by theoretical ideals, local needs, and ideological definitions of learning and participation. The analysis we present unpacks emerging and overarching “facts” about what learning and authorship are and who is authorized to define them with implications for navigating competing ideologies of literacy, text, learning, and access when designing for literacy learning. ¹

Theoretical Framework

Institutionally organized learning is shaped by macro-scale discourses that often include normative definitions of learning along canonical and authoritative lines. Progressive arguments for how to define, assess, and design for learning related to language and literacies have proliferated, many of which highlight that language positioned as a goal of learning and object of study is always ideological and tied to access. We consider here the social

¹ We define texts as written, spoken, enacted, or otherwise constructed acts of meaning making, which can include scripts, conversations, and other, less canonical notions of bounded meaning-making acts like a game of chess or refusal to participate in a school activity.
construction of “language learning” in a three-week, out-of-school, digital storytelling workshop (DSW) that we designed to foster opportunities for youth to author texts. From the lens of critical design ethnography (Barab, Thomas, Dodge, Squire, & Newell, 2004), we critique the orchestration of agentive opportunities for youth when the social milieu in which they live and learn is shaped heavily by static and narrowly bounded discourses of literacies and learning.

Mehan (2008) stated that, although design research incorporates elements of traditional ethnography and evaluation research, it extends the aims of both. Design research does not just seek to interpret “what’s going on here” (as with traditional ethnography) or to examine relationships between intended and enacted practice (as with evaluation research). Instead, design research explores tensions and gaps between goals and outcomes from an explicitly ideological perspective. Also, unlike participatory action research, critical design ethnography not only evaluates design in the immediate context(s) of its development but also formulates insights for its usefulness in other contexts (Barab, Dodge, Thomas, Jackson, & Tuzun, 2007) by critically examining interactions between local context, macro-social structures, and ideologies across both. Design research and critical ethnography of design endeavors thus entail exploring assumptions and values driving participants’ as well as researchers’ actions in light of the social context of their unfolding.

Design research is an approach to educational inquiry growing out of the learning sciences, instructional design, and anthropology (e.g., Barab et al., 2004; Collins, Joseph, & Bielaczyc, 2004; Mehan 2008). Common to most design research is the goal of iteratively refining various aspects of a learning environment (e.g., relationships, activities, goals) based on cycles of theorizing, design, intervention, analysis, and re-design. Design begins with researchers’ core theoretical commitments related to social ontology, epistemology, interaction, pedagogy, and learning, which they then attempt to embody in designs that aim to
foster certain social agendas, reform initiatives, and improve learning. Importantly however, designs are viewed not only as product-oriented processes but also as ongoing evolutions where participants are co-designers who crucially shape the process and the underlying commitments (Barab et al., 2004). Most design research aims to hear participant voices and shape theory and refinements to design accordingly.

In this paper, we consider a DSW from a post-emancipatory perspective in which we examine a design research process where the voices we attempted to hear did not speak to us in ways we were initially prepared to listen. Rather, these voices animated institutional ideologies of literacies and learning that we did not expect or share. We detail an ideological tension between what came to count as “worthwhile participation” in the unfolding of this DSW by conceptualizing the interplay between structure (macro) and agency (micro) to better understand how circulating ideologies of language learning and literacies impact design efforts with emancipatory theoretical agendas.

**Modes of Inquiry**

We present a critical design ethnography (Barab et al., 2004, 2007) that frames the design process as peopled, embodied, and thus shaped by all stakeholders in value-laden ways. We discuss this critical design ethnography in light of how the circulating ideologies of literacies and learning mediated participation across the different layers of design. In so doing, we address how attempts to empower, or give voice, were problematic, especially when competing stakeholder agendas were shaped by differing assumptions about participation and learning. We thus problematize what it meant for us to attempt to design for agency via a broadened approach to literacy, texts, and authorship in an institutional and national climate where agency is usually reserved for those with authority, and creativity is often defined in terms of skills-based pedagogy (Kwek, Albright, & Kramer-Dahl, 2007). The research questions guiding this study include: (1) how did stakeholders orient to the
DSW in terms of roles and goals?; (2) how did the core theoretical commitments informing our design become embodied and change across the three layers of mediated design—intended, authorized, and lived?; and (3) what tensions arose when we attempted to co-design with a community center a space for youth creativity to emerge through expanded notions of text and authorship? By addressing these questions, we aim to understand how our design endeavor became peopled and differentially valued as evidenced by interactional details and outcomes. Illuminating competing agendas requires a critical and methodic interpretation of the co-design process. To this end, we enlist critical design ethnography and present our approach next.

