

Considering the benefits of research participation: insights from a study of adult EAL educators

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Abstract: Despite the professional learning benefits that may be realised through participation in research, many institutions and teachers are reluctant to get involved. They (correctly) anticipate that it will require some time, effort, and commitment. They may understand that research is important for improving education practices but more direct and immediate value for them and, importantly, how to gain it may not be obvious. To address this issue, we report a part of a six-month study that used institutional ethnography as the method of inquiry. We present and analyse three generative episodes that we observed and experienced in the context of our research collaboration with the participants at one adult community-based English as an Additional Language (EAL) institution in Melbourne (Australia). These episodes provide important insights into the ways in which our participants were proactive in realising the benefits of participating in the research. The participating teachers brought research and practice into regular dialogue and strategically utilised our partnership for their professional learning. We conclude by discussing some practical strategies for EAL institutions, teachers, and researchers who want to unlock and maximise the learning potential of research partnerships.

Keywords: research participation, teacher-researcher relationships, professional learning, EAL, adult education, digital literacies

Introduction

Ideally, educational research involves a generative and mutually beneficial partnership between researchers and the participants in institutional settings, such as teachers. These partnerships may take different forms with negotiation about the degree of agency that participants can have in the research process (Cowie et al.,

2010; Reimer & Bruce, 1994). In educational settings, one such form is what we call “cooperation” between teachers and researchers. It implies that teachers are actively involved in data generation. For example, they agree to complete surveys, participate in interviews and focus groups, allow researchers into their classrooms to observe them, and explain their teaching processes and pedagogies *in situ*. Such a research partnership can generate rich data and provide important insights into practices as they happen in the day-to-day of teaching and learning.

While this scenario is ideal, one typical difficulty that many educational researchers face is obtaining institutional cooperation and individual teacher’s consent to participate in research. Gaining meaningful cooperation is a challenging and time-consuming task for many educational researchers (Befort et al., 2008; Prendergast & Rickinson, 2019; West, 2016). Potential participants may decline involvement in research for many reasons. For educational institutions, the main reasons for not participating include unrealistic demands on time, constraints due to timetabling, lack of connection with institutional priorities, sensitivities about the research focus, potentially negative portrayals of the institution, and participation in other research studies (Befort et al., 2008; Prendergast & Rickinson, 2019; Wanat, 2008; West, 2016).

Teachers may be reluctant to participate in research projects because the burden of participation can be substantial. For example, if teachers are asked to report on several students in their classrooms and share key aspects of their practice through a range of research activities, this may require a significant amount of time, effort, and commitment (Richard & Belanger, 2018; West, 2016). Additionally, research participation may disrupt teachers’ regular routines, duties, and responsibilities (Richard & Belanger, 2018; West, 2016). The power relationship between a teacher and a researcher should not be underestimated. As researchers are often seen as experts, some teachers may be worried about researchers coming to the classrooms, asking difficult or sensitive questions and making judgements about their work and professionalism (Heath et al., 2007; Richard & Belanger, 2018; Troman, 1996). Teachers may also be concerned about privacy and confidentiality, especially in light of the power relationships that always exist in a workplace (Wanat, 2008; West, 2016).

Furthermore, researchers may confront challenges that are unique to specific groups of participants. Richard and Belanger (2018) refer to the complexity, specificity, and uniqueness of goals and interests that may exist within specific organisational settings. They argue that this specificity may shape how different stakeholders within these settings engage in research. This perspective is relevant when conducting research within English as an Additional Language (EAL) contexts – in both schools and Adult Community Education (ACE). Such settings are often populated by learners who have experienced trauma, dislocation, disadvantage, or failure in their previous education (Matthews, 2008). Their teachers may adopt a protective stance because the presence of researchers in their midst may be perceived as a threat.

