This research belongs to the volunteers, both past and present, of the Redfern Kids Connect project. Their effort and presence of mind over the last three years fill the following pages. I hope this helps us learn from something we’ve all contributed to and gained from.

I want to acknowledge the support of Dr. Andrew Solomon, whose intellect has never failed to light a fire under me. I’d like to thank Bob Hodge for his expertise, especially in the last stages of writing, Matt Knight and the Redfern Computer Centre for their continued collaboration, and Holly, with whom I’ve shared many of these experiences. Finally, I’d like to thank my family and friends for their backing, especially my sister Michelle for pushing me over the final line.
Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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Abstract

Redfern Kids Connect is a community technology project that has run in inner-city Sydney since 2002. Redfern is known to many as the heart of urban Aboriginal Australia and as a diverse community facing challenges around poverty, crime and race relations. For three years, children (8-12 years old), and volunteers (university students and young professionals) have met each Saturday to play on computers and socialise. The project’s experiences with relationships, technology, and empowerment have been as confusing as they have been exciting.

In the spirit of action research, this thesis explores the impacts the project has had. Uniquely embedded in the process of reflection occurring away from its on-the-ground activities, it tells the project’s story through the eyes of its volunteers. The research concludes that the project's main contributions to empowerment have been through building social capital (Cox, Putnam) and improving new forms of literacy (Warschauer). Vital to supporting and extending these outcomes have been taking a social approach to supporting technology use, shaping a safe and open environment (Marvin et. al), supporting critical thinking and expression (Freire) and examining the project 'behind the scenes'. The author takes the dual role of researcher and participant in the research.
Introduction

'Computer classes for Aboriginal kids every Saturday from 10-2’, that’s what the whole plan was.
Shaun, volunteer of the Redfern Kids Connect project,
November 2004

Since August 2002 I’ve been a volunteer in a weekly community technology project called Redfern Kids Connect. Redfern and Waterloo are suburbs of inner-city Sydney known to many as the heart of urban Aboriginal Australia. The community has a diverse cultural heritage and strong local pride despite a number of social and economic issues including crime and unemployment. Many children in the area live with the effects of entrenched poverty and a lack of extra educational opportunities. The goal of the Redfern Kids Connect project, by means of learning around information technology, has been empowerment.

In a lot of ways, the story of the project is one of a group of volunteers from the upper socio-economic levels of society, inexperienced in youth work and community technology, finding its way through the results of bringing very different children and adults together. The outcomes haven't been straightforward and they haven't always been pretty, but they’ve certainly been meaningful.

Rather than being weighed down by theory or quantitative figures, this thesis aims to tell the story of the Redfern Kids Connect project (from here on referred to as ‘the project’) through the multiple voices of its volunteers. The research, conducted separately from the on-going running of the project, was embedded in the process of reflection occurring among its volunteers. It reveals much about the project, and in the process reveals much about its volunteers.
The Big Idea

This research has been inspired by how challenging and confusing the project’s experiences with empowerment have been. These experiences have left volunteers with a lingering question – What impact are we having? Employing the spirit of action research, my goal here is to answer this question and explore where the project, and initiatives like it, can go in the future. By doing this I’m hoping to benefit the project and its volunteers, and in the process develop insights into the emerging and important field of community technology.

To explore the project’s impact I first need to bring together the most relevant concepts relating to empowerment, something I will do In Chapter 2 revolving around four sources. At the centre is the concept of social capital, a term intended to bring the value of relationships and social networks to the forefront in measures of wealth and empowerment. This is a concept which says both children and adults can develop tolerance, social mobility and community values by casually coming together. For this discussion I will be using Australian academic Eva Cox’s A Truly Civil Society (1995) and American academic Robert Putnam’s Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (2000). Then, to explain the link between social capital and technology, and to explore how new forms of literacy can be developed by using technology, I will be using American academic Mark Warschauer’s Rethinking the Digital Divide: Technology and Social Inclusion (2003). Finally, to discuss the social and cultural context of intervention projects I will draw on Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (first published in 1970) and his theories of critical reflection, cultural invasion and oppression.

What I will conclude is that the project's main contribution to empowerment, and innovative input to community technology, has come through building social capital and improving electronic-related literacies. This has involved forming relationships which have led to 'Reconciliation in action', social mobility and group values. It has also involved providing opportunities to develop forms of literacy which involve new ways of representing and processing information. The project has achieved these outcomes by
taking a social approach to supporting casual play and experimentation with computers. These outcomes the project should celebrate and focus on despite their often intangible forms.

However, the complexities of bringing such different groups of children and adults together have necessitated the shaping of a safe and open environment moving away from traditional forms of education in favour of informal dialogue. Furthermore, concerns over how the project has addressed the ‘big picture’ issues in the community, and concerns over its cultural impact have required a focus on deeper forms of engagement, namely critical thought and expression. Yet because the project has been working with young children, the most appropriate way to support these moving forward is through casual conversation and exploration of technology.

Finally, it’s been necessary to examine the project ‘behind the scenes’. Though rooted in good intentions, it’s been important for volunteers of the project to explore their motivations and move beyond ego-oriented intents. Community involvement has also been imperative, though it has been an area often hampered by limited resources. Moving forward the project should adopt a model of community informatics, which focuses on leveraging existing community resources and fostering community relationships.

**Project Background**

Launched by a group of local and international university students, the project was initially aimed to ‘help’ Aboriginal kids in Redfern by teaching computer skills and 'sharing cultures'. Though we (the volunteer team) weren’t out to prove any radical theories, we quickly found out that trying to teach wasn't going to work. Children, participating voluntarily, wanted to play with computers. Furthermore, the behavioural challenges we faced each week, aside from being intensely emotional experiences, forced a change of approach.
In the months I’ve been preparing this research, the project has been reasonably stable. Children (mostly boys between the ages of eight and twelve) and volunteers (a mix of university students and young professionals) drop in to the community computer centre each Saturday morning. They play games, listen to music and surf the Internet, sometimes experimenting with multimedia. Volunteers join kids in banter and chat about what we're looking up on the Internet and what we did during the past week. Though a very informal experience, there have been relationships, computer skills, and a sense of group developed that both children and volunteers value to some degree.

Our feeling is that children are learning while doing these things each week and are therefore being empowered. Yet while this seems like a simple premise, its precise value and the challenging road travelled in achieving it (including being shaken by a riot in February 2004), have made us question what impact the project has had. The questions I want this research to begin to answer are:

-How can we explain the benefits we've felt in casually playing with technology, socialising and developing a sense of group? Can this have a significant impact on a small and big scale?

-How can we explain the challenging dynamics that have been at play and the steps we've needed to take in reaching a point of stability?

-How can we describe the need we’ve felt for different, and often deeper types of learning? Should we be doing more, and how can we use technology to do it?

-How can we explain and address the contradiction between the intensely personal experience volunteering has involved and the weak ties we have to the surrounding community?
Methodology

Qualitative Research

My research methodology has been primarily informed by a course I completed in June 2004 called Qualitative Research Techniques. The course was run by the Australian Consortium for Social and Political Research and was instructed by Dr. Carol Grbich of Flinders University, author of New Approaches in Social Research (2004) and Qualitative Research in Health: An introduction (1999). As a background to the basics of the research process I used Allan Kellehear’s The Unobtrusive Researcher: A guide to methods (1993).

This research has been undertaken in the spirit of action research. Action research takes many forms, but all revolve around an approach that is participative, grounded in experience, and action-oriented (Reason & Bradbury 2001). It “…aims to increase the ability of the involved community or organization members to control their own destinies more effectively and to keep improving their capacity to do so” (Greenwood & Levin 1998: 6). With this goal in mind, the research was structured to develop meaning from the experiences of volunteers of the Redfern Kids Connect project and apply that knowledge to their on-going approach. The research was not entrenched in theoretical views. Rather, during the research process, as clear themes began to emerge I sought out concepts through which these themes could be interpreted. I then introduced aspects of these concepts to the process of reflection occurring among participants. The intellectual context of the research, therefore, should be viewed as a framework that was used dynamically.

The action research format has been intertwined with a form of auto-ethnography, meaning that I have been exploring ‘multiple realities’ of our experiences through different voices, including my own. This is due to the breadth of data I already had in-hand as I began this research (which I will explain shortly), my role as researcher-participant, and the fact that I have reached for additional intellectual concepts well into the writing process. A trip to London for the Digital Generations: Children, Young People and New Media conference was tremendously useful in shaping the intellectual context of the research by allowing me to meet people from across the globe working on similar projects.
I believe the action research approach was a success. It has directly affected the thinking around the project and our approaches to it. In various forms, we have introduced the concepts of social capital, ‘co-ownership’ and critical reflection – something you’ll see revealed in the vignettes I present. For each participant the issue undoubtedly arises of how their involvement has affected their approach to the project. Since participants had already given significant amounts of time to volunteering for the project itself, I was wary of asking for much more. The in-person group meetings, which I will explain shortly, proved to be the most revealing and interactive source of discussion. It was 'real-time' and provided a useful forum in which to chat, in person, outside of the project’s environment.

The writing process has been a considerable challenge. I’ve had as many, if not more new insights during this stage of the research than any other. I found myself more removed from the project and may have suffered from a bout of information overload. Nonetheless, it has been a great success in providing extra time and space to consolidate what we've done and develop new ideas. What follows is a culmination of that continuous reflective process. I hope it continues to spark action and leaves the project and its volunteers with a legacy that's useful.

Participants and My Role
The participants of this research are a group of sixteen project volunteers, including myself. The majority are current volunteers while some are no longer active. Seven of the participants are female, nine male, all between the ages of twenty and thirty-five years old. Participants’ identities have been protected with aliases (most of their own choosing) with the exception of my own. Since I am both the leader of the Redfern Kids Connect project and chief investigator in this research, I take the dual role of researcher-participant. It is therefore unavoidable that the thesis strongly bears the stamp of my opinions. This affected research design in four key areas.

First, with existing relationships in place, I’ve had easy access to prospective participants. This was crucial in introducing the research. Second, going into the research process I
already had a sizeable collection of data in-hand (and continuing to grow, which I will describe shortly) which eased the need for an elaborate data-collection phase. Third, having little distance from that which I have studied has meant that I’ve been subjective in analysing data. Being able to jump to themes which have been important to me, both consciously and subconsciously, has undoubtedly left some data without the attention it may have warranted from a different eye. Fourth, in presenting the results I’ve needed to balance my voice as a ‘guide’ with the voices of all research participants. Again there has been subjectivity in the process of generalising a diverse range of opinions. However, since I have used my access to generate a wide range of voices, participants have spoken their sometimes different meanings in their own terms. I will explain how this has been reflected in the tone and language of the thesis shortly.

I want to make it clear that I do not wish to present our project as a shining success, especially compared to the valuable and often unrecognised efforts in community work and education. Furthermore, this research has not been a direct study of the children involved in the project. Since it is based on the reflections of the volunteer team, I want to emphasise that it therefore only provides a window into the impacts of the on the children involved in the Redfern Kids Connect project.

Data
Over the last three years, participants have shared a wide range of reflections on their Saturday morning experiences. The majority of these on-going reflections have come in the form of e-mails sent back and forth to our group e-mail list. Over this time I’ve built up a rich collection of exchanges which forms the base of the research. However, because the research has revolved around a ‘live’ project, the base of its data has continued to grow through on-going discussion.

To supplement this foundation, after completing a three month period of initial document analysis I ran two, two-hour group meetings which were video-taped and transcribed. During these meetings, which could be loosely classified as ‘nominal focus groups’ by virtue of the fact participants were not randomly selected, participants casually chatted with
each other around themes I introduced. This process was supported with an online discussion space on the collaborative web tool "Moodle", which allowed me to post transcripts and allowed participants to post comments and review documents. Additionally, through this entire process I have casually interviewed participants as needed and selectively transcribed these as required. During casual interviews I would try to fill-in ‘gaps’ in the data by asking tailored questions.

I took an iterative-thematic approach to data analysis, meaning that as I reviewed and collected data I steadily examined it and developed themes – ‘relationships’ and ‘conflict with technology’ for example. My starting points were the themes I had in my mind from recalling my own experiences. As more data was examined, more themes were developed while others were shifted and re-worked. In final preparation for writing, I developed a set of conceptual maps which formed the basis of chapters and sub-sections. Consistent with the process of iterative research, these conceptual maps were themselves reworked into this final draft.

**Voices and Language**

As a result of the unique, reflective data I’ve used, this thesis is essentially a tour of the project through the eyes and minds of its volunteers. Their words are found throughout the following pages in the form of vignettes. These vignettes include individual entries and exchanges between many participants. While some voices may come across more strongly than others, often many have contributed to these discussions. It is my intention to act as a guide through participants’ words, including my own, as well as acting as the voice that builds an argument around them.

Though this research aims to investigate the Redfern Kids Connect project, the candidness of participants’ words may themselves be the subject of another paper entirely. This is not my main focus, but in Chapter 6 I will touch upon aspects of what may lie behind our words.
In an effort to make this work as accessible and conversational as possible, I have been conscious of using language that balances the casual dialogue which has been a feature of the project with the rigour of academic research. I’d like to clarify the use of terms I will use frequently. When using the term ‘the project’ I am referring to the Redfern Kids Connect project, not this research. Similarly, participants use the term “Connect”, which is short for Redfern Kids Connect. Second, the collective terms ‘we’ and ‘our’ normally refer to the team of project volunteers. However as I alluded to earlier, since I am only a single writer I use these terms subjectively to represent the general experience of volunteers. The term ‘gaming’ refers to the act of playing computer games. Finally, my frequent use of the word ‘kids’ is an effort to match the language that has been dominant in the course of the project. I am aware that in the field of education the term ‘children’ is commonly used. I have tried to incorporate this in a complementary fashion.

**Ethics**

This research was approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. There are three main areas of consideration I would like to highlight:

*Clarification of the involvement of minors, the local community, and Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander peoples*

It is important to mark the distinction between the Redfern Kids Connect project and this research. They have been two separate entities. The Redfern Kids Connect project was an independent project that was running on its own before this research and has continued to do so. This research was embedded in the process of reflection occurring among project volunteers *outside* of the environment of the project. Therefore, no minors were subjects in this research. Likewise, the local community was not recruited to participate, but efforts have been made to inform community contacts of it. While no Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander peoples have been participants in the research, I recognise the relevance of an informed research approach in this regard. I have therefore read and gained understanding from *Values and Ethics Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander Health Research - 5 June 2003* and have been mindful of its findings as they apply to this research.
Using data that “reflects” on activities of the project versus “reports”

There has been no data of a reporting nature used in this research. Rather, data takes the form of reflections of participants. My understanding of data that is ‘reporting’ in nature is that which is written with a specific object or outcome in mind – for example a teacher writing a report of a student for an assessment. Reflections, on the other hand, are expressions with no fixed goals in mind. They communicate understandings, concerns, questions and free-thinking. Any data used in the thesis which includes descriptions of incidents acts only as foregrounding to reflections. In these cases identities of all parties have been suppressed to protect anonymity. For example: "At today's session I showed Youth 1 where I was from on a map. Youth 1 then showed me where he was from. This makes me think about the idea of social networks...".

Protection of participants and my position

The aim of recruitment was to gain informed consent of participants. Participants have been of adult age and were capable of making informed decisions. It was made clear in the recruiting process that declining participation in the research would not affect involvement in the project. There is the possibility that during voluntary reflection participants may have relived unpleasant memories and experienced confusion and stress. To address this, participants were not required to divulge information they were not comfortable sharing, and were free to request any information they shared not be used in the research. The anonymity of participants is protected by the use of aliases.

It is important to recognise that my position as leader in both the research and the community project carry with them elements of power. I guarded against exploiting this position by inviting participation through non–confrontational means. Invitations were sent electronically and no open lobbying was done.

The Reader

A driving force behind my desire to make this work as accessible as possible is the wide range of interests it may appeal to. The main audience of the thesis is intended to be the
volunteers of the project – past, present and future. It’s my hope, though, that it will have local and international readers in the fields of community technology, information technology education, sociology, Indigenous studies and more. Since this research is aimed in the spirit of *action* research, I encourage readers to approach it in the same manner.

