Research as professional development: ‘Appropriate topic content’ research projects

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the professional development (PD) dimension of teacher involvement in two research projects that focused on developing appropriate topic content for two specific target groups of learners in the Adult Migrant English Programme (AMEP). The experience of this project demonstrates that, even when teachers have a different agenda to that of researchers, a collaborative research project can nevertheless provide a productive basis for teacher professional development. We identify and discuss five issues – context relevance, collaboration, different reactions to similar events, conceptualising theory and practice, and formal presentations to peers – where research and PD outcomes interconnect in mutually beneficial and sometimes unexpected ways. Our data suggest that understanding and creative management of the tensions between research and professional development agendas can lead to productive outcomes for both.

Introduction
There is a very complex interrelationship between research and PD. In one sense, they are very different things, in that research seeks to increase intellectual understanding, while PD seeks to enhance the practical work of teachers. However, they are interconnected, since both deal with professional knowledge. One seeks to systematically extend collective knowledge, while the other seeks to extend the knowledge and skills of the individuals who participate in PD. This is perhaps the more conventional connection, where PD is based on the findings of research. However, this relationship can also be reversed, and teachers’ participation in research can become PD.

This article explores the professional development dimension of teacher involvement in two research projects focused on exploring and developing appropriate topic content for learners in two specific target groups in the AMEP in Australia. Using data from the projects, we aim to illustrate how involvement in research can lead to productive professional development for
teachers, and explore five issues: relevance to context, collaboration, different reactions to similar events, conceptualising theory and practice, and formal presentations to peers.

The experience of this project demonstrates that, even when teachers have a different agenda from that of researchers, a collaborative research project can nevertheless provide a productive basis for teacher professional development.

**Background: The ‘appropriate topic content’ research projects**

The impetus for the two projects discussed here, the ‘Appropriate topic content for SPP youth learners’ and ‘Appropriate topic content for low literacy learners’, arose from the findings of earlier projects that suggested that some AMEP learners sometimes saw a focus on language in AMEP classes as not learning about anything (Wigglesworth 2003). Another earlier AMEP Research Centre project had highlighted the potential benefits of content-based instruction (CBI) across the AMEP (Hemming et al. 2004), and had produced a teaching issues fact sheet on this topic (Williams 2004). In late 2004, ‘SPP youth’ and ‘low literacy’ learners were identified as priority learner groups and several research projects were formulated to better understand different aspects of their needs in, and experience of, the AMEP. The projects we report on here specifically examine teacher and learner perceptions of what constitutes appropriate topic content for these two groups of learners, and what happens when AMEP teachers use content-based materials with these learners in the AMEP.

Ideas about CBI were derived from the literature, which advocates and explores the teaching of language in the context of learning about some other area of learning (‘content’), often within formal education, but also within less formal education (for example, Mohan 1986; Brinton, Snow and Wesche 1989; Snow and Brinton 1997; Davison and Williams 2001; Richards and Rodgers 2001; Crandall and Kaufman 2002; Crandall and Kaufman 2005).

Our overall research objective was to not only investigate the preferences of these two groups of learners, but also to explore the application of CBI to the AMEP by supporting teachers to develop and then teach content-based units of work to their classes. Up to the time of these projects, CBI was not widely discussed in the AMEP as a strategy, although many AMEP teachers taught in ways that contextualised language in social situations and which, therefore, to varying extents, taught learners ‘content’ about Australia. Both projects sought to explore learners’ perceptions of useful or interesting ‘content’ and to explore teachers’ responses to working in a way that was...
more explicitly focused on content. During the projects, the teachers involved documented their experiences as they designed and taught their materials, and researchers made a number of classroom observations, interviewed the project teachers after they had taught their own unit, and used interpreters to interview a small selection of their students. The projects were designed to encourage teachers to share their units of work with other project teachers in order to explore issues that arise in the transfer of these units from one teaching context to another.

The teachers involved in the projects were volunteers. Twenty-two teachers of (older) low-literacy students from all over Australia were involved in the ‘low literacy’ project, and eight participated in the ‘SPP youth’ project. Numbers were smaller in the latter project because there are not so many classes consisting entirely, or even predominantly, of these learners in the AMEP. Both groups of learners were considered to be operating at only basic levels of literacy and to have had limited experience of formal schooling. Their learning needs in relation to content about aspects of life in Australia, the development of English language skills (both written and verbal), and in ‘learning how to learn’ in classrooms were therefore similar.