All in all, educational researchers often ask a lot from institutions and teachers (Befort et al., 2008) and it takes time, sensitivity, and understanding to build relationships and trust such that cooperative partnerships are sustainable. In this context, reciprocal benefits can play a substantial role in encouraging research participation (Clark, 2010). Potential participants may understand that research is important for improving educational practices. However, benefits apparent to the researchers may be less obvious to the educational institutions and teachers working within these settings. According to Nussbaum (2017), while research findings represent “a source of symbolic benefits for the researcher” (p. 47), they often have little (if any) direct and immediate value for the educational institutions and teacher-participants themselves. Nevertheless, as some studies have found (Prendergast & Rickinson, 2019; Richard & Belanger, 2018), teachers participating in research do expect “a return on their investment” (Richard & Belanger, 2018, p. 64). This demand for reciprocity is summed up by West (2016), who argues that,

[m]aking a case for the importance of the research for advancing knowledge of education and for improving instructional practices and student outcomes is not always sufficient ... Researchers must be prepared to answer the question, such as what is in it for me, my school, and my students? What are the direct benefits of participation? (p. 549)

Furthermore, institutions and teacher-participants may not necessarily know how to access or fully utilise the benefits that research projects might provide. They may be unfamiliar with research culture and its ethical parameters and, thus, hesitant to

negotiate the “give-and-take” of the relationship. As participation in most educational research is voluntary, it is important for teachers participating in research to have discernment about how to make the investment of time and effort personally and professionally worthwhile. This can be especially important in EAL settings. In these settings, both the employment status of teachers and opportunities for professional learning have become insecure in recent years due to “intermittent and ad hoc funded assistance” (Oliver et al., 2017, p. 7).

Consistent with Richard and Belanger’s (2018) call for more insights into research participation within specific settings (such as EAL), this article explores how EAL teachers from one ACE institution participated proactively to generate reciprocal benefits in our research project about digital literacies. It is not our intention here to be definitive in arguing how teachers should participate in research. Rather, we want to report how the teachers participating in this research were able to enhance their professional learning through their engagement. Based on the analysis of the participants’ experiences, we offer some practical strategies for encouraging research participation that accounts for the needs and interests of participants. This article also offers insights for educational researchers working within EAL settings who want to increase participation in their projects.

Literature review: benefits of research for institutions and teachers

Recent literature about the benefits of research for institutions and teachers has largely been focused on mainstream school contexts rather than adult, community, and EAL settings. Nevertheless, a review of school-based literature provides a useful backdrop to the discussion about the research participation of adult EAL institutions and teachers.

Benefits for schools

Material incentives funded by the researchers are reported in the literature as one of the benefits for schools. To acknowledge the burden that participation entails, some schools are offered free teaching resources when participating in pilot projects evaluating these resources (West, 2016). Similarly, Befort et al. (2008) report that school principals often see diverse material donations as one of the benefits of research participation, including snacks for after-school programs, stationary for classrooms, and playground equipment.

However, monetary or material incentives are not always the main benefit desired and schools see many other benefits of research participation. For example, for many institutions, the greatest benefit is receiving a copy of the report summarising the main findings of the research and offering usable insights into school practices and processes (Befort et al., 2008; Prendergast & Rickinson, 2019). Another more intrinsic benefit that schools can gain through participation in research is good publicity (Wanat, 2008). Additionally, schools highly value research projects that engage with activities for students (Prendergast & Rickinson, 2019).

Professional learning benefits for teachers

Literature often acknowledges that research participation can provide teachers with a number of professional learning benefits (Befort et al., 2008; Eiserman & Behl, 1992; Richard & Belanger, 2018). This is especially true for participatory action research and research designs for practitioner inquiry such as design-based research (DBR) (e.g. Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Avgitidou 2020; Kemmis et al., 2014; Lau & Stille 2014; Mitchell et al., 2009). However, professional learning in this type of research is neither incidental nor informal; it is designed and intentional. By contrast, the literature which explores teachers' informal learning in research projects that are based on cooperation between teachers and researchers is not as extensive.

One typical professional learning benefit identified in this body of literature is access to different training workshops offered as a part of research projects. For example, Richard and Belanger (2018) investigated teachers' perspectives on research participation and found that, for teachers, participation in research was often a means of gaining "access to 'ready-made' knowledge" (p. 66), not available otherwise. Importantly, these workshops were sometimes viewed as more valuable than other types of training due to their sustained nature and intricate connections to teachers' practices. Similarly, Befort et al. (2008) found that professional development offerings for teachers that are part of research initiatives are often seen by school principals as an important advantage that can be gained from research participation.

Another important advantage often reported in the literature is an opportunity for teachers to engage in critical reflections on their practice, enabling them to see aspects of their work that have previously been taken for granted. This, in turn, helps them appreciate unrecognised opportunities for professional learning.