**In the Coming Pages**

The thesis consists of six chapters, closing with a section of conclusions. There are two main parts to my presentation. Chapter 1, *The Project*, richly illustrates the research background I’ve laid out here. Chapter 2, *Searching for our Kind of Empowerment*, provides the framework of concepts that forms the intellectual context of this research. This marks the pivot point in the thesis.

Chapter 3, *Building Social Capital and Improving Literacies*, details the central role technology has played in building social capital as well as contributing to electronic-related forms of literacy. Chapter 4, *Not So Simple*, discusses our experiences with handling a range of complex dynamics which have affected the project. Chapter 5, *Needing and Trying for More* details the importance of considering and incorporating critical thinking and expression into the culture of the project. Finally Chapter 6, *Behind the Scenes*, details the need to examine the personal motivations driving volunteers of the project and the practical relationships the project has in the community.
1. The Project

Catherine: When people used to ask me ‘What do you do in Redfern?’, I used to say oh it’s like this group – kids come and we teach them computer skills. Now I say it’s a drop in centre. The kids come and play games, surf the Net and we’re there.

Isaac: It's more like a test-tube where we throw together our assumptions about how the world works and how to interact with each other, stand back, and watch the explosion.

November 2004

I’ll begin our story by opening a window into the project’s experiences. I’ll start by describing circumstances in the Redfern-Waterloo area, the flavour of the volunteer team and the nature of the project’s drop in format. I'll then explain how the project’s environment has become a cross between a hang-out, an Internet café and a jukebox. I’ll follow this by tracing the history of the project from its challenging early days to the riot in February 2004. I will finish by leading you through the launch of our Tuesday night project and our attempts to move towards ‘co-ownership’.

Setting the Stage

The Area

The Redfern and Waterloo suburbs of Sydney are a cultural, political and media hotspot. The area’s identity is strongly linked to ‘The Block’, a square of residential blocks in Redfern. Ownership of The Block was transferred from the government to an Aboriginal-run trust in the 1970s, but it has since become a media poster child for problems facing the community. In February 2004, the area made international headlines for being the scene of a riot between members of the Aboriginal community and police over the suspicious death of an Aboriginal boy. See Appendix 1 for a media report of the riot.

Due to its close proximity to the Sydney Central Business District, the area has been under enormous pressure to gentrify. There is a high density of public housing in Redfern-
Waterloo – according to the 2001 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) National Census of Population and Housing, 66 per cent of residents in Waterloo and 39 per cent of residents in Redfern lived in public housing (ABS 2001 a,b). These residents are being joined by a steady influx of more affluent property investors. Just recently in December 2004, New South Wales state parliament created a new government ministry called the Redfern-Waterloo Authority, which was granted significant power to develop the area.

There are serious social problems facing the community. The Block is known for drug-trade and drug-use. A 2004 study by Professor Tony Vinson titled *Community Adversity and Resilience*, ranked NSW postcodes by community adversity indicators and showed that residents of Redfern and Waterloo face high rates of mortality, imprisonment, unemployment, disability support and court convictions (Vinson 2004). Waterloo ranked 14th of all NSW postcodes in social disadvantage, including rankings of 6th for Disability Support Pension, 7th for imprisonment, 15th for long-term unemployment and 34th for mortality ratio (Vinson 2004).

Yet despite the often negative spotlight on the area, Redfern-Waterloo has a strong sense of heritage. The area is very culturally diverse. Indigenous Australians account for 7 per cent of Waterloo residents and just under 3 per cent of Redfern residents, both higher than the national total (ABS 2001 a,b). The area is home to significant pockets of Russian, Greek, Chinese, and Vietnamese Australians – in the 2001 Census, 29 percent of Redfern residents and 36.6 per cent of Waterloo residents spoke languages other than English at home, both well above the national rate (ABS 2001 a,b).

Many groups, including both residents and non-residents, have contributed an enormous amount of effort to supporting the community. There are many groups providing services including health care, child care, legal services, youth centres, and a number of specially-targeted programs for Aboriginal residents. These groups range from small independent groups like ours to large charities, churches and government-sponsored initiatives. With so many programs there have often been clashes and political manoeuvring. However, this has
also presented an opportunity to make partnerships to leverage what seem to be universally low levels of resources.

**The Volunteers**

At first, the project’s volunteer team had strong links to local universities. Many volunteers were members of a student club called AIESEC (formerly a French acronym no longer representing anything) which was based on an international graduate exchange program. Since then we’ve grown into an independent group not formally linked to any external organisations. We’ve had well over 75 volunteers over the last three years, though a good portion of these have participated fewer than a handful of times. On average there has been a contingent of ten to fifteen regular volunteers, but in recent months we have dropped below these levels.

We’ve grown to be a very diverse collection of people as volunteers have branched out to friends, friends-of-friends and work colleagues. We’ve been arts students, law students, film students, journalists, IT professionals and more. However, we haven’t all been Australian. There’s been a heavy international flavour to the project. Volunteers have had roots in England, Canada, the United States, India, Germany, Israel, Turkey and other countries. As the project has grown we’ve attracted more Australians and currently hover at about a seventy/thirty split between foreigners and locals. Most volunteers have been between the ages of 18 and 35.

As we’ve made connections with different organisations we’ve been infused with new perspectives and skills. In 2003 we partnered with the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) to offer a special-credit project for two Faculty of Information Technology (FIT) postgraduate students to analyse and improve our computer network. In 2004, we partnered with the DSTC (Distributed Systems Technology Cooperative) to offer a vacation scholarship for a student to work with us on multimedia projects. We’ve since made a connection with the ‘Mobilised’ volunteering club at the University of Sydney.
It’s vital to mention that all volunteers have come from outside of the Redfern-Waterloo community. It’s also vital to mention that no regular volunteers have been Aboriginal or Torres Straight Islanders. This is one reason why our project can be classified as an ‘intervention’ - we’ve been a group tying to address circumstances in an area that is not our native community. In this regard, local community involvement has been an area of concern, especially in forging relationships with parents. This is an area I will discuss in Chapter 6.

The Kids

Over a hundred and fifty kids have participated in the project over the last three years. Some children have been coming for the entire duration of the project while others have simply dropped-in out of the blue. On average we’ve had a group of ten to fifteen regulars who come at least once every few weeks, if not every week.

The majority of kids have been Aboriginal, but the group has echoed the diversity of the Redfern-Waterloo community. Ages of kids have ranged from four to fifteen years-old, with most falling in the eight to ten years-old range. At approximately an eighty-to-twenty split, the strong majority of children have been boys. Most kids have come with their friends, and there has been a mix of kids from Redfern and kids from Waterloo.

The Redfern Computer Centre

The Redfern Computer Centre is the site from which we’ve been running the project. It’s a one-room computer lab that operates as an independent community organisation. The Centre has a full-time manager who is a trained social worker, and he has relied on private funding, corporate foundations and donations of volunteer time, software and hardware to run the Centre’s programs.

On weekdays the Centre runs sessions for both adults and children, including a popular drop in program during which clients can work towards certification of an International Computer Drivers’ Licence (ICDL). There is a high-speed network of approximately 20 PCs with a broadband Internet connection. There is a laser printer and a scanner. The network is well
maintained and there have only been a few problems with it – once when the centre was broken into and on a couple of occasions when the Internet and phone connection were cut. The PCs all run Windows 2000 or XP with Microsoft Office. The Centre has children’s games such as Microsoft’s *Magic School Bus*, but we’ve mostly used the Internet or brought our own games.

Our connection to the Centre is the strongest and most vital link we have in the community. The manager of the centre not only coordinates programs and maintains equipment, but he also forges community relationships. This has been invaluable to the project.

**The Drop in Format**

Aside from two weeks for Christmas holidays each year, the project has run each Saturday. For a three month period in 2004 we experimented with a Tuesday evening session, which I will discuss. We’ve gradually lengthened our weekly opening hours from two to four hours, with sessions now lasting from nine in the morning to one in the afternoon. On any particular Saturday we never know which kids, how many kids, and at what times they are going to drop in. We average anywhere between ten to twenty kids and between three to five volunteers each week.

Up until the riot, each week we would walk down to The Block to knock on doors and pick up children, walking back with them to the Centre. We’ve also visited a local school assembly and done a flyer drop-off to spread the word about the project. Apart from this we’ve done very little ‘advertising’. We’ve almost exclusively relied on kids coming back of their own accord and on word of mouth between children.

There are only two regular markers on our Saturday morning schedule – food time and shut down time. Mid-morning we have pizza and cordial which marks the half-way point of the day (Domino’s Pizza Redfern has graciously donated four pizzas a week). Then, in the last hour, we let everyone know how much time is left so kids aren’t surprised or upset when it’s time to go.
A Hang-out, an Internet Café and a Jukebox

For the better part of three years, the project has been built around kids and volunteers playing and experimenting with technology. This foundation has led to outcomes that have felt significant, but have not been without lingering questions.

Kids and volunteers have met each week to play computer games, listen to music and surf the Internet. If you visited the project on any given Saturday, the scene would have looked something like this – children and volunteers strewn out in all corners of the room, lots of banter, kids listening to music, and most monitors tuned into the same activities. Nothing’s been more popular than gaming or surfing the Internet, and Microsoft’s *Age of Empires* and Yahoo!’s [www.launch.com](http://www.launch.com) have led the way. See Appendices 2 and 3 for screen capture images.

*Age of Empires*, which to our surprise has been a favourite for over two years, is a CD-ROM-based ‘build a civilisation’ game:

Your goal is to build your tribe into a mighty civilization that can vie for world (game) dominance (victory). You begin the game in the Stone Age with a small tribe of villagers on an unexplored map. As you move your tribesmen…you reveal different terrain types and locate sources of food, wood, stone, and gold, which villagers gather by hunting, fishing, foraging, farming, chopping trees, and mining. You must gather enough resources and build enough housing to support your growing civilization…As you advance through the ages, you can build new buildings, create new boats and military units, and research new technologies.

(Microsoft 1997)

The game plays over a network, which has allowed kids and volunteers to play with and against one another in multiplayer games that have lasted up to an hour. At first, games followed the protracted process of building up a town by gathering resources, but as the children became experts, games soon turned into races to build armies and conquer the rest of the ‘world’. What’s been a revelation has been the amazing amount of socialising around the game. Kids and volunteers have exchanged strategy and helped each other play. We’ve celebrated and commiserated together in a competitive environment that hasn’t boiled over into any real life violence in the Centre.
Launch.com has a library of videos from top-of-the-charts singers. Using a Yahoo! user account, a pop-up window plays clips through Windows Media Player. The videos can be viewed in full-screen mode which essentially turns the computer screen into a television. Rap and R&B are the genres of choice, with 50 cent, Beyonce and other top-selling artists heard often every week.

Aside from *Age of Empires* and Launch.com, children have played on a variety of other websites. Recently, e-mail and web-based chat have become popular. However, any ‘complex’ activities that kids engage with these days have been driven more by kids’ interest than volunteers’ ambition. We’ve reminded kids of the resources available to make movies and songs, to webcam and to build websites, but have mostly left it to them to take initiative:

> For the first time I can think of a group of kids got together on their own and started to make a video. We had no idea this was going on until we stumbled across it at different points outside. What I found remarkable was not what the movie was about (although this was hilarious) but how much fun they were having. And I'm talking about unmistakable happiness, not the mix of emotions and interactions we always wonder about. Noting about us struggling to get the kids to do something 'more productive'. It had nothing to do with us. I'm always trying to get my nose into things, add my two cents, make myself part of everything going on. I felt no urge to do that at this moment. I felt like I was a complete outsider and that that was okay. What started as a group of a 3 or 4 boys turned into a group of about 7 or 8. They made about 10 different clips of brawl scenes - brawling in the toilets, outside, against the wall. Play fighting. It was hilarious. They were loving it.

> Ryan, March 2005

However, our liberal approach to using technology has produced on-going concerns regarding our duty of care. Some of these concerns have been more immediate, such as online privacy and protection, while others have been more indirect, such as the manipulative nature of content online. Furthermore, with many children showing low levels of reading and writing ability, we’ve wondered how the project actively addresses literacy.
Nevertheless, with a steady routine of gaming and surfing the Internet, a sense of familiarity and even ‘community’ has been gradually established:

I think having a new volunteer around made me reflect more than I have in a while. I was having difficulty communicating to her how our relationships with the kids have come to be and our evolution into a hang-out and play spot. Watching the 'new' person trying to fit in provided some perspective on just how normal it all was to me – the kids, what we do, our routine. The sense of familiarity seemed important. An achievement.

Ryan, March 2005

Though not all volunteers and kids have become inseparable friends, relationships have developed. On face-value some of these seem to be at a surface-level:

Last Saturday I spent some time with Youth 27 and Youth 31 picking berries outside. It was good fun, and I tried to make it as safe as possible. We shared the berries, and the kids called me "Bro" a few times, I was flattered and had the feeling of acceptance to the wolf pack.

George C, October 2004

As time has gone on, other relationships have taken a life of their own:

Youth 25 asked me to play Age of Empires with him after the session, and I thought that was a wonderful opportunity to try and continue outside what we do within the time we have in connect, alot like Ryan meeting Youth 1 for movies. Youth 25 has gotten to know me alot more, asking me questions like where I live, and where are other internet cafes where he can play games! He also invited me to his place...but I doubt I'll go / his mum will let me because I'm not sure what we could do outside of playing Age of Empires on computers.

Bruce, November 2003

Both children and volunteers have also made and strengthened connections within their own groups. However, though these experiences have felt like accomplishments, full of potential, we've also struggled to understand just how deep an impact they may have:

Are we doing any better than giving them a chance to do gaming for free? I'm sure they see it like that. The question is whether they take something more from it. I mean, how can we know whether our relationships with them are socially transformative? Are the things they do on computers with us any more meaningful? Are they educational?
Isaac, October 2003

We’ve also wondered how the small scale successes of the project have translated to the wider community:

I'd like to think what I do is making a real difference, but really I think it's probably fairly insignificant. It's a constant frustration.

Alex V, July 2005

Early Days and New Directions

Though a description of the crux of our project appears to be straightforward, our hands-on experiences have been anything but. The early months of the project were a crash course in how intense and complex what we were trying to do truly was. Out of necessity, we had to adjust our approach.

We knew very little about what was involved in community technology. We didn’t know the Redfern-Waterloo area and its circumstances, we didn’t know the kids, and we had no idea how they wanted to use technology. While we didn’t want to re-create a school environment, our roots in traditional education and the notion that we needed to bridge a ‘digital divide’ strongly influenced us. We aimed to create a space in which we could ‘teach computers’ and ‘share cultures’. Our bias towards school-based learning was evident in the language we used at the time:

Since last week's class worked so well, we should continue with a similar curriculum, keeping in mind that at the end of the day, if a child is in front of the computer and interacting with us, it's still a good thing...

Things to do on Saturday: build and continue building web pages with the kids on www.tripod.com (instructions will be provided on Saturday); chat on Yahoo Messenger; use Microsoft Paint to be creative with pictures of celebrities; games: www.funschool.com, www.foxxkids.com; surf websites if kids are interested in any current events, history, etc. (try to stay away from sites that require large bandwidth, i.e. streaming audio, etc. it costs...)

11:30: Kids can go outside and play basketball and have food
12:00: We take the kids back home

Remember: be nice to the kids even if they are not nice to you! This is about having fun! Try and make learning as fun as possible.

Ryan, August 2002

However, we struggled to attract a regular number of children each week and those who did come weren’t interested in learning skills or talking about culture. We had trouble getting kids to sit down for stretches longer than ten minutes let alone engage them in our idea of learning. We were completely overwhelmed during this stretch. We weren’t prepared to deal with kids’ energy and behaviour. They were running around inside and outside, they were climbing fences, throwing floppy disks around and painting on the walls. They were also insulting volunteers:

Shaun: Again, there was complaints on certain children spitting at volunteers, and I feel maybe we haven’t tackled the problem as much and maybe after all, I feel, a 'stricter' discipline is needed to enforce some authority so the kids are not totally spoilt and allow certain behaviours to get out of hand.

Catherine: That's terrible that the kids are spitting on volunteers. I have no idea what can be done about that apart from strong disapproval from others, especially volunteers who the kids know and/or respect. I agree with Isaac that it's important to point out that the kids being 'bad' effects everyone.