The two projects involve three phases. In the first, a series of interviews with students and experienced teachers of the two groups of learners was conducted in order to elicit their experiences of what sort of content they found useful, interesting or important. The second phase of the project involved the development and a first round of teaching of a content-based unit of work by participating teachers. Two day-long teacher PD workshops during this second phase were instrumental in providing stimulus and support for the teachers in preparing their units of work. Because of the overlap in learner needs, the two projects followed parallel processes, with teachers from both projects participating in joint workshops. In the third phase, teachers will be paired-up to teach each other’s materials in order to gather further data on the impact of the materials in a different teaching context or modifications required to ensure the efficacy of the materials in another context. At the time of analysis of the data presented here, the second phase of the project had been completed, but not the third.

The divergent perspectives of researchers and teachers were evident in the motivations each brought to the projects. The researchers’ main aim was to investigate the application of CBI in the AMEP, underpinned by a belief that documentation of some teachers’ experiences of using CBI would motivate and inform other teachers interested in applying it to their teaching. For the teachers, however, the prime motivation was the opportunity to develop new materials for groups of learners for whom they knew there was
a shortage of suitable teaching materials. The goals of these two groups of participants were not exactly congruent, although there were ways in which there was overlap, particularly to the extent that usable teaching materials would be one outcome of the project.

The professional development dimension of the research projects

The most explicit and formal professional development aspects of the projects were the two teacher workshops held in the second phase of the projects. The workshops were held in Melbourne and led by the second author, and workshop input was identical for both groups of teachers. The rationale for the workshops was to offer the opportunity to explore the practical application of ideas rather than to provide extensive theoretical input. The intention was to provide concise input that would provide stimulus and new ways of thinking for the teachers, as well as opportunities for them to relate this to their prior experiences and to the tasks that were being asked of them in the project. The workshops were also included to provide them with an opportunity to share experiences, explore ideas together and strengthen the networks they would develop as part of the project. To that extent, the workshops were seen as a means of providing PD that extended teachers’ conceptual understandings, but which also enabled them to get to know each other so that they could better share ideas and assist each other, especially when they came to exchange teaching units with a partner.

The significant areas of content in the workshops were:

- Input on CBI. This included an overview of the main features of CBI (the concurrent teaching of content and language, the use of visuals to provide content input, the modelling of relevant texts to provide language input, and the contextualisation of language practice and production in the content) and reporting on research findings about the impact of CBI and the nature of its application in other contexts;

- Input on the nature of literacy and techniques for teaching literacy skills. This included an understanding of the nature of literacy derived from the model of Street (1993). This sees literacy as a combination of ‘autonomous’ dimensions of literacy (the skills related to decoding and producing written texts) and ‘ideological’ dimensions of literacy (the social practices and attitudes related to written texts). There was also reporting of techniques and classroom activities utilised in resources for developing the basic literacy skills of learners of English as a Second Language;
• Understanding of the projects, including findings from the first phase, and information about the project tasks, activities and documents;
• Opportunities for project teachers to share experiences and ideas.

The following table presents a summary of the programme followed in each workshop.

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<td>• Sharing of materials already developed by teachers (not necessarily CBI)</td>
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In addition, two teachers from each project were invited to co-present workshops, with the principal researcher, at the AMEP national conference towards the end of the first year of the project. In this conference forum, the researcher presented an overview of the project, followed by a report by the teachers of their work and experiences to date.

**Data collection in relation to PD dimensions of the projects**

Apart from the actual units of work written by the teachers, there were a number of data collection instruments and procedures used in the projects. These were questionnaires and pro-forma teacher journals, topic planning and teaching reports, and materials summary sheets, to be completed by the project teachers in association with other project tasks and activities. We also recorded workshop segments, made classroom observations and interviewed project teachers and their students. Through these we aimed to record the teachers’ experiences and to identify the issues that emerged in the application of CBI to the two learner groups in the AMEP.