Jurasaite-Harbison and Rex (2005), who analysed interactions between a researcher and teacher-participant during research interviews, found that the teacher “intentionally made use of these interactions to re-examine her practice” (p. 448). In particular, the teacher-participant engaged in retrospective reflections on her current practice, re-examined her work, and thought about ways to transform her practice. For Jurasaite-Harbison and Rex (2005), it was “one of the ways she involved herself in professional development” (p. 447) which promoted the teacher’s self-awareness about her practices and, in turn, her agency as a practitioner. The researchers conclude that “research is an opportunity for professional development” (p. 449) and all qualitative research should be considered “a default form of professional development” (p. 449).

Similarly, in their research on the use of storytelling in the classrooms, Rex et al. (2002) invited the teacher-participants to respond to their data analysis. The teachers reported that responding to data analysis made them more conscious about the stories they tell in the classrooms and the impact they can have on children and their learning. It also made these teachers think more strategically about the choice of stories for teaching, signalling impact on practice and significant professional growth.

An opportunity to take a reflexive stance and change practices through research participation was also documented by Richard and Belanger (2018). However, in contrast to the studies discussed above, this publication refers to feedback and insights offered by researchers. The participants reported the value of “a critical outside view on practice” (p. 65) which may emerge in the context of research projects at the coalface. The teacher-participants affirmed the value of researchers’ feedback as it triggers important reflexivity and, thus, embodies an important element of effective professional learning. However, Richard and Belanger (2018) note that such feedback can be threatening for some teachers, signalling the significance and value of authentic dialogue, genuine collaboration, and trusting relationships between visiting researchers and “host” teachers. It appears that effective professional learning is contingent upon and emergent through these relationships.

Another important professional learning benefit that can be gained from research participation is access to new ideas and resources for teaching. Eiserman and Behl (1992) explored the

benefits of research participation for special education practitioners. They suggest that during the research projects teachers may gain new ideas for teaching. They may also receive resources to implement these ideas and even instructional assistance which can lead to improved practices. Importantly, Eiserman and Behl (1992) emphasise that research participation often inspires teachers to conduct their own classroom research with the aim to improve their practices. Similarly, Richard and Belanger (2018) found that teachers were receptive to studies which can offer resources to help them meet their specific pedagogical needs. In this way, participation in research becomes “instrumental in a teacher’s professional development” (Eiserman & Behl, 1992, p.12).

While this body of literature provides useful insights into professional learning benefits that can be gained from research participation, little is known about how teachers and institutions, especially in EAL settings, can access these benefits. As Williams (2018) argues, the organisation of professional employment and work in the EAL context in Australia has changed over the last 25 years:

[T]here is less room for independent ethical decision making by teachers, with strong expectations of them meeting broad institutional goals, rather than being advocates for their discipline and students as was more common, although certainly not universal, in the early 1990s. (p. 15)

Adult EAL teachers “are no longer considered stakeholders in the organisations in which they work, but as temporary servants who provide a specific service” (Williams, 2018, p. 15). This means they are less able to shape the professional learning agendas of their institutions that depend significantly on funding bodies and policy makers. In this context, research participation might become an important source of meaningful and relevant professional learning for teachers. There is a need for specific strategies that institutions and teachers can use to unlock and maximise the professional learning benefits that are inherent in organisationally-based qualitative research.

The research project

Setting

Our six-month research project concerned the provision of digital literacies education within English language programs at an ACE

institution – Langfield (pseudonym) – considering classroom practices, institutional setting, and teachers’ professional learning needs. Langfield is a registered government-funded, multi-site provider of EAL and employment programs for adult learners in several different locations in Melbourne. The CEO of Langfield, 20 adult learners and six EAL teachers volunteered to participate in the study: Kate, Andrea, Susan, Polly, Tanya, Nicole (pseudonyms for the teachers).

Across its sites, Langfield had two dedicated computer rooms, several sets of iPads as well as projectors and teacher’s laptops in some classrooms. There was a specific learning program at Langfield – *Techno-Tuesday* (pseudonym) – which focused on digital literacies and was delivered on a weekly basis. This program attracted our research attention because digital literacies, as capabilities required for reading, writing and communicating in digital spaces for different purposes (Jones & Hafner, 2012), are especially important for these displaced adults moving to Australia as part of humanitarian and skilled migration programs. Digital literacies are required to access essential online services and information. They are important for joining new communities, accessing networks and engaging in independent language learning (Hafner, 2019; Kenny, 2016; Shariati et al., 2017). However, digital literacies are challenging within an EAL learning environment, not the least because of the variation in skill levels and the complex needs of adult learners from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Thus, we were interested in documenting and reporting the successes and challenges of Langfield teachers related to teaching digital literacies.