February 2003

What was exciting, but often overshadowed by the often chaotic environment, were the connections volunteers were making with kids. These were small successes, as the progression in Isaac’s reflections hint at below:

On the positive side, while Catherine and Youth 44 were working together I had a bit of friendly banter with Youth 44. There wasn't unreserved openness or anything like that, but it gave me a sense of achievement.

Isaac, January 2003
Let's all see if we can list the "victories" from this time...I had a great time with Youth 25 - he was getting totally into the number game. He learned that 1-1 = 0. What a success!...Youth 8 asked Ryan for help with maths - that's a HUGE achievement...

Isaac, February 2003

As we were running around, Youth 10 was taunting me and calling out "Isaac" in a way which somehow touched me, because that meant that to him, today, I wasn't just a white cunt but a person. I don't expect it to be permanent, but I certainly feed off that kind of thing week to week.

Isaac, September 2003

Using computers and the Internet to help form relationships seemed like a real possibility, but one that was very complex. These early experiences pointed to a fundamental shift from what volunteers wanted to do to what children wanted to do. This shift was essential because of the position of power kids held. As a project, we’ve relied on voluntary participation. If kids haven’t had fun, they generally haven’t come back. Yet despite this shift in thinking, we still weren’t giving up on the idea of teaching:

We all agreed it is difficult to keep a constant curriculum. The consensus is that each volunteer needs to take the initiative to teach the computer skills you are most comfortable with. Building websites seems to be popular but not applicable to all the kids. Try to be as educational as possible, but ultimately, if the kids want to look at games and listen to music, try to accommodate them while teaching as much as possible.

Ryan, December 2002

We began to see that if we wanted to build computer skills at all, we needed to support technology use with innovative ideas:

I thought maybe making some little 'books' or zines with some of the kids might be good. Isaac's been doing some colouring in, cutting and sticking with some of the girls lately. Maybe we could incorporate computer skills, looking for and printing out pictures of favourite things (and rappers, of course), making little covers with words on...I think the most constructive thing we can do is to keep them as busy and distracted as possible. Bruce did a great job playing tag with the kids who were 'over' the computers this week.

Catherine, February 2003
This changing mindset led us to express our goals for the first time:

1. To create a positive and open environment in which kids from the Redfern-Waterloo area can meet and interact with volunteers. We want everyone to have fun.
2. To help the kids attending the sessions gain useable and practical computer skills.
3. To help the kids and volunteers gain an understanding of cultures and people from different walks of life from outside of their own community. To share cultures and experiences.

Aside from giving us much needed reinforcement to remain motivated, our positive social experiences opened us up to new ideas about learning, specifically the idea that both children and volunteers could be learning from socialising. This was the first time the term ‘social capital’ came up:

I think I'm beginning to understand the "meaning" of what we're doing in terms which will help us make sense of the experience and which I think we can explain to other people. "Connect" is a very good name for the project. "Nexus" would be just as good. The point? Social networks. Helping build networks between kids in the Block and the outside world, so they can move more freely outside that rather restricted circle...

The theory behind all this, which I'm just beginning to grasp, is the idea that health, wealth and education are like viruses, and you catch them from someone you know who has them. In a similar way, drug addiction, psychiatric illness and poverty are catchy too. So the idea is to build bridges to the kids of that community in whom the problems are hopefully less entrenched, and the "good viruses" of health, wealth and education can take hold. The connectedness of a social network is called "Social Capital".

In some sense, teaching IT is a vehicle for building the relationships – a vector for the virus. Do you guys think this is a helpful way to think about what's going on?

Isaac, February 2003

The idea made sense but didn’t seem to capture the entire picture of what was at play:

I hope you don’t mind if I giggle at the idea of health being a catchy virus ;) But I won’t laugh at the idea of education being a virus...I think it's important to remember that for Koori communities the Australian education system offers little reflection of their identity...So the 'problems' such as
drug addiction are sometimes a direct result of the other parts of the equation which may contribute to loss of identity...

...the benefits of informal education are further reaching...we can assume that the benefits are MUCH more than can be labeled, for everyone involved. And getting out of bed on a Saturday morning is not the least of the benefits.

Nadia, February 2003

Our first effort to support the idea of social capital was an international pen pal project. We helped kids sign up for e-mail addresses and tried to facilitate an e-mail exchange with friends of ours in Turkey, South Africa, Germany, India, USA and Canada. After some initial success, excitement tapered off.

At this time, however, there were bigger issues at hand. From the early-going it was obvious that there was a clash between what behaviour was acceptable to the children and what was acceptable to volunteers. The types of difficult situations we've come across forms a laundry list of sorts: fighting and assault, verbal abuse, kids not communicating with volunteers, sexual harassment of female volunteers, smoking, tossing around computer equipment, jumping on cars, and breaking windows. These incidents have been tense, awkward and even dangerous – because of them, the project wasn’t sustainable early on:

Isaac: Shutting down often seems to be a difficult time. On this occasion, five minutes after Ryan announced it was time to wrap up, Youth 3 and another I couldn't identify were just carrying on with their games and ignoring my request to shut down. This has happened before and rather than enter into negotiations this time I just switched off the computers. Youth 3 called me something-not-very-nice but didn't seem genuinely upset. On the other hand he did switch on his computer again...I get the sense that challenging authority is something some of the kids do almost compulsively and I'm at a loss as to how to handle it...if I asked one of those particular kids to take 10 mins out after misbehaving, I don't think I'd get any cooperation.

Catherine: The question, of course, is whether by simply ignoring this behaviour we are endorsing it. I don't know. But it's certainly true that when the kids are being 'mean' to you, it's certainly not a fun experience, and I'm sure it has turned off several volunteers. A thick skin isn't the easiest thing to grow.

January 2003
Our dilemma was that we felt very little right to use authority but at the same time were sceptical of relying on respect and trust as conduits for ‘order’:

I was completely at a loss as to how to manage the situation, given that we don't actually have any parent/teacher type authority over the kids. Ultimately, I guess we want them to like and respect us enough that they wouldn't want to do this.

Isaac, January 2003 after children were jumping on a volunteer’s car

‘The Fight’ and ‘The Bus’

The often chaotic environment of the project was affecting the potential of what we could achieve. An incident in May 2003 brought the need to establish boundaries to a head.

On this day the Internet was down and a fight broke-out between two boys. Within minutes, the majority of children took sides. All control and safety seemed to be lost, and after unsuccessful attempts to verbally intervene, volunteers had to physically restrain one of the children. It was the first time we had to cancel a session mid-day. What concerned us most was just how quickly the environment deteriorated, and just how powerless we were to stop it. It was a traumatising experience:

Ryan: Youth 1 was in a rage...When he came in the last time and basically jumped over the table to get at Youth 6 and started to pick up chairs and keyboards, I thought, 'that's it'...decisive action needed to be taken. I picked Youth 1 up kicking and screaming and took him outside. I felt I need to talk to him and get him talking. I felt I needed let him know that I didn't want to punish him but I wanted him to understand why what he was doing wasn't a good thing for him and for us...The walk home was an especially emotional experience. I felt like I was invisible to the kids. All they were interested in was picking on Youth 6. It was sad to see...Kids who are normally very friendly and interactive were downright mean.

Catherine: It was by far the most difficult Saturday morning I have experienced during my time volunteering...For me one of the most worrying aspects is that for the first time I can remember we were basically positioned in 'opposition' to most of the kids. By us trying to stop them beating up Youth 6 we were immediately seen as 'taking sides', and we were on the opposite side to the majority of our regular kids. This, in my opinion, was entirely unavoidable. Even without stepping into
who was 'right' or 'wrong' in the fight, we just had to try and minimise injury. Which reminds me. I will buy a first aid kit this week!...

There was no doubt in my mind that Youth 1 would be prepared to attack us in the rage he was in. To be really honest, my feelings about him were so negative by that point I would never have been able to pull off the 'we don't want to punish you, we like you'...This Saturday will be very interesting. The kids were probably much less traumatised by the day's events than we were.

Isaac: I felt like a veneer had been stripped away, like we saw the "real" dynamics of our group of kids...For the safety of the kids and volunteers, I'm beginning to think we need to assume more of the authority of a school.

Ryan: I think this is very dangerous as it would change the whole dynamic...Any sort of school connotation is a dangerous thing.

Isaac: Without this structure in place, I can see it getting messy. The school/authority thing will be invisible until things get unruly. Remember - the kids think of us as authority figures regardless. Mostly they think we're doing paid work, so the only change in perception I can see happening is that they will feel safer.

May 2003

It was clear that we needed to take action. One area we concentrated on was offering more interactive activities, because it was becoming clear technology could play a role in engaging kids:

Catherine: We need to have a range of activities available... I think we absolutely need the Internet up and running, whatever we might think about that, if it is in any way possible...

Isaac: One positive thing came out of this: the kids interacted more than with the Internet:) On the other hand, I can see that having the Internet as a mental space where the kids can retreat to cool off is also a good resource.

May 2003

Getting thirty copies of Microsoft’s *Age of Empires* couldn’t have come at a better time, or at a better price. A volunteer managed to get copies by writing to Kellogg’s, who were putting them into cereal boxes as a promotion. We started to play with it in the weeks right after the fight and began to experience positive results. However, the sustainable solution to our challenges with behaviour seemed to be establishing a sense of group responsibility:
Well, there are only two models I see for running this kind of show: authoritarian, where we put the fear of god into them; cooperative, where all the kids take responsibility for making it work.

Isaac, May 2003

This brought up many questions. How do you create a ‘group’ identity across such large differences in culture and age? Just because we had begun to accept playing as our focus didn’t mean that there was any stock of trust built up in our group:

This "calm 'em down" strategy is, of course, dependant on the fact that the kid we're dealing with is able to be reasoned with. Which may not always be the case, but seeing Youth 1's performance last week with the trashcan I doubt we'll encounter a kid less likely to be reasoned with, and Ryan nonetheless managed the feat.

For me the most disturbing aspect of last week was this: the simple fact is that outside of Ryan and Catherine (who are treated as father/mother figures by most of the kids) I doubt any of us could have calmed Youth 1, even if we used the exact same words as Ryan. We simply don't have the influence (a fact which was pointed out to me by Youth 10 two weeks ago, who shouted: "Why the **** did all you ****ing ****s have to start coming? Ryan and Catherine were doing fine without the rest of you ****s!!". Ah, these kids are so poetic.

Ang, May 2003

We decided that we wanted to work towards a more cooperative environment but needed stop-gap measures in the meantime. The only leverage we had was to threaten kids with being banned or shutting down the sessions altogether. These were the cards we played, something I will discuss in detail in Chapter 4. Over the next few months we banned a handful of children (usually the same ones) and shut down completely twice. Slowly, some stability was developed:

Ryan: Youth 10 and Youth 3 were banned for pulling the fire extinguisher last week. Youth 3 showed up an hour or so into the session...This was a mixed outcome in my eyes. He wasn't causing trouble, was calm, and knew that he was not allowed in...At one point he was hanging at the door and I asked him if he knew why he was banned. He pointed to the fire extinguisher. Again, I saw this as a small positive. He had thought about what he did; however, my complete attention was needed from the moment he started to inch into the centre...
Isaac: This is a conflicted situation. On the one hand, it's so positive that you were able to have a genuine exchange with him. On the other, being banned achieved what is probably one of Youth 3’s main needs in life - concerned attention from someone he respects...

February 2004

With boundaries in place we had more opportunities to socialise and play in a less hostile environment. From this point the project began to settle into its current shape.

Despite establishing boundaries, we were still dealing with challenging behaviour from a group of five or six kids. Similar to ‘the fight’, our on-going stresses came to a boiling point. In this incident, after we banned one of the kids, we lost control. The boy began to reek havoc in the Centre and the session deteriorated quickly, including children breaking into a bus parked near the centre and taking the hand-break off:

Ryan: A session that challenges our existence. I'm still feeling numb from it. We had to shut down mid-morning, visit the house of one of the kids to explain how she had been punched for no reason, stop a bus from being driven into the school, volunteers were physically abused, and we decided we needed to consult the police...Most of the session we were on the brink of losing control and eventually, it happened. From 11:00AM onwards we were, for all intents and purposes, at the mercy of the misbehaving kids; and after we shut down it was almost like a circus.

Isaac: Yesterday I couldn't sleep - I couldn't get away from reliving the incident.

February, 2004

As we recovered and developed our strategy for the following week, our project and the area were shaken by a riot.

The Riot

This was the first time that our little world collided head-on with the big issues in the community. We had always talked about race relations as a reason why the project existed, but had never faced their public manifestations first-hand.
The incident that sparked the riot, the death of a boy falling off his bike (while allegedly being followed by police), happened half a block away from the computer centre. One of the children in our group claimed to have witnessed it and one of our volunteers was on the scene soon after. In the immediate aftermath our resources were stretched well beyond what we were prepared for. Myself and another volunteer made statements to the police and were later called as witnesses in the Coroner’s inquest. As a group, we struggled to deal with our emotions. We were concerned for the well-being of the children and were confused by seeing kids we knew all over the news:

Therese: I couldn't stop thinking about _ and how scared she was after seeing the accident...Her mother called me last night at about 11:30 asking me what she should do as she was crying and couldn’t fall asleep...it seems that each week we seem to be experiencing things which are quite difficult to deal with...last night was a long night for me.

Ang: I'm sure anyone who's watched channel seven news at all today has seen the clear shots of _ attacking a police car and _ smashing a civilian car with a crowbar. And I’m pretty sure _ was _ or _ who threw that Molotov cocktail at the station...This is fucking insane.

Isaac: I know, I'm finding it very difficult to concentrate. The thing is, there's almost no action we can take.

Ryan: Thinking about what type of effects this has is staggering. I can picture kids just feeding off the anger of the people around them...How confusing must all this be, with all the mixed messages that the kids are getting from their families, friends, police, media and other members of the community. They mustn't know what to think or how to act, what is up and down?

February 2004

Many things haven’t been the same since. We don’t go down to the Block to pick-up kids anymore. The group of kids who were causing the most challenges haven’t come since. From a volunteer point of view, I’m not sure those of us around at the time have fully recovered. I still get an intense feeling of anxiety every time I think about those few weeks:

Ryan: It’s been over a year and I don’t think I’ve recovered.

Therese: Every time something comes up you do think about it...They flash the little boy’s picture on there and you start thinking about what happened...it was an intense two week period.

June 2005
Pushing On: Tuesday Nights and ‘Co-Ownership’

To the full credit of volunteers and children, the project pushed-on. With this research in full-swing we started to move in new directions with a rough aim in mind – more interactive activities to promote talking, thinking and a stronger sense of group.

With a new digital camera in-hand, we launched a Tuesday night session in February 2004 with the hopes of working on multimedia projects:

I'm hoping we can capitalize on the popularity of the Saturday morning classes and start up a new activity where kids can work *quietly* on projects.

The classes will be: small (maybe 4 kids and 3 volunteers at a time); goal oriented; probably running on a weekday afternoon; stable – the same volunteers should be working with the same kids as much as possible;

Possible projects: create comic strips and put them on the internet; create fan pages for sports stars, and (hopefully!) get their feedback; something which has the potential of getting feedback will be more interesting than something which just sits on the net and rots.

Isaac, December 2003

Despite some success, after running Tuesday sessions for three months we struggled to get a regular turn-out. Due to dwindling sunlight we put the idea on hold, something I will discuss further in Chapter 4. Our boldest attempt yet to move forward as a project has been the goal of ‘co-ownership’:

In reading about projects and practices working in similar spheres as us (by that I mean people from outside communities helping to address issues in disadvantaged communities), reoccurring buzzwords are "co-ownership" and "empowerment". The theme that pops up is that once a community project achieves a significant level of co-ownership (shared roles in decision-making, running and developing the project) outcomes are more numerous, take hold more strongly, and are more lasting.

And while the image of kids driving a fundraiser or taking charge of arranging a public display of work done on Saturdays may seem a bit out there, I'd venture to say we'd all agree it would be a good thing if the kids had a voice on what we did, how we did it and where we were heading...
To facilitate this process we arranged get-togethers between kids and volunteers after our normal sessions ended. Writing on pieces of butcher’s paper we brainstormed about what we did and what we wanted to do in the future. We were surprised and excited by the kids’ interest. We wanted to act on as many suggestions as possible, and extending the weekly session by one hour was our first step. After some time we began to think about the idea of mentoring and children becoming ‘volunteers’. The concept opened up more questions than answers:

Bruce: It doesn’t take too much responsibility (tongue in cheek) - walking with us to get the pizza, setting up games, maybe letting him referee/set up the AoE tournament? He could set up basketball games, or even just do what we do indoors – help ppl get onto websites. I think he’d like the extra responsibility, and if he doesn’t like it, then no biggy - he can come and go as he pleases.