**Critical Design Ethnography**

Barab et al. (2004) first outlined critical design ethnography and described its core goals as: (1) empowering learners to see themselves as active contributors to their community and (2) understanding the local processes and relationships that are part of such design work (designing in ways that can be adapted for use in other contexts). As part of design ethnography, researchers are in the dual role of supporting the learning community and building trusting relationships while also critiquing practice and aiming for iterative improvements to design. Barab and colleagues defined *empowerment* as developing “common knowledge and critical awareness” (2004, p. 257), and their design hinged on inspiring social action through reflexive awareness of social responsibility and community commitments.

In a commentary paper on critical design ethnography, Reason (2004) discussed a similar goal—emancipation—in terms of fostering “liberating ways of knowing” and engagement in decision-making processes (p. 271). *Empowerment* in Barab and colleagues’ context of study drew on a changing sense of learners’ roles, responsibilities, and power. Reason similarly characterized *emancipation* as liberating participants from a lack of agency.
In this paper, we critically examine our experience as co-designers and attempted change agents in a design research process; however, our focus is not on a humanist sense of empowerment or emancipation. Rather, our design ethnography centers on a sociocultural view of authorship and learning as dialogic and participatory, but not necessarily emancipatory.

Our interest in co-designing a DSW with an after-school center in Singapore was inspired by a dissatisfaction with the hegemonic ethos of education in Singapore, marked by heavy test preparation, didactic pedagogies, and narrow institutional orientations to texts and authorship (Cheah, 1998; Kwek et al., 2007; Stroud & Wee, 2007). Shaped by the salience of these practices and normative definitions of text and literacy that continue to pervade many education systems worldwide (e.g., Flowerdew & Miller, 2008), we believe that such narrowness necessarily closes down pathways for some learners who are uncomfortable with, resistant to, or seen as unsuccessful at understanding and producing texts in narrowly defined ways. In addition, our sociocultural perspective on learning emphasizes the importance of providing opportunities for youth to take multiple positions relative to texts as readers, critics, and authors. DSWs thus can provide a platform for opening up spaces for youth to try out different ways of being with texts.

Data Sources

To these ends, we conducted a three-week DSW with 9 and 10-year old youth (Primary 4) at a Singapore community centre, Green Town (all names of places and individuals are pseudonyms). During this workshop, eight youth worked in two groups of four to create DSs. Video-recordings of both groups totaled 15 hours, which were transcribed verbatim for content (with Mandarin—most participants’ primary home language—translated into English), totaling 300 single-spaced pages. For the analysis presented here we focus on one of the two groups of youth, comprised of four boys—John, Qing Feng, Bronson, and
Mark. We analyze elements of our DSW design below according to interactional evidence of different stakeholder assumptions about roles and goals in the DSW, which we interpret from transcripts, video recordings, and fieldnotes to unpack how clashing ideologies shaped the mediated layers of design.

Analysis

In this section we describe: (1) our design intentions as they relate to social agenda, reform initiative, and learning—the intended design, (2) the unfolding design decisions as shaped by all stakeholders—the authorized design, (3) participants’ negotiation and positioning of the DSW—the lived design, and (4) the way institutional and ideological discourses mediated the design process across these three layers.

Intended Design

As we discussed above, our core theoretical commitments in designing an out-of-school DSW were to: (1) foster youths’ authorship, (2) build opportunities for participation in collaborative activities with texts broadly defined, and (3) to support youths’ interests.