Methodology

For the broad project of working with Langfield, we employed ideas from Dorothy Smith’s concept of institutional ethnography (IE) (Smith, 2005). Smith points to the critical role of collegial relationships within institutional settings and how the interpersonal constitution of an organisation is pivotal to its outcomes. Smith’s ethnographic work focused on a researcher appreciating the totality of an institution and its life, including its important documents, the people and relationships within it, and the accepted practices and values that guide its mission. Researchers can only understand this totality by close involvement in the life of the organisation based on trust and a thorough recording of

that life. Thus, researchers are required to interact with the research site and participants closely and empathetically.

IE can also be viewed as a conceptual framework, since it incorporates the idea of how meaning and local epistemologies are constructed within the situated interactions, circumstances and exigencies of an organisational or community setting. We employed IE as a methodology and also a conceptual framework for analysis to understand the following dimensions of Langfield as a teaching and learning community:

- The ways and means of constructing meaning within the organisation
- Nature of professional collegial relationships
- Agency of teachers as professionals within the organisation
- Construction of local understandings that inform practice

To support this IE perspective, this research employed a range of qualitative data generation methods to understand the complexity and situatedness of different interactions and practices with and about digital technologies within Langfield (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Data generation methods included interviews with the teachers and CEO, focus groups with teachers and students, observations of the setting and taking detailed field notes, collection of site artefacts (e.g. teaching resources), video recordings of teaching and learning, and still photography.

This article has a distinct focus on the researcher-participant relationships and the ensuing development of interconnections and reciprocity with the organisation as a whole. The article brings attention to three key episodes recorded in our field notes. These episodes document what we observed and experienced when working closely with the participants from Langfield. While, of course, we are individual researchers with our own views and experiences, the analysis in this article reflects our combined position and voice. We selected these episodes because they are cogent examples of how the participants were proactive and effectively utilised our presence at the research site for their professional learning.

Research and practice in a dialogue: episodes of professional learning

As visitors at Langfield, we had privileged access to generate data for subsequent analysis. However, the teachers were aware that,

like them, we are also educators and former teachers (although not at Langfield) with a keen interest in digital literacies, EAL, and adult education. Whilst our primary purpose was to generate data, the participants saw opportunities for engaging in dialogue about their practices and drawing out information from us that they could utilise in their professional worlds. Importantly, as we saw in the following episodes, the teachers were deliberate and proactive, creating opportunities within the research interactions to address their professional needs.

Episode 1: "What do you think?"

Field notes

It was the second class on email communication taught by Polly and a volunteer assistant as a part of the *Techno-Tuesday* program in a small computer lab of the community house with eight desktop computers along the walls. At the beginning of the class, Polly explained that while last Tuesday they focused on setting up Gmail accounts for each individual student, this week their focus was on accessing these accounts and sending an email to a peer. It was a productive class for students and the majority (except for one) were able to send a message. However, the class seemed to be very laborious for the teachers who mainly worked with the learners individually assisting with the navigation process, prompting and repeating the steps, helping to use a mouse, supporting typing, managing password recovery, and troubleshooting different issues.

Once the students left the classroom, Polly said that she felt "a little bit frustrated" about this class. We noticed earlier that while all the teacher-participants at Langfield often did a great job with technology, they were very uncertain about their own ability to teach digital literacies. They viewed their own work as pedagogically deficient and, perhaps, even inadequate. This thinking was evident in Polly's comment too. However, then she suddenly asked me what I thought of her class. I felt that Polly would benefit from the discussion of her successful practices in this class. Thus, I started asking her questions about what worked well and why from her perspective. I also offered my interpretations of what I observed. We talked about different strategies that she used to support students' use of technology and reflected on several examples of successful learning.

As a part of this insightful and deeply reflective conversation, Polly asked me what *I*, as an educator, would do next and what else can be done to extend students' email skills. This question led to another productive dialogue as we both brainstormed possible

directions that her teaching might take. We carefully considered what students already could do confidently and what capabilities associated with email communication were central to their settlement experiences in Australia. After exploring a number of different ideas, we decided that the students would benefit from more opportunities to write emails in different contexts and to different recipients as well as to extend their operational skills by learning how to add an attachment to an email such as a photograph or a document.