Isaac: If we ask him to be a volunteer, what *is* a volunteer? I guess we can view the question from the point of view of what a volunteer wants, their identity, or what they actually do.

- just someone slightly older who comes along to try to be a role model?
- someone who is from the "outside community"?
- just someone with a key to the computer room and who helps you surf the net?

October 2004

Despite our on-going reservations, the culture of the project began to shift towards the idea of joint responsibility and decision-making. In 2005 the process of co-ownership has taken a much slower-moving course, and we’ve settled around the playing, socialising and sense of familiarity which I described at the outset of the chapter.

With an understanding in mind of the range of experiences the project has encompassed, I’d now like to turn my attention to laying out the conceptual framework that can develop meaning to them.
2. Searching for Our Kind of Empowerment

Many important changes in social relations may come from the human interaction that surrounds the technological process rather than from the operation of computers or the use of the Internet. For example, a new computer laboratory in a low-income neighbourhood may also become a meeting hub for at-risk youth and college student mentors. The social importance of ICT in the information economy and society means that ICT initiatives often have powerful leveraging potential...

(Warschauer 2003: 212)

What do our experiences mean? How, if at all, has our project empowered kids or volunteers? Empowerment is often a vague term, and I need to develop a framework of thinking that can capture its meaning in our context. In this chapter I will introduce a framework of concepts to accomplish this.

There are four key parts to this framework. At the centre is the concept of social capital, and its relationship with technology and new forms of literacy. I will demonstrate this connection, which Mark Warschauer’s words above preface, in Chapters 3 and 4. However, the loose and often unproven claims of social capital, the complexity of new types of literacy, and the power of technology to be anti-social require this core to be supported by additional ideas. The second part of the framework, therefore, covers the type of learning environment needed to foster empowerment in a diverse setting with children. The third part of this framework, which I will explore in Chapter 5, argues for the need to support critical thinking and expression in order to combat ‘oppression’ and ‘cultural invasion’. The fourth and final part to the framework, which I will explore in Chapter 6, discusses looking inwards and outwards at the project, focusing on the need to examine volunteers’ motivations and the project’s community integration. The sum of this framework is represented in Figure 1.
Social Capital: Empowerment by Coming Together

Since we connected to the idea of social capital so early on, it makes sense that it takes a central position in this discussion of empowerment. I will be using Eva Cox’s Boyer Lectures titled, *A Truly Civil Society* (1995), and Robert Putnam’s, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Society* (2000), as my main sources.

The great relevance of social capital to our experiences is its assertion that both children and adults can be empowered by casually coming together to socialise. This notion has undeniable appeal because it can give significant meaning to our vibrant social experiences. As I will explain, much of Cox and Putnam’s arguments connects strongly with our experiences, and we should therefore embrace them as a main outcome and continued goal of the project. However, its romantic but relatively unproven claims require us to extend its arguments and look to other concepts – not the least of which is an investigation into how technology can be involved in the process of empowerment. I will be illustrating these arguments in Chapters 3 and 4.

What is Social Capital?

Forming the foundation of social capital is an assumption that as social beings, we learn and shape our identities through relationships:
...we are primarily social beings, defined by our relationships, linked to a broader society. The links between us are important because they define who we are and how we see ourselves in relation to others...we continue to learn trust, sociability, distrust and aggression...we are very much a product of our environment...we want to be accepted by the group.

(Cox 1995: 70)

According to Cox it is in these relationships that social capital is created, she says, “Social capital refers to the processes between people which establish networks, norms and social trust and facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit” (Cox 1995: 15). Cox and Putnam contend that accumulated trust and networks have value, captured in the use of the word ‘capital’, which places social capital in the context of physical, human and financial capital:

...the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value. Just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both individual and collective), so too social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups. Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norm of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.

(Putnam 2000: 19)

Putnam and Cox both propose that social capital has benefits on a small and a large scale. Putnam says that social capital is, “…simultaneously a ‘private good’ and a ‘public good” (Putnam 2000: 20). These goods come in the form of tolerance, civic virtues, and social mobility. Cox says, “Accumulated social trust allows groups and organisations, and even nations, to develop the tolerance sometimes needed to deal with conflicts and different interests” (Cox 1995: 16). As I will discuss, developing tolerance has been an important theme to our project. Indeed, one of our most significant outcomes has been a form of Reconciliation ‘in action’, and many volunteers have discussed how the project has broadened their perspectives.
Cox also says, “High levels of social capital bring cooperation and norms which many be called civic virtues…the basis of truly civil societies where the law rests lightly. If we trust others as we trust ourselves, prosperity and economic growth follow” (Cox 1995: 18). Putnam suggests that civic virtues can pour-over into the wider community to produce a better quality of life:

A society that relies on generalized reciprocity is more efficient than a distrustful society, for the same reason that money is more efficient than barter. Honesty and trust lubricate the inevitable frictions of social life.

(Putnam 2000: 135)

As I will discuss, the idea of civic virtues relates strongly to the sense of familiarity and ‘community’ we’ve felt.

Another outcome of social capital is social mobility, something explained by Putnam’s descriptions of “bridging” and “bonding” networks (Putnam 2002: 22). Bridging networks best describe the type of connections we may have built between different groups of kids and adults. He describes bridging social networks by saying they are, “…outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages. Examples of bridging social capital include…many youth service groups” (Putnam 2000: 22). Bonding networks best describe relationships kids have made and reinforced with each other, and likewise volunteers have made with each other. He says they are, “…by choice or necessity, inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups. Examples of bonding social capital include ethnic fraternal organisations…” (Putnam 2000: 22). In summarising the social mobility bridging and bonding networks yield, he says:

Bonding social capital is good for undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity. Dense networks in ethnic enclaves, for example, provide crucial social and psychological supports for less fortunate members of the community…Bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity…Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40.

(Putnam 2000: 22-23)
Putnam’s social mobility relates to our experiences - as I will explain, we’ve reflected on how the project has extended social circles.

Cox and Putnam are quick to point out, though, there are potential downfalls to social networks, especially bonding groups. In these groups strong connections can lead to exclusivity and intolerance:

> People who fear the Other seek out those whom they can define as like themselves - ‘people like us’ who seem familiar and therefore safe. This familiarity may be based on shared race, class, religion or other definable characteristics.
> (Cox 1995: 31)

As I will discuss, this dynamic is very relevant to the power hierarchies and in-groups we’ve experienced, especially down the lines of race and geography. However as Putnam alludes to above, it is important to balance the downfalls with the support it can provide. This is especially the case for children who may be dealing with challenging circumstances or who are from cultural groups in danger of marginalisation, such as Aboriginal cultures.

Of supreme relevance to our experiences is the contention that social capital can significantly impact the development of children:

> Child development is powerfully shaped by social capital. A considerable body of research dating back to at least fifty years has demonstrated that trust, networks, and norms of reciprocity within a child’s family, school, peer group, and larger community have wide-ranging effects on the child’s opportunities and choices, and hence, on his behaviour and development...The implication is clear: Social capital keeps bad things from happening to good kids.
> (Putnam 2000: 296)

Putnam examines American states over a statistical index counting death rates, child health indicators, teen birth rates, violent crime rates, teen arrests and school drop-out rates to conclude that, aside from poverty, community engagement is, “...far more important than anyone would have predicted in ensuring the healthy development of youth” (Putnam 2000: 297-298). His research even suggests that social capital can indirectly affect education, a
finding that meshes with our experiences in improving literacy, something I will discuss in Chapter 3:

Unexpectedly, the level of informal social capital in the state is a stronger predictor of student achievement...there is something about communities where people connect with one another - over and above how rich or poor they are materially, how well educated the adults themselves are, what race or religion they are - that positively affects the education of children.
(Putnam 2000: 300-301)

Though Putnam’s findings are of obvious significance, they need to be looked at with a critical eye. This is a point even Putnam himself touches on:

Of course, the mere fact that social capital is correlated with good outcomes for kids does not mean that social capital causes these outcomes or, conversely, that a social-capital deficit is leading kids to take wrong turns in life. Besides social capital, states also differ in many other ways that might influence child well-being - parental education levels, poverty rates, family structure, racial composition, and so forth. To make matters more complicated, social capital itself associated with these factors.
(Putnam 200: 297)

This brings up a number of concerns I have with Cox and Putnam’s arguments, which I will elaborate on shortly.

**Building Social Capital**

According to Cox and Putnam, a key to building social capital is voluntary participation. Cox says that social capital is developed in groups that, “…are generally run democratically: people participate because they want to and their processes involve members working together…” (Cox 1995:18). This is a crucial link we can make to social capital. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, the bedrock of our project has been the consistent, voluntary effort put forth by both kids and volunteers. Another crucial link we can make is the view that many benefits come from *casual* interaction:
...the development of trust, translated into social capital, works best in relatively superficial relationships. This is because civic relationships are essentially formed in public view through task-orientated, friendly, cooperative activities. We need early experiences of less visceral but more collegial contacts such as group activities with other children and adults to help us learn to trust those outside our limited intimate circles.

(Cox 1995: 31)

Putnam’s views support Cox’s:

...the informal connections we strike up – getting together for drinks after work, having coffee with the regulars at the diner, playing poker every Tuesday night...Like pennies dropped in a cookie jar, each of these encounters is a tiny investment in social capital.

(Putnam 2000: 93)

This is a point underlined by Smith, who says, “Robert Putnam’s discussion of social capital provides informal educators with a powerful rationale for their activities – after all the classic working environment for the informal educator is the group, club or organization” (Smith 2001). As I will discuss in Chapter 3, we’ve referred to the project’s environment as a casual ‘living room’.

I now want to discuss my concerns with social capital. First, it is a very intangible concept. Relationships, trust and reciprocity are hard to recognise and open to interpretation. As I’ll discuss, we’ve often been confused by shallow relationships and a sense of tenuous trust. The far-reaching but unproven benefits of tolerance, civic virtues and social mobility take this loose basis a step further. If a ‘feeling’ is all we have to go on, we run the risk of overromanticising social capital. There are examples of this in the public arena. In a speech to The Sydney Institute, Federal Treasurer Peter Costello weaved the concept of social capital through discussion on the occupation of Iraq, fiscal policy and the role of government in very fuzzy terms (Costello 2003). In 2003, the Australian Government’s Productivity Commission released a report titled, Social Capital: Reviewing the Concept and its Policy Implications, which attempts to capture the meaning of social capital as it relates to government. The report advocates social capital as an important measure in the development and execution of government programs, but provides minimal practical
suggestions on how this can be achieved. If we are to embrace social capital as a project we need to decide if we are going to accept its looseness. We also need to understand that we are attaching ourselves to a concept that can be used in many contexts.

This plays into an examination of how social capital theory can be applied to projects like ours. I’m concerned with how social capital theory is applied to ‘disadvantaged’ communities. Should we really be aiming for prosperity, economic growth and academic performance? As I will discuss, it is clear that there are political and social inequities feeding into the challenges facing Redfern-Waterloo, if not causing them.

Intensely relevant to the discussion of building social capital in our context is the state of race relations in Australia between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people – specifically in an urban setting such as Redfern-Waterloo. May there be too big a gap to cross, too much history and too many differences between our groups to form the reciprocity and trust so central to models of social capital? An examination of the Reconciliation movement can shed light on the uneasy state of race relations in Australia on both sides of the gap. The situation may begin with the hotly contested historical relationship between Aboriginal people and European settlers. Over the last decade there has been a so-called ‘history war’ over the matter. Reynolds (1999) discusses the inaccessibility and shame of the history of colonisation while Windschuttle (2002), controversially attacks the claims of both established historians and Aboriginal groups, contending that colonisation was not as brutal or baseless as widely accepted views suggest. Manne (2003) and Dawson (2003) continue Reynolds and Windschuttle’s opposing arguments.

Yet there is much evidence that racism, loss of culture and language, loss of identity and abuses of human rights have dominated race relations in recent times (Parbury 1988), including the Stolen Generations (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission 1997) and Aboriginal deaths in police custody (Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody). Despite public action, including a number of Reconciliation-focused community groups and even a symbolic march across Sydney Harbour Bridge (BBC News 2000), relations have continued to be strained. In Redfern-Waterloo there has been much
concern over the relationship between the Aboriginal community and the police (*Cop It Sweet, ABC TV 1992*), most recently illustrated by the riot in February 2004 (Jopson 2004).

It is obvious, then, that there are many dynamics at play and many challenges to face in bringing Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together with the goals of building trust and relationships in mind. If a lack of social capital isn’t the only issue, then building social capital cannot be the only answer. This presents two areas in which social capital theory needs to be extended. If we want to impact the big picture issues facing Redfern-Waterloo we need to investigate forms of empowerment that go beyond casual play and socialising. Furthermore, if there are complex issues facing people in the area, we need to be well-integrated in the community, in a culturally appropriate way, in order to address them.

These concerns are well-illustrated by Gewirtz et al. in an examination of the deployment of social capital theory in “education action zones” in England. These zones were launched by the Department of Education and Employment (DfEE) and were influenced by Putnam’s arguments of social capital (Gewirtz et al. 2003: 2). The initiative was designed to raise educational achievement in schools in disadvantaged areas by providing opportunities for “active citizenship”, described as “…new and exciting ways for schools…parents, business and community organisations to work together…” (DfEE cited in Gewirtz et al. 2003: 13). Policy aimed to support, “…before and after school clubs, weekend and holiday classes, reading clubs and nursery facilities…introducing family literacy initiatives; or by bringing parents or grandparent into the school to support teaching and learning” (DfEE cited in Gewirtz 2003 : 14,16). According to Gewirtz et al., though the program’s documentation spoke of a culturally supportive and progressive manifestation of social capital, *in practice* they failed to do so (Gewirtz et al. 2003: 15). Their study concluded:

...insufficient attention has been given to whether forms of social capital these policies are designed to build are the same as those which give middle-class families their relative advantage in their interactions with the education system; and second, there is a fundamental confusion at the level of both discourse and practice about the rationale for the schemes and the ways in which parents are positioned within
Beyond these concerns, Cox and Putnam’s descriptions of the casual nature of social capital don’t do nearly enough justice to the complexities of bringing very different groups of people together. Cox says, “Learning some of the rough and tumble of group process also has the advantage of connecting us with others. We gossip, relate and create warmth that comes from trusting” (Cox 1995: 16). While we can attest to the warmth that comes from trusting, our experiences take her use of ‘rough and tumble’ to another level – something I’ve begun to illustrate with the conflicts I described in Chapter 1. As I will discuss, our experiences with relationships have been complex, and there are a range of dynamics that have directly affected trust and reciprocity. Socialising requires conscious effort, and agendas, gender, communication styles and power hierarchies have all affected our experiences.

Finally, the central position of trust and mutuality in social capital theory requires us to question the motivations driving our project, especially notions of charity. As I will discuss, we’ve had trouble accepting the project as a two-way experience, and we may also be placing limits on the amount of respect and trust we are willing to invest into it.

As a result of these concerns I will reinforce and build around Cox and Putnam’s ideas. A crucial connection to make is the relationship between social capital and technology use. However, but before I make this connection I need to explore the measures we’ve had to take in order to maintain a safe and open space.

A Safe and Open Environment

As I’ve begun to illustrate in Chapter 1, the complexities of bringing such different groups of adults and children together have presented a number of challenges. It’s been essential to have well thought-out responses to a range of behaviour, and as I’ll discuss in Chapter 4, its general theme has been ‘setting boundaries’. This theme has proved important not only
in managing difficult situations, but it’s also proved important in setting the stage for positive social and technological experiences.

Marvin and colleagues’ (2002) “circle of security” is very relevant in articulating the dynamics we’ve seen at play. Although developed from research with pre-school aged children, its spirit has proved to be very important in our setting. Their research explores the central role a ‘secure base’ plays in child development and behaviour:

A central feature of my concept of parenting [is] the provision by both parents of a secure base from which a child or an adolescent can make sorties into the outside world and to which he can return knowing for sure that he will be welcomed when he gets there, nourished physically and emotionally, comforted if distressed, reassured if frightened.