Coming from a sociocultural approach, we sought to create opportunities for youth to engage texts from multiple positions (including as authors) through non-didactic, youth-generated storytelling processes and stories. We provide concrete examples of design specifications that embody these intentions in Table 1 below. By providing youth with ample resources to create their own digital stories, we aimed to support their role as authors. However, all designs are to be pushed towards greater usefulness, which we now discuss in relation to the design as mediated by the local context, and Green Town itself, in the authorized design.

Table 1.

Core Theoretical Commitments as Embodied across the Mediated Levels of the Design Process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intended Design (embodied)</th>
<th>Authorized Design (co-</th>
<th>Lived Design (sites of</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>conjectures)</td>
<td>design push back)</td>
<td>ideological tension)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
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<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster creativity as authors</td>
<td>• Dramatic conventions, story sharing</td>
<td>• Quick activities to share stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Adults as guides and mentors</td>
<td>• Adults as time managers and coaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Youth create individual stories about topics of their interest</td>
<td>• Collaborative stories; roles and expertise negotiated amongst group mates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Youth unused to sharing ideas; stories quickly decided upon</td>
<td>• Adults as sanctioners, behavior managers, artistic directors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support expanded ideas of text</td>
<td>• Stories based on youth ideas; non-authoritative</td>
<td>• Groups decide on topics together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Multiple construction paths</td>
<td>• Single construction path due to group effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Process prioritized over product (peer-critique, revision, experimentation)</td>
<td>• Focus on completing story within timeframe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Groups decide on topics together</td>
<td>• Book brought by youth prompted story idea; he claimed ownership and leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privilege emergent literacy practices</td>
<td>• Group sharing and brainstorm</td>
<td>• Group activities to decide topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Adults to support youth direction</td>
<td>• Adults to shape direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Synergize connections between interests and authoring</td>
<td>• Suggest connections between ideas and product; occasionally sanction and direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Quick selection of story idea from published book</td>
<td>• Time constraints shape adult role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Interests must fit time frame and institutional norms</td>
<td>• Authority contested among group members</td>
</tr>
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**Authorized Design**
As mentioned above, we initially intended to work with 12 to 16 year-old participants, but instead, we worked with nine and ten-year-olds. Instead of an ongoing weekly workshop, Green Town wanted a workshop with a fixed time frame that would run between school terms. We settled on a three-week workshop, meeting twice a week for two hours each session (totaling 12 hours). Given this quite limited time frame and that there were only three researcher-facilitators, we decided to limit the workshop to ten participants who would work in groups of three or four to collaboratively create a DS, as opposed to our initial plan of individually constructed DSs. The DSW was further positioned by Green Town to incorporate a detailed timeline. Only so much emergence can take place in a 12-hour DSW with 9-10 year olds if they are to construct even one draft of a DS; based upon our documented agreement with Green Town, a completed DS was expected. Therefore, we recognized the need to create enough structure to allow participants to construct story ideas and begin exploring them quickly.

The revamped phases of the DSW were as follows: Day 1—drama activities to facilitate groups’ story ideas, then work on script and storyboard; Day 2 and 3—construct story scenes and take photos of them for use in Windows MovieMaker (WMM); Day 4—import scene photos into WMM, plan voiceovers, and create titles and credits; Day 5—record voiceovers and sounds effects; Day 6—final revisions and viewing.

In the authorized design, a focus on product and efficiency took shape because the DSs would be created in groups and our agreement on the formulated lesson plan/skills requested by Green Town. This greater focus on procedure and time-constrained logistics meant that we could not prioritize openness and youth-generated authorship practices as much as we had hoped. Acknowledging the ways we had to position the workshop in order to gain access—learning goals to be attained, a plan to be followed, and the expectations these helped to create—we came to realize in the unfolding of the authorized design that
circulating ideologies of learning, literacy, and use of youths’ out-of-school time played an undeniable role in shaping the DSW.