2 September, 2019

As evident in this episode, Polly asked the researcher to offer feedback on her teaching and provide professional advice on her further lesson planning. This was instigated by Polly, who used her agency as a reflective educator to make the most of this opportunity. Trust developed between the teacher and the researcher over a number of visits to the site leading to a shared understanding about using research to facilitate best practice.

Learning plans at Langfield, as fluid institutional documents, were viewed by participants as highly beneficial for professional practice and central to professional learning about digital literacies at Langfield. As ethnographers aiming to gain new insights into this institutional environment that was unfamiliar to us, we enacted the roles of observers rather than mentors assisting with lesson planning. This meant that while we were open to professional dialogue, we were unlikely to provide substantive comments and suggestions about teaching and learning at Langfield without being invited. Polly chose to be proactive and agential in taking the initiative to start these generative conversations about her professional practice and, importantly, invited the researcher to contribute. By doing this, she extended on existing collegial practices at Langfield. Whether Polly realised this or not, she decisively used our research partnership to help her move forward in teaching digital literacies and improve her professional work as an EAL educator. The value of personal initiative and self-learning promulgated at Langfield appears to undergird her positioning of the importance of research knowledge.

Polly seemed most comfortable when observed in the classroom, perhaps suggesting that for her the dynamic role of teaching in context was where she preferred the research to be placed. Furthermore, as illustrated in this episode, after the class she honestly shared her doubts about the efficacy of her practice and uncertainty about next steps in teaching email communication to students for whom this was a new concept. To us, as researchers,

she admitted her vulnerability. This intimates that she felt safe to ask for constructive feedback from the researchers about her practice, signalling the growing trust, authenticity, genuineness, and openness of the relationships that Langfield teachers and the research team managed to build in the context of this project. Thus, informal and highly contextualised professional learning became a natural outcome of the research process itself.

Episode 2: Coming prepared to a research interview

Field notes

During the interview with Tanya, I was impressed by her definition of digital literacies because such understanding is rare among EAL practitioners. Tanya acknowledged that definitions of this concept vary and then she offered her perspective:

I see digital literacies as not just the skills to use it [technology]. That's part of it but it's having more that critical element. Like feeling confident to communicate on these devices and understanding how to navigate them, to use them for their own purposes. (Interview)

I noted to myself that her definition was well aligned with a socio-cultural theory of literacy as well as my own perspective on digital literacies that informs all my work in the field. Later, Tanya said:

I think you created a website which has got heaps of ideas... I had a brief look. (Interview)

Tanya referred to the website that I created – *Digital Literacies: EAL Teachers' Guide* (www.digitalliteracies.info) – and said that she had some questions for me. In particular, she wanted to know how to bring the critical dimension of digital literacies effectively into her teaching – the focus that remained unclear to her after exploring my site.

28 June, 2019

Our field notes about this episode from a research interview with Tanya suggest that she came prepared to the interview. She had accessed and evidently explored the website about digital literacies that was designed as a resource for teachers. This provided her with not only a fresh professional resource to build new learning but also fostered reflexivity about practice as part of her ongoing development as an educator seeking transformation of her teaching practice.

Whether she had previously encountered a socio-cultural perspective on digital literacies offered on the website is not clear. Obviously, she engaged with these ideas through reading and analysing the research-based website content as well as reflecting on her own practice through this lens. Such reflexive activities are often viewed as central to teachers' professional learning: teachers are encouraged to engage with research and use it to inform their practices (Broemmel et al., 2019). Tanya deliberately used our research partnership as an opportunity to signal quite explicitly her professional learning needs in terms of teaching critical digital literacy and position this new knowledge as part of her self-initiated professional learning. While it was not possible to address Tanya's questions in the context of the research interview, it became clear that there was a continuing desire and need for further professional dialogue about digital literacies, including their critical dimension, specifically tailored for the Langfield context. Tanya's wish to enhance her professional knowledge reflects the utility and importance of new knowledge that is embedded and contextualised.

Tanya's openness to this learning is also testament to the permissions granted earlier by the CEO of the organisation to have full access to the teachers and their practice environments, and it is consistent with the informal collegial professional learning observed at Langfield. This created a climate of trust between the researchers and the teachers. It also reflected the core values of Langfield in opening opportunities for teachers to learn and grow as practitioners in concert with research evidence. Undoubtedly, explicit leadership support is vital for engendering collaborative researcher-participant relationships.