Teacher interview data and questionnaire results from phases one and two contained insights into the professional development dimensions of the projects. When this became evident, some additional interviews were conducted in order to follow up issues that were raised, and phase two
interviews that had been scheduled but not yet completed were slightly restructured to enable further exploration of these issues. The PD dimensions of the projects are reported in this article, while the implementation of CBI will be reported elsewhere (Achren and Williams forthcoming).

The issues identified here were selected partly because they were prominent in our data and partly because they illustrate a number of the concepts identified by Yates (in press) in her consideration of research and teacher PD. Feedback from the teachers overwhelmingly indicated that they found the workshops to be a positive PD experience, which they felt they really benefited from. Some teachers also made more critical comments about aspects of the PD they experienced in the project. On reflection, we thought about why this might be, and came to the conclusion that as researchers we had quite different goals in our approach to the research compared to the teachers. Yet, despite our different starting points, both teachers and researchers viewed the PD dimensions as beneficial. Indeed, it was the fact that both groups of participants approached the projects with different expectations that proved to be useful to both. In the following sections we discuss why this may be so using some of features that Yates argues are important in effective PD (see Yates in press, chapter four), and identify some pertinent issues.

The issues considered are relevance to context, opportunities for collaboration, different reactions to similar events, conception of theory and practice, and formal presentations to peers.

**CONTEXT RELEVANCE**

Involving teachers in materials development was a way of both investigating what topics might work effectively with the target learner groups and identifying issues that might arise in the application of CBI in this context. The teachers did not necessarily share our research goals but were willing, nonetheless, to make considerable investment in the project in the pursuit of their more pragmatic aims of developing teaching materials that would be immediately useful to them and their learners. Twenty-two of the 24 teachers who responded to an initial project questionnaire listed insufficient teaching resources for the two target learner groups, together with developing appropriate content materials, as motivating their involvement in the projects. While neither the teachers nor their organisations were necessarily interested in CBI per se, it was clear that they took the opportunity offered by the projects to develop appropriate materials for groups of learners of interest to them and for whom they perceived there was a lack of suitable classroom materials.
Thus, teachers were generally very focused on developing useful materials, and a number arrived at the first workshop with ideas about topics that might be relevant to their students. Indeed, some teachers had already carefully chosen an area of content that they believed would both fulfil a client need and be usable in ‘youth’ and ‘low literacy’ classes and across different levels. In follow-up interviews, teachers also commented that both the workshops and materials development in these projects have reinforced their belief in the importance of good teaching resources and increased their belief in the need for a wider range of materials suitable for these groups of learners to be available for teachers.

Teachers were keen to ensure that they developed materials that fitted into the Certificates in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) curriculum and the learning outcomes that the students had to work towards, and their early feedback suggested that they felt that the project had enabled them to do this. For example, one teacher was able to do this through teaching words and signs as part of her CBI unit on the local rail system, which integrated very well with particular assessment tasks students are required to complete at CSWE Level 1.

When the development of teaching units was well advanced, teachers were eager to ensure resources and ideas would continue to be disseminated among teachers after the project had finished and suggested various ways to help facilitate this, such as setting up an email list and/or a website for distributing resources and sharing information in the longer term. It is pertinent to note here that several teachers also commented on the difficulties that they and their organisations face in circulating teaching resources in a tendering environment where competition often restricts what they can and cannot say. Other teachers also commented that forums run along the lines of the two project workshops would be good on a regular basis. In these examples, teachers were in fact reflecting on their own ongoing training requirements, an aspect of PD we had hoped to facilitate and which had been part of our interactive project design.

While strongly committed to developing good teaching resources, teachers frequently commented how time consuming this was and how difficult it was to set aside the blocks of time required for materials development in the normal teaching schedule. AMEP providers were requested to provide some time release for project teachers to complete project tasks. While the time allocated was not sufficient to fully support all development of the teaching materials, it at least enabled teachers to spend some focused work time on materials development. However, finding sufficient time to develop materials and complete other documentation remained an issue for all teachers in the
project, with many handling it in different ways: some teachers devoted large amounts of time in a very short space, others worked on it gradually and over a period of time. Some teachers chose to develop their topics by working in teams of two or three as a way to deal with the large time commitment and workload involved. Three teachers from the same centre, who worked together cooperatively, also commented that they often felt very isolated because of their centre’s geographical remoteness. Working together in a group seemed to be their way of coping with these feelings of isolation, as well as dealing with the large workload of developing new teaching materials. This option wasn’t available to all teachers involved in the projects where, for example, only a single teacher or multiple teachers but with different learner groups from a centre were participating.