(Bowlby cited in Marvin et. al 2002: 107)

The concept they develop from this premise is a ‘circle of security’ which caregivers provide for children. In this circle of security, caregivers support children’s exploration, children’s coming to them, watch over them, enjoy with them, protect them, comfort them and help them organise their feelings (Marvin et al 2002: 110). This connects very strongly to our experiences embracing a casual, ‘all-welcome’ approach to the project. It also connects strongly with our experiences setting parameters as to ‘what’s cool’ and ‘what’s not’ cool in the centre, – both in a social and technological sense, so both children and volunteers can have more piece of mind to ‘make sorties’ into the world of our sessions.

A key driver in Marvin and colleagues’ study is the caregiver providing emotional back-up by being, “…kind and always bigger, stronger, and wiser than [the child]. Wherever possible, this person follows the child’s need. Whenever necessary they take charge” (Marvin et al 2002: 110). This strongly relates to our experiences with authority. An ‘authority only when necessary’ style fits with the stop-gap measures we’ve had to adopt, and also fits with the long-term need we’ve identified to lean on the respect and trust coming from growing relationships.
A worry in the application of this model is its connection to attachment relationships in which children may see their caretakers as consistent and irreplaceable presence in their lives, responsible for their well-being (Marvin et al 2002: 108). Though there has been little evidence of this in our experiences, we should still only pull upon the spirit of this model. To further develop the ‘open’ aspect to our environment I will draw upon Paulo Freire’s ‘dialogue’, which I will introduce shortly.

**Technology: A Vehicle for Social Capital and Literacy**

Since playing and experimenting with technology has formed the core of the project, I need to establish two things. First, I need to demonstrate *why* and *how* using computers and the Internet can contribute to the process of building social capital. Second, since the project has been flavoured by the idea that we could empower by improving computer skills, I need to establish how using technology can contribute to new types of literacy.

Mark Warschauer’s book *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide* (2003), provides the basis for these arguments. Warschauer’s research is especially relevant because it was developed from his visits to community technology projects around the world. He suggests that by taking a social approach to supporting and surrounding technology use, computers and the Internet can become a vehicle for social capital and literacy. The underpinning to his argument is that we need to re-think the digital divide to focus on ‘social inclusion’. Much of Warschauer’s argument connects strongly to our experiences. Indeed we have implicitly adopted many of his ideas, and should continue to.

However, Warschauer’s arguments need to be extended. The links he makes between technology and social capital is a fuzzy one. These concerns highlight the need for a safe and open environment in which to support technology use, and also the need to support critical thinking and expression. Aside from Warschauer, I will be using a variety of additional sources to support these arguments, including Neil Postman’s *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (1992) - a highly critical discussion of society’s pursuit...
of technology which proposes that we may be losing rather than gaining from relying on technology.

**Technology in Society**

We first need to recognise that technology plays a central role in society, especially in the lives of children. Warschauer calls today the “new information economy and network society” and points to advances in science, information processing, networked organisations and globalisation as drivers behind it:

The shift from a focus on a digital divide to social inclusion rests on three main premises: (1) that a new information economy and network society have emerged; (2) that ICT [information and communication technology] plays a critical role in all aspects of this new economy and society; and (3) that access to ICT, broadly defined, can help determine the difference between marginalization and inclusion in this new socioeconomic era.

(Warschauer 2003: 12)

Children are expected to lead the way in this new era. In a piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, concerned parent Adele Horin sums up the expectations placed on children and parents by the education system:

Many primary school teachers now assume every home is a library and every parent is a librarian. They take for granted overnight access to a computer, the Internet and an in-house research assistant.

(Horin 2004)

These concerns are supported by a 2004 study titled, *UK Children Go Online: Surveying the experiences of young people and their parents*, by Sonia Livingstone (London School of Economics and Political Science) and Magdalena Bober. Through a United Kingdom-wide in-home survey of 1,511 young people aged 9-19, and 906 parents, the study surveyed children’s use of the Internet and their parents opinions thereon (Livingstone & Bober 2004: 1). I have chosen this study because of its relevance in terms of age, its timeliness and its comprehensiveness compared with data available from Australian sources.
However, the study does present concerns which require consideration, namely the environment in which the research was carried out (in-home versus community technology centres like ours) and the cultural differences between children in the UK and Australia, especially Australian Aboriginal cultures.

Among 9-19 years olds, 41 per cent used the Internet daily, 43 per cent weekly and only 3 per cent were non-users (Livingstone & Bober 2004: 18). Results showed that Internet access at school was near universal – 92 per cent of all 9-19 year olds surveyed had accessed the Internet at school, 24 per cent had access at school, but not at home, while 64 per cent had used the Internet ‘elsewhere’ (Livingstone & Bober 2004: 1). Near universal access at school but non-universal access outside the classroom creates inequality. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, this connects to our growing understanding of kids’ technology access outside of our project

As a result of this argument, Warschauer asks us to recognise that kids need to be capable with technology. Warschauer says, “…the ability to access, adapt, and create new knowledge using new information and communication technology is critical to social inclusion in today's era" (Warschauer 2003: 9). This provides the basis of the argument that computer-related literacies can empower kids. It is also what makes a discussion of the ‘digital divide’ so vital.

However, what Warschauer’s discussion does not point out is the power of technology to bring people together – to act as the excuse to build social capital. We’ve seen that technology is a major part of kids’ lives – at school, at Internet cafés, and at home. Its entertainment value has been vital to participation in the project. This is evident in Livingstone and Bober’s study which reports that, “…the most commonly visited sites are those for music, games, hobbies…” (Livingstone & Bober 2004: 22). Of those children that went online at least once a week, 72 per cent use it to send and receive e-mails, 70 per cent used it to play online games, 55 per cent to send and receive instant messages, and 45 per cent used it to download music (Livingstone & Bober 2004: 21).
‘Rethinking’ the Digital Divide

Rethinking the digital divide provides the basis for linking social capital theory to technology use. The traditional idea of the digital divide is that a lack of access and skill with technology instantly creates disadvantage (Warschauer 2003: 1). As I’ve alluded to in Chapter 1, this is an idea that has heavily flavoured our project, especially in its early days. However, Warschauer wants us to move from a traditional notion of the digital divide to a view of technology as a socially-connected entity:

The bottom line is that there is no binary divide and no single overriding factor for determining such a divide. ICT does not exist as an external variable to be injected from the outside to bring about certain results. Rather, it is woven in a complex manner into social systems and processes...I join with others in recognising the historical value of the digital divide concept...while preferring to embrace alternative concepts and terminology that more accurately portray the issues at stake and the social challenges ahead. (Warschauer 2003: 8)

What Warschauer suggests, and what our project supports, is that technology use is part of a holistic state of affairs encompassing financial capacity, culture, politics, family life and more. Warschauer’s research shows that people have different sets of opportunities and motivations for accessing technology – all connected to their social circumstances:

The notion of a binary divide between haves and have-nots is thus inaccurate and can even be patronizing because it fails to value the social resources that diverse groups bring to the table...even in its broadest sense – [it] implies a chain of causality: that a lack of access (however defined) to computers and the Internet harms life chances. (Warschauer 2003: 7)

This is especially relevant considering the distinct cultures of Aboriginal communities. For a research report I completed for the University of Technology Sydney, I visited a number of technology access points in the Redfern-Waterloo area – schools, libraries and other community organisations. The same issues around social circumstances kept coming up. Though computers and the Internet form a regular part of some residents’ lives, just getting
to a computer is a challenge to others - it’s what’s leading kids to the computer, or hindering them from sitting down at one that is most relevant (Sengara 2005).

The complex array of dynamics affecting technology use rings true with available statistics on the use of digital technology in Redfern and Waterloo. In the ABS 2001 Census of Population and Housing, keeping in mind the diversity of the area, less than 24 per cent Waterloo residents had accessed a computer at home or accessed the Internet in the week before the census, which was well below the national rates – 42 per cent for computer use at home and 36.7 per cent for Internet use (ABS 2001a). Redfern, however, with 37.1 per cent of residents having used a computer at home in the week preceding the census, was below the national rate in computer use at home but was above the national rate on Internet use with 45.1 per cent of residents having accessed the Internet in the week preceding the census (ABS 2001b). The relevance of this data should be balanced with the knowledge that computer and Internet related questions were new to the 2001 census, that it only probed for computer and Internet use in the week leading up to the census, and that not all cultural groups in the area may have been adequately sampled.

Since a lack of technology access isn’t the only issue facing children in the community, it’s certainly not the only answer. Warschauer suggests that we need to discard any ideas we have about ‘technological determinism’, “…based on its notion that a computer in the classroom will automatically generate learning in the same way that a fire automatically generates warmth” (Dede, quoted in Warscaher 2003: 202). He cites Kling:

[The] big problem with “the digital divide” framing is that it tends to connote “digital solutions,” i.e. computers and telecommunication, without engaging the important set of complementary resources and complex interventions to support social inclusion, of which information technology applications may be enabling elements, but are certainly insufficient when simply added to the status quo mix of resources and relationships.

(Kling, quoted in Warschauer 2003: 7-8).

To Warschauer, the goal is not to bridge the digital divide but to use technology to contribute to “social inclusion”:
Social inclusion and exclusion...refer to the extent that individuals, families, and communities are able to fully participate in society and control their own destinies, taking into account a variety of factors related to economic resources, employment, health, education, housing, recreation, culture, and civic engagement.

(Warschauer 2003: 8)

According to Warschauer we need to focus on the social environment around:

Human resources are one of the most important factors affecting social inclusion and exclusion. Literacy and education can be furthered through use of technology but not merely through the provision of the hardware, software, and connections. A computer program or Web site can provide information but it cannot provide the kinds of social interaction that are at the heart of good education.

(Warschauer 2003: 152)

The social interaction and support he refers to comes to fruition in the form of social capital.

**Contributing to Social Capital**

Theoretically linking technology use to the concept of social capital is a significant achievement of Warschauer’s research. However, at this point, there is little more than conjecture to prove this link. This is an area to which our experiences can contribute a great deal. Warschauer says, “…the Internet provides expanded opportunities for communication and association with broad numbers of people. This is especially important for developing weak social ties, for which the Internet is a natural medium” (Warschauer 2003: 156). He goes on:

...one of the simplest ways to promote social capital is to lower the cost of social interaction, and the Internet certainly achieves that. One leading sociologist has gone so far as to proclaim that the rise of the Internet has brought about, ‘a revolutionary growth of social capital’.

(Collier & Lin cited in Warschauer 2003: 158)
There is research indicating that social capital can be stimulated through *online* communication but it remains to be seen just how *offline* communication around technology can do so. He says, “…strategies must be devised to combine the strengths of the Internet with other forms of interaction” (Warschauer 2003: 160). Of great relevance to our experiences is emerging research concerning computer games and social interaction. Shanly Dixon of Concordia University has examined the ways in which computer games and the Internet can create space for childhood interaction:

As media generated notions of public space as dangerous space lead to increasing privatisation of space, virtual space becomes an alternate space for childhood play and social interaction.

(Dixon 2004)

In an ethnographic study, she notes that young players viewed gaming as a way of hanging-out, requiring a significant time and emotional investments (Dixon 2004). Her players also enjoyed critiquing the game with each other (Dixon 2004). In Chapter 3 I will discuss how the interactivity of Age of Empires and other online gaming sites have acted as a means to interact. The significance of space shouldn’t be underestimated either, considering the cramped public housing estates and on-going development in Redfern-Waterloo.

A complementary piece of research comes from John Carroll and David Cameron, who provide insight into identity formation in gaming. Through an examination of the multi-player fantasy game *Everquest*, they link gaming to the medium of process drama. Process drama can be defined as, “Dramatic exploration based on extended, connected improvisations and structured through a sense of theatre and drama structures…” (New Zealand Ministry of Education 2003). Carroll and Cameron contend that gaming can provide a space for exploring identity and interaction:

Both activities [process drama and gaming] allow participants to ‘become somebody else’. Both deal with the identity shifts possible within imagined environments…The increasing closeness of performance elements within both fields is seen as a response to the changing cultural forms being generated by mass media and developing digital media.

(Carroll & Cameron 2004)
Carroll and Cameron relate the ‘group narrative orientation’ of process drama to the video cut-out scenes in games, the ‘teacher in role’ to superior or helper characters in games, ‘out of role research’ to cheats, and ‘exercise focus’ to custom games and online chatting (Carroll and Cameron 2004). Of course this research needs to take into account that the exact impact of identity exploration on children is hard to ascertain.

There is also pertinent research linking e-mail, web-chatting and web-caming to social capital. Warschauer cites research by Hampton and Wellman on a suburban housing community in Toronto, Canada called Netville. In the study on-line interaction was monitored to see how it affected social networks (Warschauer 2003: 158). The results showed that the Internet was especially helpful with, “…building social capital with those people who are ‘just out of reach’ (more so than with those whom one never sees, or sees often)” (Hampton and Wellmen cited in Warschauer 2003: 158). The Internet as a helpful, but not revolutionary tool in creating interaction is supported by results from Livingstone and Bober’s study: “Across all activities – passing time, making arrangements, getting advice, gossiping and flirting – the phone…and text messaging scor[ed] higher than e-mailing or instant messaging” (Livingstone & Bober 2004: 33). Results also confirmed that computers and the Internet did not, “result in a larger and/or geographically more widespread social circle” (Livingstone & Bober 2004: 33).

Anti-Social Technology

Despite the emerging link between social capital and technology use, there is much to be taken from the flip-side to this argument. An extreme example of an anti-technology position comes from Neil Postman, who would challenge our project’s ability to build social capital, much less provide greater social good. He suggests that technology is useless in addressing social issues:

> Our most serious problems are not technical, nor do they arise from inadequate information...If families break up, children are mistreated, crime terrorizes a city, education is impotent, it does not happen because of inadequate information. Mathematical equations, instantaneous communication and vast quantities of information have nothing...
whatever to do with any of these problems. And the computer is useless in addressing them. And yet...the computer compels respect, even devotion, and argues for a comprehensive role in all fields of human activity."

(Postman 1992: 119)

He suggests that we may be losing our sense of humanity by relying on technology:

It subordinates the claims of our nature, our biology, our emotions, our spirituality. The computer claims sovereignty over the whole range of human experience, and supports its claim by showing that it 'thinks' better than we can.

(Postman 1992: 111)

He also contends that all technology embodies manipulative agendas:

...every technology – from an IQ test to an automobile to a television set to a computer – is a product of a particular economic and political context and carries with it a program, an agenda, and a philosophy that may or may not be life-enhancing and that therefore require scrutiny, criticism, and control.

(Postman 1992: 184)

Postman’s solution is to develop a severe distrust of technology by becoming “resistance fighters” who believe that, “…technology must never be accepted as part of the natural order of things” (Postman 1992: 183-184). According to Postman, we should become people who are, “…suspicious of the idea of progress, and who do not confuse information with understanding…who admire technological ingenuity but do not think it represents the highest possible form of human achievement” (Postman 1992: 183-184). To do this, Postman argues that we need to focus on a traditional style of education:

...to become educated means to be familiar with the intellectual and creative processes by which the best has been thought and said has been produced...it is an education which stresses history, the scientific mode of thinking, the disciplined use of language, a wide-ranging knowledge of the arts and religion and the continuity of human enterprise. It is an education as an excellent corrective to the anti-historical, information-saturated, technology-loving character of Technopoly.

(Postman 1992: 188-189)
Postman’s arguments are over the top. They are based on conjecture, not evidence, coloured by sweeping statements about all types of technology. They are unrealistically radical, and fail to acknowledge that technology can, in the least, provide new avenues for empowerment. His arguments are made all the more hollow by his proposed solutions. His suggested approach to education seems to be aim for the protection of traditional and exclusive forms of learning. This type of approach to empowerment is not at all suited to our project.

However, while our project goes a long way in disproving Postman’s fundamentalist views, we can take something away from them. Specifically a scaled-down critical eye to help us address his claim that all technology carries agendas. This idea connects to concerns we’ve had over the types of cultural influences kids can be exposed to online. I will re-visit this idea shortly through the concept of ‘cultural invasion’. This critical eye is further warranted by practical evidence proving that computers and the Internet can detract from social capital. Warschauer only briefly mentions this:

The most popular and fastest growing uses of the Internet include private, antisocial forms of entertainment, such as viewing pornographic material and gambling. To the extent that the Internet facilitates activities such as these, it will weaken rather than strengthen social capital.