Episode 3: Making sense of it all

Field notes

Late one afternoon at the end of a teaching day, five teachers assembled with the researchers to participate in a focus group. Rather than being just a talk-reflection time, this focus group was designed as an active and embodied creative research activity. The teacher-participants were asked to create a visual collage of their experiences using paper, scissors, and a variety of materials supplied by the researchers. They visually constructed what they believed to be "a picture of their needs" in terms of professional learning about digital literacies and institutional practices that are needed to support this

learning. The creation of the collage was characterised by laughter, much negotiation between participants, and reflections about practice. The participants commented on the focus group in the following ways:

Well, I think opening up this discussion is great ... it's huge and it's more than we've ever had.

I think it's great ... it's the first time we've had an opportunity to do this and thank you because I really feel that it's opening up something that we've needed to talk about for quite some time.

15 July, 2019

As a data gathering activity the focus group creative task, and the discussion that followed it, was not initially intended for professional learning. The goals for the research activity were threefold: first, to connect with the experiences of the participants through more creative ways of sharing their teaching experiences and concerns; second, to promote generative interactions that established shared values and meaning; and, three, to provide a safe space for disclosure that reflected their existing collaborative processes.

However, the participants found this research activity, including their discussion and the making of a collage, incisive for understanding their own professional practice and learning needs. It transformed into a highly engaging professional learning activity for them. Involvement in the focus group created beneficial dialogue not only with us, perceived as more knowledgeable but trusted others, but engendered a powerful collegially that created a shared space to consider their needs as educators. The collage and the accompanying dialogue encouraged teachers to articulate their concerns (with each other) in relation to teaching digital literacies, recognising the multi-faceted, complex, and challenging environment of being an adult EAL teacher in digital times. It also enabled them to identify limitations in their current professional learning and think about strategies for improving their professional learning outcomes.

Being opportunistic in appropriating these collaborative learning opportunities helped these teachers reframe a research activity as a positive catalyst for reflexivity about professional learning. It also brought attention to the epistemologies of their practice in the context of their own and their students' digital

needs. Following this highly positive research activity it became clear to us that the teachers wanted more of this type of activity, and that they emphatically viewed it as professional learning. Out of this and other positive interactions grew a desire from teachers to continue our research relationship through a professional learning course on digital literacies. After the research concluded, our research team was invited to facilitate a professional learning course on digital literacies at Langfield in the upcoming year. We accepted this invitation with great enthusiasm, though it has since been delayed due to COVID-19 times.

Research as professional learning: practical strategies

To explore how EAL practitioners can unlock and maximise the potential professional learning benefits of research participation, this article analysed three episodes that we observed and experienced in the context of our research collaboration with teachers at Langfield. It was not our initial aim to engage Langfield teachers in professional learning as a part of this project: we entered Langfield as ethnographers, not as mentors, coaches, or contracted facilitators of professional learning.

Nevertheless, in the course of our research work, using the methodological and conceptual frame of IE, we noticed that the participants engaged in research activities in ways that we did not anticipate. This provided them with many opportunities for professional learning sponsored by the research processes itself. Their ways of participation allow us to identify a number of strategies that might be useful for the leaders of educational institutions and teachers. They may also be useful for researchers interested in “giving something back” to their participants. These strategies synthesise our findings on this issue.

Strategy 1: Seeking constructive feedback

Teachers actively seeking constructive feedback about practice within the design of a research project (and researchers responding) was an important way of constructively adding to the practices of participants and to the positive perception of agency of the teachers. Within the context of the research at Langfield, we were viewed by the research participants as both researchers and experts in our field of integrating digital literacies into EAL practice. Of course, this might have the unfortunate consequence of limiting the sort of interactions possible due to creating barriers between researchers and participants. However, in this project, on

many occasions, such as the one involving Polly described above, there were authentic interactions that encouraged our participants to seek and receive feedback about their practices that aligned with their local understandings within the inner-city context of the teaching and learning. This appears to reflect the trust and authenticity in our relationships: at all times respect for the work they do was pivotal. Furthermore, such feedback was highly contextualised and situated in perceptions of need by the participants themselves.

Strategy 2: Engaging with researchers' work

With the connections established with the CEO and the teacher participants, there was strong interest in opening up researcher's academic work through the sharing of resources, pointing to publications, and opportunities for questions. From our experience at Langfield, the extent to which this sharing is efficacious for participants depended on both its applicability to their situated digital literacy practices and the interest generated in researcher-participant dialogue. In the episode describing Tanya's experience, such interest was especially evident, but it was also observed in our interactions with other teachers, so it reflects the depth of existing collegial engagement within this organisation.