The high level of interest in and commitment to the projects exhibited by the teachers was the result of the ‘context relevance’ of the projects, and the fact that teachers saw participation in the projects as connected to the outcomes they were working towards for their own students. This context relevance also explains the willingness of project teachers to devote considerable time to their work in the projects.

The teachers also appeared to have differing goals in mind in terms of what they wanted to produce as part of the project: some strove to develop a very polished end result, while others were content with workable materials that would be well received by students and achieve their teaching purpose. There were different interpretations among the teachers about the nature of content-based teaching materials and this impacted on how the materials were developed and the time taken.

Teachers had different styles and approaches to the design of their materials. One teacher reported looking for a topic that was both creatively interesting and substantively important to her; another began with a multitude of ideas and concepts and sorted through them, trying out different things until a topic she found suitable emerged; another group of teachers working collaboratively focused on a topic they considered as very useful content for students and which could be used in many different classes, and they felt driven to generate high-quality materials of a professional standard.

Whatever they hoped to produce as their materials developed in the projects, the teachers invested considerable time to the projects – more than the research design, and the providers who employed the teachers, had envisaged and planned for. This willingness to make such a commitment can be explained by the context relevance of the project, a degree of openness in letting teachers set their own goals in terms of the materials they produced.
and, not least, by the dedication and professionalism of the teachers in being willing to do whatever it takes to better meet the needs of their learners.

Collaboration

Yates (in press) argues that both collaboration with other participants and between teachers and researchers is useful in teacher-based research. In these projects, we attempted to incorporate both types of collaboration into the research processes as a means of helping the teachers to support and learn from each other and as a way of developing a fluent cross-interaction between teachers and researchers, which would ensure a productive PD for teachers and also enable us to collect fruitful research data. Collaboration among participating teachers, and between teachers and researchers, was based on an educational philosophy that all learners can learn more effectively when their learning is collaborative. Workshops for the projects were planned to enable participating teachers to get to know each other and to share ideas and experiences. While the development of a collegial community of practice around the projects was not seen as a primary goal of the research, it was nevertheless actively promoted as a process that would assist the researchers in realising their primary goals. We also felt that comfortable communication between teachers and researchers would enhance the data collection processes of the project.

The participating teachers clearly saw the development of a collegial community of practice as a valuable outcome in itself. When asked what had been the most useful aspects of the first workshop, the most positive response was to the sharing of ideas and materials and networking in the group sessions: 17 of 24 teachers indicated that this was the highlight for them. The discussion about content, the second highest response, was regarded as very useful by nine teachers.

The teachers, however, generally felt they lacked sufficient opportunities for interaction with each other outside the project in their normal working lives, and a number noted that the roundtable brainstorming sessions included in both workshops were an unusual and welcome change to their usual experience of PD where, as one teacher said, ‘we hear speakers but we don’t see what individual teachers are doing, and that is so useful, and I don’t know any other forum where that happens, that was a real highlight’. As another teacher noted, ‘typical teachers, it’s what we really like, we like being able to share, see resources, see what other people are doing … we love that’. Teachers also commented that, with only a small number of teachers teaching ‘low literacy’ or ‘SPP youth’ students across a large number of sessions within a single workplace, there were few opportunities
to bounce ideas off each other on a regular basis, which made the workshop sessions with more than 20 ‘low literacy’ teachers especially valuable. It is also worth noting here that we had only eight ‘SPP youth’ teachers participating in the project and, while we decided that having mixed round-table discussions would be helpful to all participants, one ‘SPP youth’ teacher did make the comment that she would have preferred to have been placed with other ‘SPP youth’ teachers in order to have generated more youth-specific discussion and ideas. As discussed above, this practical orientation was of especial importance for teachers who were primarily focused on creating new and appropriate teaching materials.