(Warschauer 2003: 160)

Livingstone and Bober’s study show that kids are being exposed to dangers online and adults aren’t aware of the extent of the danger. Among 9-19 year olds who went online once a week, 57 per cent had come into contact with online pornography, yet only 16 per cent of parents thought this was the case (Livingstone & Bober 2004: 2). One third of 9-19 years olds who went online once a week reported having received unwanted sexual or nasty comments via e-mail, chat, instant message, or text message, yet only less than 7 per cent of parents thought this was the case (Livingstone & Bober 2004: 3). Children are also giving out personal information online:

…nearly half (46%) of 9-19 year olds who go online at least once a week say that they have given out personal
information, such as their full name, age, e-mail address, phone number, hobbies or name of their school, to someone that they met on the Internet. By contrast, only 5% of parents think their child has given out such information.

(Livingstone & Bober 2004: 3)

Warschauer, in one of his few forays into the anti-social impacts of the Internet, discusses the concept of ‘flaming’ which is relevant to our experiences with online chat:

The reduced communicative content (no visual or auditory clue) frees people up from their inhibitions online but can also bring out the worst on people. This results in a phenomenon called flaming, in which people express hostility in ways they might never do face-to-face.

(Warschauer 2003: 159)

A second branch to these worries is the grey area around what content is considered ‘socially acceptable’. Violent computer games and comedy websites are the most relevant examples of this. This is a debate based mostly on personal opinions and values, and there is large amount of public hysteria involved. The following was a front page story in The Daily Telegraph concerning the game Counter-Strike:

SCHOOL teachers are receiving special training to combat student rage attributed partly to ultra-violent electronic games...Teachers have complained increasingly realistic violent computer games are attracting susceptible students to engage in "dark side" behaviour...

Teacher Ros Jaeger said games like Counter-Strike were influencing students in the way they thought and reacted to situations...

"The way they speak, their reactions to a simple request, their violent outbursts, their threats to fellow students and teachers are evidence of this."..."More children are being diagnosed than ever before. We are now confronted daily with anarchy."

(McDougall 2004)

Though many games do depict graphic violence, and this is an important area which needs to be examined, there is little basis for this type of reaction. Media Studies Professor Henry Jenkins of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology asks us to consider the critical
abilities of kids to process messages. He says we must recognize a distinction between ‘effects’ and ‘meanings’ of games:

[Opponents to computer games] see games as having social and psychological ‘effects’...that increase the likelihood of violent and antisocial conduct...[they] are seen as emerging more or less spontaneously, with little conscious effort, and are not accessible to self examination.

Meanings emerge through an active process of interpretation; they reflect our conscious engagement; they can be articulated into words; and they can be critically examined. New meanings take shape around what we already know and what we already think, and thus, each player will come away from a game with a different experience and interpretation.

(Jenkins 2004)

These arguments necessitate a discussion of the environment in which we provide technology access. This presents a dilemma. Though these concerns begin with technical content, they require social solutions. It is hard to determine what our duty of care is considering that regulation and childcare online are only emerging fields. Above all, these concerns reinforce the need for a safe and open space in which to support technology use. In Livingstone and Bober’s study, only a third of young people 9-17 years old said that their parents played a direct social role in supporting their Internet, such as suggesting websites or sitting at the computer with them (Livingstone & Bober 2004: 45). Children are also finding ways to be private about their use of the Internet. Among 12-19 year olds, 38 per cent reported deleting e-mails so no one else could read them, 38 per cent had minimised a window when someone else came into the room, 17 per cent deleted the ‘history’ file and 12 per cent had used someone else’s password without permission (Livingstone & Bober 2004: 46). This underscores the need to ‘talk’ with children around technology use, something I will expand on shortly.

One aspect of Jenkins’ argument that raises alarm his assertion that children who are surrounded by violence are at more risk of having examples reinforced by gaming:

...a lot of real world violence impinges on the lives of these kids. They don’t need to play games to have violence in their lives, these kids see it in their immediate environment. The problem is that every time we take a step to deal with games
as a solution to these problems we convince ourselves that we
don’t need to take the hard steps, which are to look at how
we deal with the roots of real violence in the real world

(Jenkins cited in Penny Arcade 2004)

His argument leads into a discussion on literacy, specifically literacy that involves
analytical ability.

**Electronic Literacies**

As I will discuss in Chapter 3, playing and experimenting with computers has allowed us to
support improvements in basic user skills. This is equivalent to what Warschauer calls
computer literacy, “a fluency…with the physical and operational manipulation of a
computer that profoundly affects people’s productivity with it…” (Warschauer 2003: 111).
However, we may be helping kids gain new forms of literacy that go beyond reading,
writing and computer literacy. Warschauer says these new forms of literacy are the result
of a change in the nature of information:

...social, economic, and technological transformations
are aligned to bring about major changes in literacy
practices. New types of computer and Internet-based literacy
practices are emerging...not isolated from the types of
literacy practiced with print but rather involved added
layers that account for the new possibilities presented in
the electronic medium.

(Warschauer 2003:110)

His views are complemented by Professor Gunther Kress of The University of London:

Of course there has been a massive shift in the world of
representation. Thirty years ago, children...learned science
by looking at books - writing is the dominant mode for
representation and communication, it is the mode through
which you engage with what is presented to you, that which
you have to learn. And nowadays...there's a pretty big
difference in how knowledge is represented. Is this the same
knowledge?

(Kress 2003)
Mark Warschauer calls the skills needed to handle this new type of information, “electronic literacies”, including ‘information’ literacy and ‘multimedia’ literacy (Warschauer 2003: 111).

Multimedia literacy consists of skills around using image as the dominant form of communication and knowledge formation:

> It is in the realm of computers, however, that multimodal communication has progressed the furthest, combining text, backgrounds, photos, graphics, audio, and video in a single presentation...millions of people around the world have the desktop power – if not necessarily the skill – to create multimedia documents, ranging from simple PowerPoint presentations to homemade movies. This re-emergence of the ‘natural sign’ has profound implications for digital democracy...the rise of multimedia should provide an important opportunity to level the playing field of literacy...

(Warschauer 2003: 115)

According to Warschauer, information literacy encompasses collecting, processing and evaluating information (Warschauer 2003: 113-114). He says this involves developing research questions, determining the best places to look for information, using the best tool to find those locations, and evaluating the “…the reliability, authorship, and currency of a source…” (Warschauer 2003: 113). However, like multimedia literacy, information literacy involves existing intellectual ability. In this case, analytical ability:

> Information literacies involve both computer-specific knowledge (e.g. mastery of browsing software and search tools) and broader critical literacy skills (e.g. analysis and evaluation of information sources). Many of these broader critical skills were also important in the pre-Internet era, but they take on greater importance now with such vast amounts of information available online, much of it of questionable quality.

(Warschauer 2003: 113)

This point connects to Jenkins’ and Postman’s arguments stressing the importance of assessing and developing meaning from information. What is so alarming is that young children may lack a developed capacity for this. Livingstone and Bober’s study suggests
that kids may not have the key skills needed to evaluate online content. 49 percent of all 9-19 year olds in full-time education thought that ‘some’ of the information on the Internet could be trusted, an alarming 38 per cent trusted ‘most’ of it, only 9 per cent trust ‘not much of it’, and 1 per cent trusted ‘none of it’ (Livingstone and Bober 2004: 28).

Furthermore, only 33 per cent of 9-19 year olds who went online once a week said they had been told how to judge the reliability of online information (2004: 28). Livingstone and Bober conclude:

...the introduction of some guidance for all is an obvious and urgent first step...beyond this, to ensure that all children become competent and informed in weighing the value of the vast range of online resources is a vital if longer-term priority for the education system.

(Livingstone & Bober 2004: 28)

What Livingstone and Bober recognise is a need to support information literacy, which involves supporting critical thinking. Again, we need to determine if this can be done either through play and experimentation or if we need a more engaging approach.

Critical Thinking and Expression

As our lingering questions and the preceding discussion have touched upon, there have been a number of aspects to our experiences that call for an exploration of approaches to empowerment that go beyond casual socialising and playing. These include the loose framework of social capital in addressing marginalisation, the insistence that technology can be a vehicle for manipulative agendas, and the need to support analytical and creative capacities so vital to new forms of literacy. I now want to develop these points to argue that, as a project, we need to support critical thinking and expression.

I will use Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a base to work from. His pedagogy is relevant in assessing the forces shaping the Redfern-Waterloo area, the types of messages that kids can be exposed to online and the need to support Aboriginal cultures in our approach. His concept of ‘dialogue’ is also very relevant in describing the type of open
environment the project has established. However, because he is too revolutionary and black and white in his assessments, we can only draw on the spirit of his arguments. As a result, a more grounded approach to critical thinking and expression is needed – one which pulls on the spirit of Freire’s problem-posing but acts through the casual channels. I will demonstrate this framework in Chapter 5.

**Leaving ‘Banking’ Education for ‘Dialogue’**

A crucial part of Freire’s argument is a critique of traditional forms of education which he calls ‘banking’ education, a top-down approach to learning where teachers ‘deposit’ facts into students (Freire 1996: 31). According to Freire, because there is an absence of any form of creativity or critical thinking, traditional forms of education do not create an empowering environment:

>The students are not called upon to know, but to memorise the contents narrated by the teacher. Nor do the students practice any act of cognition, since the object towards which this act should be directed is the property of the teacher rather than a medium evoking the critical reflection of both teacher and students. Hence in the name of the ‘preservation of culture and knowledge’ we have a system which achieves neither true knowledge nor true culture. (Freire 1996: 61)

This aspect of Freire’s argument sets the stage for a radical, ‘liberating’ critical pedagogy which I will discuss shortly. For now, I wish to present them in the context of extending the ‘safe and open environment’ we’ve tried to establish. In this respect, Freire suggests that a polar teacher-student type relationship is disenfranchising:

>...the teacher teaches and the students are taught...the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing...the teacher thinks and the students are thought about...the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined...the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it. (Freire 1996: 54)
According to Freire, the solution to this contradiction rests in making all involved, “…simultaneously teachers and students” (Freire 1996: 53). The results are more horizontal roles and a much less-prescribed environment:

...a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.

(Freire 1996: 61)

‘Dialogue’ then takes hold, in which people exchange opinions in a praxis of reflection and action, with an emphasis on equality:

...when a word is deprived of its dimension of action...the word is changed into idle chatter, into verbalism, into an alienated and alienating “blah”...if action is emphasized exclusively, to the detriment of reflection, the word is converted into activism...

(Freire 1996: 68-69)

In a dialogue-driven environment, he suggests that authority rests on group cohesion, “In this process, arguments based on ‘authority’ are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be on the side of freedom, not against it” (Freire 1996: 61).

Freire’s discussion of traditional education connects to the ideas about ‘teaching’ that we’ve held, specifically at the outset of the project. His description of ‘co-teacher-students’ roughly articulates the ambiguous roles that volunteers and kids have taken as the project has developed. Most importantly, though, his concept of ‘dialogue’ has directly influenced our safe and open environment and our move towards ‘co-ownership’.

However, there are two areas this discussion which need reinforcement. First, Freire’s argument is very difficult to put into practice in its entirety. Setting a space for critical thinking creates questions of just how much we are able to give up power:

Freire insists that teachers should never impose their view of a problem on students, though he does not say teachers
should or even could be neutral. The teacher does enter into the exchange of views concerning the problem, but ostensibly and simply as an equal participant. Yet, it is reasonable to assume that students will view teachers as equal?

(Caulfield cited in Ohliger 2003: 11)

This point is touched upon further by Walker:

Democracy does not figure in the theory of dialogue...[W]hat remedies are suggested by his orientation? More moral attentiveness and application to duty on the part of the leaders, and more conscientization of the oppressed by the leaders? We are not only moving in a circle, we are trapped in it. The tighter it gets, the more like puritanism and the less like liberation our new position will seem.

(Walker cited in Ohliger 2003: 12)

This connects to a critical aspect of Freire’s argument – a profound respect for the realities of those who intervention projects are developed for. As I will describe, this has been an underlying struggle for us and calls for an evaluation of the motivations driving our involvement in the project:

One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding.

(Freire 1996: 76)

The second aspect of his argument which needs extension is its vagueness in acknowledging the practical structures needed to handle complex dynamics. Indeed, Freire lacks acknowledgement of the unique circumstances projects like ours face, “By not linking his revolutionary model to a particular social and economic context, he makes it that much more difficult for those of us not in North-eastern Brazil to find it useful” (Woock cited in Ohliger 2003: 14). While group authority is a worthy long-term goal, in our case, we have needed stop-gap measures – which Marvin and colleagues’ theory can help us to articulate.
‘Oppression’, ‘Cultural Invasion’ and ‘Problem-posing’ Education

In his most revolutionary statements, Freire declares that in society there exists an unjust social order which breeds “dehumanization”, built on an exploitative relationship between ‘oppressors’ and ‘the oppressed’:

Dehumanization...is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human...for the emancipation of labor, for the overcoming of alienation, for the affirmation of men and women as persons...[it is] the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors...nourished by death, despair, and poverty.

(Freire 1996: 26)

According to Freire, oppression can come in the form of “cultural invasion”, in which dominant groups leverage positions of power to strip the oppressed of their culture:

...the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter’s potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression...cultural invasion is thus always an act of violence against the persons of the invaded culture who lose their originality or face the threat of losing it...

(Freire 1996: 133).

He goes on to say that, “The invaders mold; those who they invade are molded...The invaders act; those they invade...begin to respond to the values, the standards, and the goals of the invaders...”(Freire 1996: 133).

To liberate the oppressed, Freire proposes that dialogue be used to spark critical reflection that “…strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality” (Freire 1996: 62). He proposes a “problem-posing” education in which participants communicate opinions in response to questions:

The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own...Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly
challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge as interrelated to other problems within a total context, not as a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus constantly less alienated.

(Freire 1996: 62)

He challenges us to “name” the world:

Human existence cannot be silent...To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming...If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings.

(Freire 1996: 69)

There are three main areas in which Freire’s assessments of society are relevant to the project. First, they are pertinent in examining the inequities and forces shaping the socio-economic circumstances of Redfern-Waterloo.

Second, they lead into a discussion of how we may be supporting cultural invasion through the messages kids receive through technology. Underpinning these concerns is the increasingly commercial nature of the Internet: “Commercial interests seeking to expand the child and youth market increasingly centre on the development of targeted online contents and services” (Livingstone & Bober 2004: 6). As Jenkins discusses, children can also be exposed to racial stereotypes online:

The one [game] that bothered me the most was the one where you go into a Qwikee-Mart and Osama bin Laden pops his head out from behind the counter and you blast him away...in that context you have strong social reinforcement of the attitude against Arabs and a kind of atmosphere amongst your society that can be more militaristic and encourages a certain blurring of racial categories...So it's much more likely in that case to lead to direct confrontation...

(Jenkins cited in Penny Arcade 2004)

The representations of gender online is also worrisome. In her paper, Britney Spear-ing the Digital Generation, Candis Steenbergen analyses the online presence of pop singer Britney Spears:
Britney Spears has sparked more moral panics around girls and their bodies, sexualities, relationships and dress than any other pop personality. Googling ‘Britney Spears’ returns approximately 4,270,000 hits: one third of which are fan sites (official and unofficial), one-third consumer-based product sites, and one-third porn.

(Steenbergen 2004)

Steenbergen argues that Spears’ online identity is directly related to consumption and eroticism, and these representations have an effect on the way children view females (Steenbergen 2004).