**Lived Design**

The lived design includes how direct stakeholders in the design process—center staff, youth participants, and researchers—enacted the design, including positioning roles and goals in the DSW. The intended design led to tensions in light of the authorized design, culminating in the lived design. The lived design thus represents a site for analyzing how these clashing ideologies created certain opportunities for authoring over others, types of participation for all stakeholders, and what these efforts might implicate for future designs and pedagogical approaches informed by sociocultural and multiliteracies approaches.

The material and social affordances of Green Town’s infrastructure contributed to the lived design. The DSW took place in a small, adjacent room separated from the rest of the center youth who were doing “regular” afternoon activities—e.g., reciting classic poems and parables in unison with Michael (the full-time center staff member who worked with the youth), having nap and tea time. Michael checked in regularly with our group when they could be heard outside. We also called Michael in to restore order when necessary, as agreed upon with the center manager at our initial meeting. The center manager’s warmth toward the youth (hugs, soft voice when she came to visit) as well as their excitement at seeing her (calling her name and running over to her), stood in sharp contrast to Michael’s relationship with the youth. Michael was no-nonsense, stern, and foreboding. We had assumed that his position as disciplinarian would allow us to avoid being seen by the youth as authority figures or overstepping our role at the center. However, the youth became so loud at points that we occasionally threatened to bring in Michael, which met with the youths’ trepidation.

The aspects of our role vis à vis Michael further situated the authorized design in opposition to the core commitments of the intended design. The burgeoning authoritative
structures imposed by Green Town’s goals and adherence to macro-level policy (e.g., KPIs), Michael’s role and embodiment of the tensions between our own and Green Town’s agendas, and our positions vacillating between supportive facilitators and behavior managers also created an ideological gap. Play and “transgressions” are not normally seen as acceptable in Singapore schools, even at the primary level. This also struck us as being the case at Green Town. In a way we colluded in transgression by trying to create an open space, where youth could play and be loud(er) as a necessary part of working on their DSs. We now situate this transgression amidst an analysis of how “orientations to school” were constructed through different stakeholders’ positionings of useful and appropriate spending of youths’ time, what counted as “story,” how roles were positioned, and how authority was evoked.

**Orientations to School.** We organize our discussion of the lived design according to one particularly salient theme—orientations to school in the DSW. Analytic attention to both the ideologies we claim were circulating and our conflicting roles complexify simplistic notions about emancipating youth voices. All stakeholders contributed to the colonization process by which the DSW became at least partially accountable to school-like foci on product, ability, authoritative texts, and sanctioning youth behavior.

**Center staff—Michael.** Michael was the sole adult facilitating the youth after-school program at Green Town. Michael checked in with us numerous times during the DSW, usually when the noise level rose or the participants left the room repeatedly. Unfortunately, Michael was not involved in the negotiating of our entry and its terms on Green Town’s end, and we did not meet him until the first day of the DSW when it was too late to openly discuss roles and goals. When youth left our room to look for supplies, use the bathroom, or get a drink, Michael would sternly address them, forbidding them to leave again as they were disrupting the group’s activities outside. When Michael came in, the video-recording marked a stark change in youths’ behavior: their faces seemed frozen, their tone deferent and hushed,
their eyes wide. When Michael left, things returned to how they were prior. Michael also reprimanded the participants for speaking Mandarin, one time saying, “In this lesson, all speak English, understand? No Mandarin!” The youth quietly groaned and glanced at each other, but after Michael left they jokingly took turns calling out, “Mandarin, ooooh,” when someone inevitably lapsed into Mandarin. These interactions had the effect of reinstating some of the order and adult-driven hierarchy Michael represented.

Participants—Youth. The youth were negotiating relationships and responsibilities—with us, each other, and Michael. The differences between how we and Michael interacted with the youth likely confused them as much as our team’s vacillating facilitation between supporting playful creativity and focusing on task completion and behavioral compliance.