Three teachers working cooperatively in an isolated centre developed their teaching materials as a group effort. They found the time and energy that they could devote to the development of a single set of materials was therefore multiplied, not only in terms of more actual time but also in terms of enthusiasm and cross-fertilisation of ideas, which became an important aspect in their success in developing their teaching materials. Others who worked in teams also found they could frequently devote greater time and energy than a single teacher working alone, which enabled them to develop very polished and professional teaching units.

While some teachers who worked alone enjoyed the individual and subjective process and felt it gave them time to think through and develop their ideas independently, another commented that she would have welcomed the opportunity to work collegially with another teacher. This was her first time developing CBI materials, and she felt that working with a partner would have given her someone with whom she could have bounced ideas around, and with whom she could have shared the time commitment and workload.

Collaboration between the researchers and the project teachers was fostered in the projects through the two workshops noted above and through visits to a number of classes during the first round of teaching of materials. We also endeavoured to support teachers by disseminating information as effectively as we could via email and also by inviting teachers to speak with us by telephone or email if any issues came up that they wished to discuss with us. A number of teachers raised queries with us regarding their understanding of CBI and materials development. We can infer from both the good and continuing participation by teachers in the two projects, and from the positive reception to the idea of the workshops, that teachers were very open to collaborating with researchers. As one teacher wrote to us regarding a classroom visit by the primary researcher:

[I]t was great to have you visiting our classroom yesterday. To have someone interested in what is going on is a real boost to enthusiasm on a long,
slow journey for us all. Being able to discuss the work is good too, for by articulating reasoning and processes it has allowed me to see things from a broader perspective.

We believe that the collegiality we established with the project teachers was an important part of our research design in that it bridged the two worlds of classroom teaching and academic research in a mutually complementary and informative way. This was despite times when the pressures of other demands on our time meant our responses to teachers were not always as timely or complete as we or they would have liked.

DIFFERENT REACTIONS TO SIMILAR EVENTS

Our data provide graphic illustration of the very different reactions that participants might have to the same events. The responses of different teachers to the workshops illustrate how different starting points lead to different interpretations of events.

PD offers different things to different people depending on an individual teacher's perceptions, experiences and styles of teaching. While all project teachers were very keen to develop new and useful teaching materials, participants brought a broad range of knowledge about CBI to the projects. Fifteen of 24 teachers who answered the initial project questionnaire indicated that they had some prior knowledge of CBI: teachers had encountered the concept during their teacher training (6), at previous PD sessions (3), through reading (3), teaching (2) and their own personal research (1). Nine teachers had no prior experience of CBI teaching at all. The first workshop was therefore intended to stimulate discussion of CBI and how it could be applied in designing and teaching units in the AMEP. The format of this day-long session included a presentation introducing both the projects and the concept of CBI, with ample time set aside for engaging in roundtable discussions where teachers brainstormed ideas and, in some cases, demonstrated some of their materials (which were not necessarily CBI-based).

The group roundtable discussions during workshops appeared to run quite smoothly and certainly the teacher responses to our questionnaire survey following each one, and discussed earlier in the section on collaboration, indicate that the PD workshops were successful. However, when we spoke with teachers individually, we discovered diversity in their reactions and opinions as to what was useful or not.

Some teachers who had a well-developed sense of CBI knew what they wanted to do and assumed others would also be in the same state of preparedness. They reported to us afterwards that they found the group discussions in the first workshop unfocused and too general, with
insufficient focus on content-based materials. By the second workshop, these teachers who, by then, had completely finished preparing their unit of work, were perplexed to find that most other teachers were not as advanced with their materials. They found the CBI presentations the most stimulating aspects of the workshops in that they ‘reconfirmed’ their basic teaching principles and helped concentrate their thinking and encourage new ideas. Nevertheless, they still felt that valuable time was wasted in the second workshop reviewing the theoretical basis of the projects for new teachers joining the project and for those original teachers for whom CBI was a newer concept.

On the other hand, some teachers with less background in CBI saw the workshops as introductory sessions to help them find their way. One teacher interviewed regarded the first workshop group discussions as simply a recounting of ideas on teaching rather than presenting CBI materials already in classroom use, and viewed this first PD day as an information session for all participating teachers and one which extended her knowledge of the area, even if it did cover some familiar and complementary territory. In the second workshop, she further deepened her level of understanding, as well as continued to gain ideas for further activities and modifications to her materials from the teachers’ group discussions. She found the workshops both positive and productive in encouraging teachers to develop teaching ideas and understandings of CBI, regardless of whether it was a new or revisited concept.