Strategy 3: Embracing collegial dialogue and reflexivity

One striking outcome of our research at Langfield was the extent to which our presence at the site, our interactions, and research activities with the teachers generated professional dialogue and reflexivity about practice, especially between colleagues. In our larger investigation using IE the importance accorded to collegiality within Langfield was overt. Within the third episode explored in this article and in the larger data set outside the scope of this article, these collegial professional exchanges were generative of a positive professional learning climate and collaborative meaning-making that reflected local concerns.

Strategy 4: Inviting further professional learning

It is often the case that in doing research at a site, researchers are limited by a pre-existing time period in which it is to be conducted, shaped by funding and other research commitments. There may not be an ongoing relationship that develops between an organisation and a research team. For us, however, it makes sense that researchers who come to understand an institutional context

so intimately, might have a more extended professional relationship, such as facilitating professional learning activities that emerge from the findings of the research. In turn, institutions and teachers can be proactive and exercise considerable agency in negotiating the “give-and-take” of the relationship and invite further collaboration.

Discussion and conclusion

These four strategies share one common thread – they were all initiated by the participants within the bounds of their own needs and collegial work, such that they had considerable control over both what they needed and how it then would be instantiated in practice. As Cowie et al. (2010) argue, research “affords teachers, and researchers, different roles, degrees of agency and voice” (p. 69). The participants’ involvement in this project reflected an approach to ethnographic research that embraces an active role for participants and strong agency. In addition to being cooperative partners assisting with data generation, they voluntarily enacted another role in our research – “agents of learning” (Jurasaitė-Harbison & Rex, 2005, p. 427). They instigated regular dialogue and strategically utilised our partnership for their own professional learning. This is significant in the current context of EAL provision in Australia, especially in the adult sector, which is characterised by a “less cooperative professional environment” (Williams, 2018, p. 7).

Previous research documents a number of professional learning benefits that institutions and teachers can gain through research participation (Befort et al., 2008; Eiserman & Behl, 1992; Jurasaitė-Harbison & Rex 2005; Rex et al., 2002; Richard & Belanger, 2018). Consistent with this body of work, this research also suggests that opportunities for professional learning emerged in different research activities and especially in informal interactions where participants felt safe and connected with the researchers. Building on Jurasaitė-Harbison and Rex’s (2005) work, we also found that these opportunities were intentionally and actively sought by the teacher-participants through a number of strategies. The strategies that we identified in this article make a significant contribution to the existing body of literature by illuminating *how* the institutions and teachers can gain access to these learning opportunities and maximise the benefits of research participation.

It is important to note that the depth of engagement of our participants was not immediate, nor should researchers and participants expect it to be. It took some time to establish working relationships and rapport that was constructed through open and generous dialogue between participants and researchers. We believe that using institutional ethnography as a methodological approach to research has facilitated this rapport because of its emphasis of conceiving research within all that constitutes an organisation and its meaning-making, especially the relationships and the values that undergird those relationships. It is clear to us that the teachers felt comfortable to ask for feedback on their teaching and reflect on their work, revealing the level of trust that developed as we worked with them. This indicates that there was a sense of mutuality and respect that developed in our relationships that enabled these teachers to engage so unreservedly in our project as “agents of learning”. Indeed, trust plays a key role in research collaboration in ethnographic studies (Tickle, 2017). While there are many ways in which trust between researchers and participants is developed, in our case, it was our shared interests and sincere concerns in relation to digital literacies and the needs of this cohort of adult learners.

In this article, we have argued that research participation can enable important professional learning opportunities, even if these are not always explicit or expected. Teachers and educational researchers might rethink the “participant” role in research and see it as transcending unilateral data generation. Our research in this EAL setting does suggest some core ideas about a more expansive notion of what research can provide in terms of a reciprocal relationship with institutions and practitioners and, importantly, how the potential of educational research can be further unlocked by the participants. However, the strategies that we report in this article neither represent an exhaustive list nor function as a “one size fits all” approach. Indeed, our research was limited to one site. Unequivocally, more research in the adult EAL education sector is needed. Nonetheless, we can state, from our research experiences, that research collaborations can result in growth for all the stakeholders involved, especially when a climate of trust and respect is fostered.

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