Engagement and playfulness characterized much of the group’s collaborative work across the six days. This was interspersed with 1) youth-proposed issues of ownership (who wrote/drew what and what roles they will have, and 2) our team’s somewhat inconsistent positioning of our roles within the DSW—fostering creativity by praising performativity while in the next moment blurring boundaries by trying to get the group back “on-task.” This early on, the unfolding goals were being negotiated, with our team unfortunately contributing to the regimentation of play by intermittently focusing on who individually contributed what and task completion. The youth also positioned us as potential sanctioners and judges of quality or correctness. Script-as-story, ownership, valid use of time, and appeals to us to comment on correctness and quality of their “work” are but a few examples of orientations to school from the larger corpus. On other occasions, they insisted that we comment on which group’s DS was better, suggested their grammar was “very bad” (seeming to seek reassurance), and asked us if their work was “good or bad.” The youth seemed to expect that we would single them out to reprimand or report them to Michael or provide a judgment.
about their grammar or quality of work. These few examples of youths’ orientations to school illustrate their negotiation of roles and goals with us, between themselves, and in light of Michael’s looming presence.

Of course, the boundaries between each stakeholder group are fluid, and we and Michael were also integral to such orientations. By orienting to issues of authorship, correctness, quality, and by positioning us as sanctioners and evaluators, the youth help to create an aura of school with its attendant accountability structures. In turn, we also oriented to time constraints, quality (through our praise), and directives (through suggestion and task structuring).

Researchers—Us. Due to the constraints of the authorized co-design with Green Town, our intended design and its embodied theoretical commitments was pushed back upon. Instead of guides supporting youth direction, we became more like art-directors as well as time and behavior managers. This was not just due to the authorized design constraints but was also compounded by all stakeholders’ positioning of the DSW goals in the lived design.

In response to our occasional sanctioning of behavior and even explicit references to school, the youth pleaded that we not bring Michael in (and pointing the finger at each other’s transgressions at times) and lamented being part of the DSW (on a few occasions), probably because at times it seemed quite a bit like school in some ways. At other times, we praised their efforts or encouraged performativity; however our inconsistency in how we positioned our roles and goals for the youths’ participation likely confused our agenda and the youth. This vacillation was exacerbated by our team’s internal differences in how we each responded to Green Town’s push-back to be more structured in our engagement of the youth, with our Singaporean research associate coming closest to Green Town’s norms.

Scholarly Significance

The outcomes of the lived design as they pertain to roles and goals include a tension
between our wanting to downplay the authority vested in us as researchers in the Singapore context and to find out what youth participants wanted to create within the bounds of the DSW. The staff, on the other hand, prioritized structured opportunities to develop “key skills.” The youth also oriented to individual ownership and authorship, correctness, and adherence to form—all hallmarks of how schoolwork is positioned in Singapore. These multiple positionings thus illuminate ideological tensions between how participants are meant to behave and what they are expected to accomplish in the intended and lived design.

While there were strong pressures from multiple sources for youth to be quiet and complete a story on time, they collaboratively created a DS entirely unlikely to be produced in a Singapore Primary 4 classroom (their grade level)—it was collaborative, image-driven, fanciful, a bit gory, and performative—none of which are typical characterizations of English assignments. We conclude that the shift in adult role from the norm and relative openness about what youth were doing resulted in a creative, collaboratively produced DS.

In light of shifting ideological views of education (e.g., multiliteracies; constructivist learning), we problematize the notion of designing for agency. We thus examined the relationships between one instance of youths’ literacy practices out-of-school and the seeming colonization of those practices by institutional ideologies of text and authorship. This colonization has implications for the method of design research as well as for curricular design more generally, because attempts to empower are always mediated by expectations about roles and goals at the local interactional level as well as at the ideological macro level. Highlighting tensions between structure and agency embodied in our intended design and the institutional arm of Michael, respectively, culminated in opportunities for agentive authoring and creativity pushed back upon by reactions from all stakeholders.

We, as researchers, experienced tensions between the expected and in-place, meso-level structures of this institution as well as the ideological macro-policies of Singaporean
education. However, as much as our attempts worked against the main discourses of the institution, these circulating macro-discourses also shaped our enactments. The DSs were mediating texts that connected transgressive worlds with sanctioned worlds. They were mediated by the design and its unfolding layers as well as our own transgressive breach of Green Town’s functioning at the same time that they shaped youths’ roles and relationships as owners and sanctioners.

References