Another teacher felt her materials elicited mainly bemused responses from the other teachers in her group at the second workshop. Her conception of an oracy-based topic using excerpts from a popular Australian television soap opera to illustrate aspects of Australian culture and to increase students’ cross-cultural awareness was, in our view, innovative in both concept and design. It was still in a formative stage and minus the final fine-tuning of the layout and the polished finish of some of the other completed materials presented at the second workshop: nevertheless, this teacher left the workshop feeling ‘quite discouraged’ by the indifferent reaction to her materials by some teachers who she felt had not seen the potential that she saw in her idea. However, encouraged by our feedback and committed to developing her topic, she was able to take on board the feedback from her colleagues in a positive sense by returning to her workplace and strengthening her materials to ensure they were clearer and flowed better. She continued trialling and re-jigging the materials and, subsequently, has been very happy with both the teaching and student reception of her final materials. The classroom observation of the teacher using her materials clearly demonstrated that the
potential of her ideas was realised, and she will be involved in a conference presentation in the final year of the project.

These differing perceptions of the workshops illustrate the challenge of designing PD events that will uniformly meet the needs of all participants. If PD is to be effective in raising teachers’ awareness and extending their knowledge, such differences need to be recognised in planning. In designing these projects, we worked from the ‘no one size fits all’ premise by incorporating a variety of tasks, formats and contact points to achieve the practical goals of the project and accommodate participants’ different styles and knowledge bases.

CONCEPTUALISING THEORY AND PRACTICE

While, as previously discussed, the desire for practical and useful on-the-ground teaching materials was the main motivation for participating in the project, the teachers also appreciated the CBI presentations and found them stimulating. However, connecting the theory that informed the project with the practice and practical experiences of the teachers was not always straightforward. This is an issue in designing research that relates to the interests of teachers. The question is how far can researchers challenge the thinking of participating teachers without overloading or alienating them? Our projects provided some interesting insights into this question.

CBI was a new concept for many of the teachers, who sometimes requested email and telephone follow-up. One teacher who joined the project with an idea of what she would like to develop as a classroom CBI unit, nevertheless still felt unsure after the first workshop of her understanding of CBI and whether her idea fitted the ‘real content’ focus spoken about at this session. After wrestling with it for a few weeks, until ‘my mind hurt trying to understand’, she considered withdrawing from the project and contacted us for advice. We reassured her and encouraged her to pursue her original theme in developing her proposed teaching materials, and this support enabled her to continue successfully in the project. This kind of support and follow-up was possible given the period of the projects and, as Yates (in press) inter alia argues, seems to have been very useful from the PD perspective.

Some teachers clearly embraced the input on CBI presented in the workshops, and some teachers experienced difficulty in relating it to their usual practice of contextualised language teaching. As most documentation of CBI has been in formal educational contexts, the literature on CBI is often directed toward the subject matter of academic disciplines, while the ‘content’ of the AMEP is often more informal subject matter related to settling into life in a new social and cultural environment. While there has
been a long history in the AMEP of assisting learners to be prepared for social interactions in which they might participate, the focus of CBI was presented as an emphasis on learning substantive content that would enable learners to better understand and manage such interactions both within their AMEP classes and also in the wider Australian cultural context.

One happy example of a productive integration of project input into practice occurred among some teachers who expressed concerns during the first, more general, workshop. They had difficulty understanding how language and literacy fitted with content, and how attention to all of these areas, as well as ‘learning to learn’ skills, could be successfully integrated into one set of materials covering a particular topic. However, it became clear after the second workshop that they had achieved such integration relatively easily when they set about the practical task of designing their teaching materials. One teacher commented that the handouts of the second workshop presentation were ‘very useful’ and that she had continued to refer to them when doing her term planning, as they ‘crystallised things in my mind so that I went into needs analysis and term planning with much more focus’. This can be regarded as a positive PD outcome of the project, in which the input provided contributed to an extension of the teacher’s professional knowledge and practice.