Third, we need to consider if our approach is doing enough to support Aboriginal culture or potentially engaging in an ‘invasion’ of it. These concerns are directly related to our project as a form of intervention, especially considering that no regular volunteers are neither Aboriginal or Redfern-Waterloo residents. This significance of this can be seen in the on-going struggle for Indigenous-run education programs to survive within or alongside the traditional education system in Australia. In an open letter titled, *Independent Indigenous Education under Attack*, Paul Knight, Executive Director of Tranby Aboriginal College in Sydney (an Independent Indigenous education provider controlled by Indigenous interests), attacks proposed Australian Commonwealth Government bills which would result in a reduction in spending on Indigenous education by approximately $3 million:

Through this, I believe the Government is saying two things; firstly, that they do not believe that Indigenous people and community controlled organisations can deliver educational outcomes of any value for Indigenous people, and, secondly, that Indigenous culture, values and methods of teaching have no relevance and place in today’s society and can not deliver appropriate outcomes conducive to reducing the disadvantage faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. I would challenge both of these positions and can not help wondering about the path to ‘practical reconciliation,’ or should that be ‘practical elimination?’

(Knight [Tranby Aboriginal College] 2005, pers. comm., July)

Though Knight’s argument is broad and our project operates on only a small scale, we can’t escape the questions it raises.
The central role technology has played in our project raises further questions. We’ve been concerned at a perceived lack of readily accessible content targeted for Indigenous children. This appears to be an issue in urban and remote settings, articulated by a report by the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA):

There has been some activity in the development of Indigenous content. This has mainly been locally or sectorally based and often is only accessed by the immediate target group… Information is not readily available to assess how accessible and relevant these sites are…

(DCITA 2002: 82)

The report goes on to stress the importance of content relevant to Indigenous people:

Lack of culturally appropriate or relevant content is also seen as a significant disincentive to Internet use. This may include presenting materials in Indigenous languages or in a culturally appropriate format (such as the use of visual menu icons, instead of English words), or materials of cultural heritage significance or other interests identified by communities. Community concerns were also expressed in a number of forums about the Internet opening up access to undesirable sites (such as those containing pornographic material) to communities.

(DCITA 2002: 60)

Though it doesn’t alleviate the need for this kind of approach, it may be the case that children are not interested in more serious content online – something we have had experience with as well, as I will discuss. In Livingstone and Boer’s study, 55 per cent of 12-19 year olds who used the Internet at least once a week sought out sites concerned with political or civic issues and only a minority had responded to or contributed to these sites in any way (Livingstone & Bober 2004: 3).

Despite these three areas of relevance, we cannot take on the full depth of Freire’s arguments. First, he does not support his definition of ‘oppressed’ and ‘oppressors’. This makes his black and white assessment all the more confusing. Are we, as volunteers from middle and upper classes of society the oppressors?:

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The problem with Freire’s social criticism is its simplistic nature. Freire deals only in vague generalities. Oppression is never clearly defined. Freire concentrates on the oppression of the poor and fails to deal realistically with the oppression as it is found at all levels of society. It is a mistake to see only the poor as oppressed and all others as oppressors.

(Elias cited in Ohliger 2003: 7)

Second, since his book was published in 1970 there have been a number of programs inspired by his ideas that have not provided the results he proposes. In assessing the outcomes of Freire’s model, Gottlieb and Thomas say, “Most consciousness-raising programs, alone or in combination with skill transmission programs, have not achieved expected social changes, and it seems that this has led to a growing disenchantment with these efforts” (Gottlieb & Thomas cited in Ohliger 2003: 4). There is a well-placed concern that Freire is too simplistic in his assumption that critical thinking can be developed through his model. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, this is something that connects strongly with our concerns over how much critical thinking we can expect to develop and support in young children:

At times, one gets the impression from reading Freire that human and societal change can be brought about simply by willing it.

(Elias cited in Ohliger 2003: 11)

Elias, with Sharan, accentuates this point by saying Freire’s theory, “...depends on some sort of transcendent view of reality through which individuals come to see what is real and authentic. There appears to be little room in his view for the painful struggling with different views and opposing viewpoints” (Elias & Sharan cited in Ohliger 2003: 4). These concerns lead to me to a discussion of how we can support the spirit of Freire’s problem-posing education without passionately engaging in his vague assessments of society and his light switch-like view of critical reflection.

Using the Avenues of Social Capital and Technology

The casual avenues of social capital and multimedia production may provide this opportunity. As I’ll discuss in Chapter 5, critical thinking and expression can still be
supported through casual socialising and informal use of technology. This idea connects to how Jenkins proposes we foster literacy:

> Around the country, people are beginning to experiment with both classroom and after-school programs designed to foster games literacy. The best such programs combine critical analysis of existing commercial games with media production projects that allow students to re-imagine and re-invent game content. What kids learn is that current commercial games tell a remarkably narrow range of stories and adopts an even narrower range of perspectives on the depicted events. Rethinking game genres can encourage greater diversity and in doing so, introduce new contexts for thinking about game violence.
> (Jenkins 2004)

Cutting through hysteria with dialogue is a concept taken further by media studies teacher Barney Oram. He describes how students at Cambridge sixth form college in England have played and analysed games as part of the curriculum. The history of video games, representations of characters, violence and the moral panic around gaming are all part of the course plan, and students write reports on topics such as the representation of competition and conflict (Oram 2004). Though we differ from the classroom setting Jenkins and Oram discuss, their focus provides us with important direction.

Taking the idea further, the interactivity of multimedia and its wide availability may support expression. In its submission to the DCITA report, The Central Land Council wrote:

> To encourage Indigenous participation of Internet technologies, Indigenous people need the resources to develop content rather than just being recipients of externally generated content...content developed in regional communities has the potential to protect cultural life from being redefined.
> (Central Land Council cited in DCITA 2002: 67)

Supporting multimedia literacy is all the more important considering the low levels of traditional literacy we’ve experienced: “Low levels of English literacy present a major problem for Indigenous communities, not just in using the Internet, but also in
understanding information and processes relating to all telecommunications services…” (DCITA 2002: 18).

**Looking Inwards and Outwards**

Much of the above discussion provides a frame in which we can explore our ‘on-the-ground’ experiences. However, it’s been clear that what’s been going on behind the scenes of the project has affected its impact. I’ve alluded to often tenuous levels of respect and trust and, especially early-on, our tendency not to view the project as a two-way experience. I’ve also mentioned that if we wish to directly address the complex circumstances of Redfern-Waterloo, we need to explore our practical connections in the community. To explore these issues, I will use Freire’s examination of patronising notions of charity (and a need for ‘re-birth’), and Warschauer’s model of ‘community informatics’. This discussion is the focus of Chapter 6.

**Motivations**

According to Freire, personal motivations flavour the entire effort of empowerment. He presents charity as ego-driven and perpetuating oppression:

> The pedagogy of the oppressed, animated by authentic, humanist (not humanitarian) generosity, presents itself as a pedagogy of humankind. Pedagogy which begins with the egoist interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism) and makes of the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism, itself maintains and embodies oppression.
> (Freire 1996: 36)

Despite good intentions, he contends that there are biases inherent in an act of intervention, touching on two recurring themes for us – respect and trust:

> ...certain members of the oppressor class join the oppressed in their struggle...Their is a fundamental role, and has been so throughout the history of this struggle. It happens, however, that...they almost always bring with them the marks of their origin...which include a lack of confidence in the people’s ability to think, to want, and to know...
converts...truly desire to transform the unjust order; but because of their background they believe that they must be the executors of the transformation. They talk about the people, but they do not trust them...

(Freire 1996: 42)

Freire describes trust by saying, “Trust is contingent on the evidence which one party provides the others of his true, concrete intentions; it cannot exist if that party’s words do not coincide with their actions” (Freire 1996: 72). To overcome patronising intentions Freire proposes a ‘re-birth’:

Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly. This conversion is so radical as not to allow of ambiguous behaviour...Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth.

(Freire 1996: 42)

According to Freire this involves risking, “an act of love” (Freire 1996: 32).

Freire is helpful in articulating the internal dynamics that may have, and continue to be at play in volunteers’ minds. First, though grounded in good intentions, ideas of charity have been at play for most volunteers. Second, it’s been clear that there have been ego-driven motivations, specifically a form of ‘voyeurism’ of Aboriginal culture and ‘feeling important’. Third, the idea of implicit trust also connects to our experiences, both in its presence and absence from interactions. Finally, the process of self-examination connects with the process of reflection by volunteers that the project has fostered.

However, he remains much too radical in his assessments. Thinking about a voluntary commitment as an act of ‘dehumanisation’ is a great deal to ask. Like his classification of the oppressed and the oppressors, he fails to take into account just how complex an emotional situation this is. Sherman says, “On the one hand, Freire states that we need certain emotions (e.g. love, mutual trust) in order for dialogue…On the other hand, Freire talks about the necessity of overcoming emotionality…” (Sherman cited in Ohliger 2003: 10). Putnam has a more moderate take on charitable motivations, saying, “Social capital
refers to networks of social connection – doing with. Doing good for other people, however laudable, is not part of the definition of social capital” (Putnam 2000: 117).

In Chapter 6 I will propose that we should draw on the spirit of Freire and Putnam’s thoughts. We need to acknowledge that there are ego-driven motivations for volunteering, and may always be, but we can strive to develop a flexibility of mind that acknowledges the complex emotions of these experiences.

**Community Informatics**

Warschauer’s concept of community informatics, based on Gurstein (2000), focuses on using technology to achieve community goals:

Community informatics begins from the perspective that ICT can provide a set of resources and tools that individuals and communities can use, initially to provide access to information management and processing, and eventually to help individuals and communities pursue goals in local economic development, cultural affairs, civic activism, and community-based initiatives.

(Gurstein cited in Warschauer 2003: 163)

According to Warschauer, community projects need to structure themselves in a way that maximises the development of social capital:

...social capital is created and leveraged by building the strongest possible coalitions and networks in support of the community’s goals, using technology projects as a focal point and organizing tool. Online communication is of course a part of this, but so are more traditional forms of communication, organization, mobilization, and coalition building.

(Warschauer 2003: 163)

He suggests five guidelines to help in achieving this. First, he calls for leveraging existing community resources, people who, “...know the local situation and can work to provide a structure that meets local needs”, and stresses the importance of local residents being involved in the management of the project (Warschauer 2003: 163-164). Second, he
suggests mapping and connecting community resources to, “…identify relations and resources within a community and how those might be amplified through a technology initiative” (Warschauer 2003: 165).

Third, he calls for forming links with existing social movements by saying, “Technology projects do not exist as ends in themselves. They are most effective when they are tied to broader social and economic campaigns…” (2003: 166). This step directly connects to our concerns over how we can impact urgent community issues. Warschauer provides the example of the “Bresee Cyberhood” computer centre in Los Angeles. The Cyberhood centre is only part of a larger community centre that has a variety of services aimed at addressing community issues, such as a health clinic, employment training and recreation program, in a holistic approach (Warschauer 2003: 166). In an interview with Warschauer, the director of Bresee said:

We don't just teach people computers, it's not just about developing skills - it's about connections with people and building relations. This community lacks the kind of mediating institutions like good schools, churches, and parents involved in the schooling. Our technology programs work together with all our other programs to help people develop these kinds of relations that are often missing. In this way we can be a gathering place and hub for the community.

(Director of Bresee Foundation cited in Warschauer 2003: 167)

Fourth, citing Alkalimat and Williams, Warschauer calls for organising new social alliances, “…gradually increasing the involvement of local churches, a university, and municipal organisations provides strength and sustenance to a community technology centre.” (Warschauer 2003: 169). Finally, he suggests social mobilisation through a variety of media, “…to use all available media to amplify the power of the Internet” (Warschauer 2003: 170). As I will describe in Chapter 6, Warschauer’s suggestions are very helpful in analysing our current connections to the community and in identifying ones we should pursue.

It’s only recently been possible for Warschauer to propose his practically-minded model. Indeed, the entire field of community informatics is still in its early stages. With ICT
industries booming in the 80s and 90s, sociology and computing researchers began to investigate the potential of technology to alter society. Early work (Schuler 1994, Rheingold 1994) explored the exciting possibilities for community formation and community change through technology use. However, the discussion has often suffered from the romantic and vague ‘digital divide’ rhetoric. The more focused ideas proposed by Gurstein (2000) and Keeble & Loader (2001) began to address this vagueness and clarified the direction of the concept.

Community informatics has since been interpreted in a number of different ways. In Australia, the movement has been joined by government, especially in the area of service provision and connecting rural and regional communities (Thompson 2003, McClelland et al. 2003). Consequently, questions have been raised over how technology projects define and target ‘communities’, especially in terms of socio-economic class biases (Loader 2002). There is also a concern that the movement is too heavily directly by academic and commercial interests rather than community-based interests (Gurstein 2003, Steer & Turner 2003, Denison 2003):

…I’ve highlighted Warschauer’s model because it builds on lessons learned in the field and incorporates the reflective perspective proposed by Loader.

I’ve now laid-out a framework of concepts to capture our ‘kind’ of empowerment. It is centred around social capital, technology and electronic-related literacies. It is reinforced and supported by a safe and open environment, critical thinking, expression and an examination of our motivations and community integration. I can now return to telling our story through this framework.
3. Building Social Capital and Improving Literacies

What's most promising, for me personally, is that I no longer see our project as being about serving just indigenous kids. I see it as helping kids full stop. These kids have a hard life, from what we understand, some not as hard as others, but all in all, they are kids that we can help learn stuff about music, computers, but more importantly, I really believe in this empowerment concept Ryan has been floating around. I feel that our project will one day give these kids opportunities, to do something with their lives that they might not have thought of before.

Bruce, June 2004

With technology providing the reason and the means through which we've come together, the project’s main contribution to empowerment has come through building social capital and improving electronic-related literacies. By socially supporting kids’ use of computers and the Internet, we’ve managed to establish a two-way ‘living room’. In this space, budding relationships, social networks and trust have broadened horizons, shaped group culture, and led to ‘Reconciliation in action’. They've also contributed to developing the skills involved in computer, multimedia, and information literacies.

However, if we are going to embrace these outcomes as the core of the project's accomplishments and its goals moving forward, we'll need to celebrate their small and often intangible successes. However, our experiences with the anti-social capacity of the Internet is one of many dynamics which have required us to reinforce our approach beyond social capital and literacies.

Technology as the Reason and the Means to Come Together

Led by Warschauer, I’ve laid out a field of thought presenting technology as a vehicle for social outcomes. In our case, there have been a number of factors involved in developing a space conducive to social capital, but few have been as central as technology. Although our social environment has at times felt like it has transcended technology, the entire
project has been based on children’s interest in using computers. We can’t lose sight of this. Our relationships with kids have not been independent of technology and technology use has not been independent of these relationships. At times we’ve struggled with romanticising this balance:

Ryan: The net was down. It’s no secret that some (most?) kids come mainly for the access, but I got a reminder of it. About 5 or 6 kids, most regulars, left almost immediately after they learned the Net was down. When the net is down I always feel more pressure, more insecure. Will the kids stay? Will they be happy? Are we just a big sham? It gave me a little reality check on how much I think the social scene may mean to kids. The technology is important. So is the social. They’re connected.

Bruce: Well...I guess they have better things to do; our social atmosphere seems more computer based than volunteer / kids interaction based.

May 2005

We’ve had to re-think the digital divide, much like Warschauer suggests. For a long time we’ve operated around the idea that the project has been bridging a technological divide. Yet in reality this has rarely presented itself as a pressing issue. Kids we thought were on the wrong side of this divide seem to have regular access to technology while only some seem to have very little. Some have been wizards on the computer while only few have barely been able to use a mouse. However, they’ve all wanted to have fun and be entertained. As we’ve learned more about how the project has fit in with other access to technology kids have, it’s made much more sense to welcome a casual, social approach. We’ve seen that kids have regular access at school, Internet cafés and with other community organisations. What we’ve provided is a space where children can experiment and play with technology, supported by a number of experienced computer users, for a prolonged period of time each week:

Ryan: That’s the thing that Eddie said that really struck a chord. How we’ve allowed that sort of experimentation with the technology at the centre. The project’s given me the capacity to see that things can be learnt by not having an agenda...One of the things that teachers at the schools in the area said is that since lots of the kids don’t have computer access at home, and just have access at school, we might provide support around using the technology. Where
they can experiment with the help of someone who has a little more experience to help them navigate through it and give that sense of security.

Antoine: So you almost have two buckets. You’ve got the IT capacities and social capacities. We tend to focus on the social aspects a lot...For IT capacities, think about the number of hours they spend on the computers on Saturdays, for a kid, is huge.