Some aspects of the PD input were less readily adopted or accepted by some of the project teachers. While we have no concrete data suggesting that teachers rejected the CBI theoretical framework we introduced, we nevertheless encountered a number of interesting responses to the conceptual framework provided in workshops, which indicated the difficulties some teachers may have experienced in relating their practice to theory. One teacher, for example, seemed unsure that her materials were ‘content-based’, even though they clearly met the criteria of the framework presented by the researchers. Her materials involved students learning to read the names of railway stations along their local rail line. We saw these both as developing literacy skills and ‘content’ learning. Some other teachers also experienced difficulty in reconciling CBI with their already-established teaching frameworks. These teachers commented, in both the workshops and in interviews, that CBI is what they already do in their ‘survival-oriented’ approach to teaching in the AMEP, which, as we discussed earlier, tends to highlight situations more than content. They nevertheless remain happy to participate in projects such as these, which result in concrete outcomes in terms of teaching materials for immediate use in their classes. Moreover, there were ways in which the researchers could provide feedback to assist teachers to recognise and emphasise the content-based dimensions of their materials.
This suggests that context relevance can be powerful in motivating teachers, even when they find themselves working within a different, and perhaps even confronting, conceptual framework.

The impact of a challenge to the thinking of teachers can also be productive, even when teachers may be hesitant or reluctant to take it up. Another aspect of the more theoretical input of the project that some project teachers found hard to accept was assertions by us that adult learners with low-literacy skills and limited prior schooling can be both supported and challenged in their learning of language, literacy and content, not to mention ‘learning how to learn’ skills. The view presented by the research team was that research on CBI consistently reports higher motivation among learners, and substantial increased learning of both content and language when teaching is supported by strong contextualisation and visual presentation of content (for example, Brinton, Snow and Wesche 1989; Grabe and Stoller 1997; Kasper 2000). The message here was that it was worth exploring how teachers could extend their learners, since they have adult (or older adolescent) cognitive and social capacities, even if their experiences of formal schooling are limited. Some project teachers, whose practical experience had emphasised the importance of providing strong support for students with little experience of success in formal schooling, felt that the progress of such learners could be jeopardised and their confidence and self-esteem eroded if presented with challenges they could not meet, as illustrated by the comments of the teacher below.

Interviews with teachers after they had developed and taught their units found that students had indeed exceeded the expectations of some of their teachers when challenged, although not all were as unequivocal as this example from one teacher.

Interviewer: And has your perception of what students can and can’t cope with changed at all from developing these materials and doing this project?

Teacher: Yes, that’s a good question. They took on things that I didn’t think they would take on, because they really wanted to do it. That their motivation to learn really spurred them on to do things that I would’ve, if I was just looking at the task myself, I would’ve said, oh, that was a bit hard, but they actually exceeded my expectations, because they were really motivated to do it, and, yeah, I was pleasantly surprised at how they took it up and ran with it.

This teacher’s materials focused on learning about the rail system map and being able to identify or use word attack skills to read the names of
stations on railway platform signs, and the railway system map. The teacher went on to report the difference this made to one student in particular.

Teacher: She was quite hesitant about going anywhere in the train herself, and she said to me, ohhh, now I don’t need my husband, and I said, well, what do you mean? And she said, I can just go on the train by myself, and I thought, well, that’s brave. But, yeah, that was a nice little thought that she felt that she was a little more empowered to use the system, even though she doesn’t really know how to buy the ticket, she said, oh, well, I can ask, and, you know, she was coming from being really hesitant to use the system and thinking, no, that’s definitely beyond me, I just have to go with my husband everywhere, to, no, I can do it, and that was great …

We conclude that it was the way in which ‘theoretical’ input in effect confronted and challenged the ‘practical’ wisdoms and work habits of participating teachers, together with the skills of the participating teachers in drawing on the theoretical input to meet their practical concerns, which led to such felicitous outcomes. This illustrates how research-related PD that challenges teachers can not only produce research insights, but can also extend the practice of participating teachers.

FORMAL PRESENTATIONS TO PEERS

One PD impact of the project came from the involvement of some teachers in formal presentations on the projects.

One of the PD dissemination outcomes written into the briefs for these projects was presentation at a public forum, in this case a national conference of the AMEP, where teachers and researchers present papers and workshops on issues of relevance for teachers working in the AMEP. In the first year of the project, two teachers from each project were involved in co-presenting a conference workshop, with one of the researchers, which reported to conference participants on the work done to date in the two projects. This was quite challenging for them. Although they are used to talking to groups of people (their students) and interacting with their peers in a variety of situations, moving from the familiar and personal environment of their classroom to an impersonal and strange national conference forum was a difficult step.

The reactions and experiences of the four teachers illustrate the professional development benefits that can be gained from such movement. One, who was a first-time presenter at such a forum, was very nervous and wished her materials (which were developed collaboratively with others) had been
‘finalised’. However, she coped by assessing where she was at, thinking about how to explain what she and her colleagues had done, and by anticipating possible questions in preparation for her presentation. She reported that this, along with the questions asked by her audience, helped direct her to reassessing parts of her materials, and that at the time she saw this task as simply part of the project but that, in hindsight, she regarded the experience as valuable practice in making presentations to her peers. Another teacher who was a first-time presenter in such a forum was also very nervous to start with. She planned to ‘show and tell’ her unit, which had been developed but not taught. Once she began her presentation, however, her nervousness dissipated and it was very well received. Indeed, participants’ evaluations rated highly all the teachers’ presentations. She reported that this experience increased her confidence, and she asked the researcher to pass on feedback about her talk to her programme manager.

These experiences illustrate that the outcome of an activity conceived originally only in terms of a means to increase dissemination of information about the projects benefited not only the teachers in the audience, but also those who presented. The task encouraged the presenting teachers to reflect in new ways on the work they had done in the project and therefore can be seen as a PD outcome for the teachers concerned.

**Conclusion**

From these insights into the professional development benefits that the teachers gained from the ‘appropriate topic content projects’, it is clear that teachers and researchers do not need to have identical goals for a project in order for it to be fruitful for both teachers and researchers. Rather, understanding and creatively managing the tensions between the research and professional development agendas can lead to productive outcomes in both research and professional development.

In the appropriate topic content projects described above, interaction between research and PD outcomes occurred in several ways. We set up a materials development task as a means to investigate the application of CBI. This connected with a very strong, immediate and practical need that teachers saw for the development of suitable materials for two groups of learners with particular needs. The context relevance created the time and space for motivated teachers to explore ideas and allow themselves to be challenged. The development of a collegial community of practice among the teachers and researchers enabled teachers to explore ideas in ways that made sense to them. The teachers began from their different starting points and developed materials together within a relatively open-ended approach to research,
which enabled them to construct content-based materials that were relevant
to their learners. This sort of approach helped the teachers to learn and
grow at their own pace, and ultimately provided insights into a wider range
of issues that arose. By recognising the teachers’ considerable practical
knowledge, as well as providing them with some input that extended them,
the projects enabled them to help their learners go beyond what they had
previously thought possible, and the opportunities to make formal presenta-
tions promoted a deeper understanding of their professional learning.

In connecting the goals of research and professional development in
ways that enabled interaction between them, we believe the professional
development dimensions of these projects were enhanced in ways we had
not anticipated when the research was originally conceived, and our experi-
ences reinforce the notion that participation in projects of this kind can be
fruitful for both research and teaching practice in many different ways.

NOTES
1 The term ‘SPP youth’ refers to young adult learners aged between 16 and 24 years
of age who are eligible for additional hours of English instruction based on low
literacy in their first language and minimal or severely interrupted schooling. ‘SPP’
stands for the ‘Special Preparatory Programme’, which allows up to 400 hours of
AMEP instruction in addition to the basic entitlement of 510 hours.
2 25 years and over.
3 The third phase of the projects is ongoing at the time of writing. This article there-
fore reports on aspects of teacher PD that emerged in the first two phases of the
projects.
4 The first workshop was held early in the second phase of the projects and the
second follow-up workshop was held three months later when materials develop-
ment was well underway.
5 AMEP National Conference *Pathways to the future*, 29 September – 1 October
2005, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW.
6 The CSWE is the outcomes-based curriculum and assessment framework used in
the AMEP.
7 See Yates (in press, chapter four).

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