November 2004

The revelation of the project has been that technology has provided the means through which we’ve interacted. It’s broken the ice and been a medium for working together. Often we’ve come together in short exchanges. Kids have wanted to do something and volunteers have helped them do it – helping with spelling or accessing a website for instance. Though these interactions have been simple, they have contributed to building rapport. However, it’s been playing games and surfing the Internet that have sparked the most involved interactions, as Dixon’s findings suggest. Age of Empires has been the best example of this:

I think part of the success can be accounted for by Age of Empires, which is becoming a framework within which the kids can constructively interact with each other and with the volunteers...It's a long, drawn out game where we can interact and plan and talk.

Isaac, May 2004

The game’s design has encouraged teamwork and group strategy, and players have also needed to acquire game-specific skills:

I've been thinking more about why gaming might be beneficial. Basically, it's about knowledge acquisition. They won't be learning generic computer skills, but the process of knowledge acquisition is far more important as it involves developing intellectual and interpersonal skills.

-MUCH more attractive than downloading music so the kids will want to do it.

-they will probably need knowledge from us on how to use it.

This will break the pattern of kids coming and basically knowing how to do everything in their realm of possibilities and being bored. A tantalizing new possibility, just out of their present grasp is sure to be a stimulating challenge and opportunity for growth.
Though Carroll and Cameron’s research into identity exploration does resonate with our experiences (Age of Empires allows players to play through a number of different identities including villagers, soldiers and even animals), its impacts have been hard to ascertain. ‘Civilizations’ in the game take their names from ancient cultures such Assyrian, Babylonian and Egyptian, but we’ve rarely experienced kids using these names, or their unique attributes, when playing.

Online gaming sites such as [www.jippii.com](http://www.jippii.com), [www.123spill.com](http://www.123spill.com) and [www.miniclip.com](http://www.miniclip.com) have also been very popular (See Appendix 4 for screen capture images). These sites have allowed players to play against each other (as well as others online) in action games such as pool, mini-golf and Battleship:

I find playing games on the Jippii website has all sorts of benefits. It's a good way for me to interact socially with them; the games often involve a fair bit of banter, but this can lead into other conversations. There are plenty of morality issues at play too: a sense of fair play, magnanimity in winning and loosing, showing respect for opponents, sometimes good team skills too even my opponent might give me tips on how to take a shot or pass on other skills. It can become increasingly social when other people watch over your shoulder, offer advice etc.

We played a game last week, where there were probably five or six people involved. It became quite a social event. I enjoy trying to get some of the more impatient players to think for a little bit longer before making their move in chess. And one lad I play chess with regularly has certainly improved to the point at which he nearly beat me. It was very satisfying and I hope he and others can extrapolate some of these skills to other areas in their life. But whether it really does mean anything in the real world, who knows?

Alex V, July 2005

We’ve seen how these games can lead to the types of bridging and bonding interactions Putnam discusses:

They were playing a martial arts fighting game...Two players could play against each other on the keyboard and I found it amazing the interaction they had. They were very playfully insulting each other...The interesting thing about this was
that they do not know each other from school or any other social activities except Saturday mornings...They come from noticeably different backgrounds – Aboriginal and Polish-Australian. I remembered that Shaun related to me an exchange he had with Youth 28 while walking home some time ago...Youth 28 said that 'black people were bad’. They were sharing a keyboard...There was no physical fighting. Youth 28 was giving it to Youth 8 as much as Youth 8 was giving it to him.

Ryan, October 2003

While gaming has been a good way to work together, surfing the Internet has been a catalyst for talking with each other. What kids and volunteers have surfed online has given us instant topics for conversation:

Had a great chat with Youth 30...She was checking out a fan site so I started asking her about the wrestling phenomena. She is so enthusiastic about wrestling and all the 'cute' wrestlers. I felt really comfortable chatting with her. I told her that some of the wrestlers looked abit frightening in their gear and when they are in their fighting mode. She thought this was hysterical...We chatted about tattoos and I told her about my tattoo and she described her dad's...We also checked out her site, and she read the entry I left in the guestbook. I also showed her one of my favourite singers, and she agreed that he was good looking too...It felt like a really girlie chat, and I found her to be really engaging, intelligent and funny.

Therese, May 2004

Our experiences with online communication echo those of Warschauer and Livingstone’s research. This was especially the case with our e-mail ‘pen pal’ project. Though children seemed to enjoy receiving e-mail from people in other countries, we found that long-distance communication soon gave way to local communication:

Despite me being right there with him and trying to engage in some casual conversation, he really wanted to have an e-mail conversation. So I went to another computer on the other side of the room and we sent a few e-mails back and forth. He would yell over "Check your e-mail" and then I would respond. What I tried to communicate over the e-mail actually felt more coherent than when I tried to communicate it in person...

Ryan, July 2004
Kids began to e-mail each other and began to e-mail volunteers. This supported existing social circles:

Youth 22 and I have been emailing each other over the last 2 weeks, which is great because when we first started the pen pal project I helped her set up her email address and can now see her development...She seems to really enjoy the communication and replies straight away. In her last email she invited Isaac and myself to her birthday party next year in April...I have sent her pictures of saris which she really liked, and we have exchanged information about our trips, our families etc.

Therese, December 2003

We can only speculate as to why the pen pal idea didn’t take-off. Perhaps the messages pen-pals sent to kids were too long. There may have been language barriers. Another possibility is the transient nature of our drop in format. However, it provided an example of how small initiatives can have unexpected positive results, something which we need to embrace, as I will discuss shortly:

Ryan: On one hand I’m sort of embarrassed we left all these pen pals out in the dark...I think it was a success and a...well, I’m not going to call it a failure. Kids were really excited to get e-mail from people. I don’t know if they ever understood what e-mail is. In lots of cases the kids loved getting e-mail but they didn’t want to write back. I don’t know if that’s because of literacy skills or the concept.

Nadia: That is FANTASTIC! its a bridge that is semi-tangible towards using a very abstract system of communication. E-mailing unknown people, overseas may have been a big ask but getting e-mail skills, any which way? Invaluable!

November 2004

We’ve only recently explored the world of webcaming. In 2004, we managed a thirty minute session with a youth group in Austin, Texas. It was successful in connecting kids from very different backgrounds. Unfortunately, we’ve been unable to connect again due to the time difference, but webcaming remains something we should pursue further:

It was a highlight of the day for me. When I was helping Youth 11 out on the webcam, I thought it was great that he really wanted to engage with the kids in Texas and find out about them - their nationality, names etc. It was really important for him that they could see him and also that he
could see himself on the webcam so he knew how he was coming across. I heard him tell one of the other kids not to be rude when they started mucking around which I thought was great - he understood the need for respect and consideration...It worked well with an adult typing what the kids wanted to say - sped things up and once the rules and boundaries were set, it seemed to work smoothly. I think it's a great way of widening horizons. Yay!

Maria, August 2004

We did, however, run into the problem of kids not knowing what to say, which led us to the idea of using nametags:

Isaac: ...a lot of the traffic was of the form: "that girl in red, what's her name?" and a certain amount of embarrassment around that when names have to be repeated...[Nametags] will hopefully help the kids understand this is a personal, two-way medium as much as a telephone call. Putting on a nametag is an acknowledgement that there are *real people* at the other end engaging with you as a *real person*.

August 2004

We’ve also been concerned with kids becoming bored:

Even with that, it’s exciting for five minutes like “hello, hello!” but eventually is degenerates into showing their asses. It’s kinda like hard to talk to somebody you don’t know. Even as a grown-up.

Catherine, November 2004

A Two-Way ‘Living Room’

I now want to discuss how our experiences with technology has connected to Cox and Putnam’s social capital. The project’s contribution to social capital has come through what we’ve described as a two-way ‘living room’:

This addresses the question of is it educational or is it social and social capital-building? The thing which separates these kids from other kids in terms of educational achievement, seems to me, that they come from socio-economic backgrounds which isn’t conducive to educational progress and social progress. So what we provide, in some sense, is a
living room which is more like our living room than their living room. And they get to spend time in that living room. And when you're in the living room at home, as a kids, you learn things without being taught and somehow that's the kind of environment we're providing for them. A place to learn things on a social and technical level. Where learning is normal.

Isaac, November 2004

Volunteers have reflected on how mutual this environment has been:

George C: We said that we're having the kids in our living room, our culture, but I disagree. This is a place we meet and I was also influenced by the kids. I know what 50 cent is now...So it's a place to meet. It's not our place and the kids are coming, it's all of our place and we're meeting.

Catherine: That's true, actually. I hadn't really thought about it like that but I know about a lot of things I wouldn't know about if I didn't go on Saturdays - like popular culture, what kids like, what these kids like. Stuff I wouldn't know.

Maria: It is something I grapple with a lot, often seeing things through my own culturally-tinted glasses then trying to understand other ways of seeing things...I didn't expect to come back to Australia and to be dealing with that as much because I kind of assumed I was going back to everything I knew but Connect has certainly opened up a whole new world for me.

Shaun: Two years ago after a session I remember, it was the same thing, we actually sat down and actually said “what is connect for us and the kids”. Before, back then, my thoughts on connect was that it was just for the kids- like we're doing just this sort of like give the kids a bit of relief. But now I look at it - the biggest point is that element of co-identity, co-dependency with the kids now. I think that it’s a lot for us as well...

November 2004

As Cox and Putnam suggest in their descriptions of social capital, a crucial part to this living room has been the voluntary and casual format of the project:

The kids who come, come because they want to be there. That’s the most positive thing about everything.

Catherine, November 2004

For the most part, children and volunteers have interacted on their own terms:
I think that's why I like the idea of connecting in the way that the project allows. It is not a direct system. The kids get to choose to come and we get to choose to be there. The sharing is reciprocal.

Nadia, February 2003

As the project has developed we’ve seen evidence of the sense of belonging and group identification which forms the underpinning to Cox’s social capital:

I know that I am not there to improve computer skills. Sure, I think it's absolutely wonderful that some of the kids can now do things that they couldn't do before and some things that we can't do (like get those lovely images off the screen that flash up just before start up!) but it's not my reason for getting out of bed on Saturdays. I am much more interested in the relationships built between the kids and volunteers. I think it's amazing that some of the kids have shared things with us about their lives, that they tell us stories about what they've been doing and who they like and who don't like and how many cigarettes they smoke...I don't mean that in a voyeuristic way, of course, I mean that for me that's the true nature of the relationships we're building and there is no doubt that there has been trust built up with some of the kids.

Catherine, November 2003

However, as I’ve alluded to, at times we’ve struggled with seeing the project as a two-way experience – benefiting both kids and volunteers. This touches on both the motivations for volunteering and the need to avoid ‘cultural invasion’, both points I will return to later:

Nadia: I'm still a little uncomfortable about the amount of 'thought' spent on the us and them stuff. Don't we ALL have different backgrounds? I know poverty and most likely race are key points in these children’s classification (to drum the point) but what are the positives for them of their background?... ideas about what's good about being a kid from Redfern's Block. Community, freedom, creativity, less responsibility, less expectation...

Isaac: It sounds rather condescending, because I think there's probably lots of stuff going on in their living rooms - even on the block - which help them learn about how to live and operate in an aboriginal community. Unfortunately (but necessarily) there's also lots of learning about how to live and operate in a crime and poverty stricken community. What they pick up in our "living room" is learning about how to operate in a different community with which they may possibly
want to engage for many good reasons – one is that it controls most of the country's wealth and power. On the other hand, we get to learn a little bit about how to operate in a community such as the block. One thing I've learnt is that interactions are less direct and learning is about observing rather than asking questions.

November 2004

**Social Networks and Implicit Trust**

So what’s gone on in our living room? Putnam’s ‘bridging’ and ‘bonding’ networks help to describe the relationships we’ve seen formed and strengthened. These have shown themselves in simple and practical ways. For example, we’ve remarked how children have begun to include volunteers in their networks:

A really interesting "social network" thing happened...Youth 31 and Youth 6 are friends. Youth 6 wasn’t there on Saturday. Youth 31 knew that Youth 6 comes regularly and knows that we know that. He also must know that we go down to the block to pick-up/drop-off kids sometimes. So he asked Ang and myself to send a message to Youth 6. He told me to ask Youth 6 to come over to his place later. He told Ang to tell Youth 6 he really wanted to see him...

Although he probably just really wanted to get a hold of Youth 6, he included us in his network in order to get to him. Perhaps this is an indication of us having something of a place in his social network or at least a temporary place. Either way, it at least shows that we aren't exclusively outside.

Ryan, April 2004

We’ve also reflected on moments when kids have remembered experiences they’ve shared with volunteers:

Ryan: While we were walking home Youth 25 mentioned your name and that you two were playing together.

Maria: I was quite surprised that he mentioned to me on Saturday about another time when we had been doing some stuff together...It's amazing how the kids remember things isn't it? I sometimes think they don't notice things but they notice a lot more than I think.

March 2005
Some relationships have even grown to be more involved:

Youth 30 texted me out of the blue yesterday to wish me a happy birthday. I felt an amazing feeling of friendship and surprise. She must have written down my birthday in her diary (as I have hers) and then made a point of getting in touch. All this even though I haven't seen her for some time. I was thinking how this relationship, and others I have made with kids, are starting to transcend my commitment to the project and becoming a part of my regular life and who I am. Youth 30 is my friend, whether I'm with her on a Saturday morning or not.

Ryan, September 2004

Though we’ve spent more time reflecting on the transcendent nature of some of these relationships, the project has also provided a space for children to develop relationships with each other. The same can be said of relationships among volunteers:

At the very least, I've made some good friends through the volunteers and that's more than enough incentive to get out of bed on a Saturday.

Gloria, August 2003

The building of trust, however, has been a more elusive phenomena to assess. We’ve talked about how trust has been implicit, evident in actions rather than words:

Eddie: Have you ever noticed any comments that the kids said about you trusting them or them trusting you? Because it could be pretty important if you have all that coming back week after week.

Ryan: Yeah, I think the trust is evident just by actions, you know, it’s something you can just sense.

Antoine: You can tell when they’re relaxed around you. The kids are kind of apprehensive and they kind of say, ‘I don’t know who you are.’ Whereas when you sit beside Youth 25, he sort of says, ‘Ok, we’re going to do this, we’re going to do that’. Ok, you obviously know who I am.

Ryan: I can feel when kids trust me. From that point forward there’s something to build upon here. Finding something to get that level of trust then it just takes off from there.

November 2004
Yet trust has also been a tenuous entity, evident in our reluctance to give up ‘control’:

I asked Youth 4 and Youth 41 to pick-up the pizza. By themselves. The decision was forced because it was only me in the centre and I couldn't leave. But the more I thought about it the more I saw it as a show and test of trust. The fact that I actually entertained the thought in the first place I consider to be pretty significant...I felt vulnerable though...I had some strange double feeling of nothing to loose and everything to loose (like 4 pizzas and 2 boys). But the boys took my invitation in stride (no screaming up and down saying yahoo!), they got the pizza and brought it back without incident and without touching a slice. They even yelled out that pizza was here before helping themselves to one slice at a time.

Ryan, April 2005

This intangibility has also been evident in our angst over what we may encounter each week:

Shaun: Last year, there was trust, but it was basically a one-way trust - where we trusted them and they were like...we can push buses, we can jump on roofs. But this year the trust has been...probably because the kids have been much more solid as a group- that the trust has been reciprocated. That’s why, one o’clock, kids shut the computer off...because if you think about it, when was the last time we had a problem with the computers?


Shaun: 6 months? We haven’t had a major issue where the kids are...[Someone knocks on wood, Laughter]

November 2004

Broadening Horizons and Group Culture

What have been the benefits of our two-way living room? Almost universally, volunteers have reflected on how their relationships with kids have broadened their horizons – harkening to Cox and Putnam’s social mobility:

Catherine: It’s broadened my horizons. I’ve seen a side of life I haven’t seen before, met children I never would have met, both kids and adults, had conversations I never would have had anywhere else. It broadens my social life. I have...
more empathy. Experiences I never would have had.

Maria: I’ve learned about kids.

Ryan: I’ve learned how to deal with conflict and clash.

George C: The image of the bus incident is burned into my memory.

Ryan: It’s given me greater ability to handle difference. There have been some crazy different experiences to handle...And like Eddie was saying, for the kids hopefully it’s a case where different will be more of a normal thing than not. Maybe not something to fear, but something to get used to.

November 2004

Exemplified by the sense of familiarity we’ve established, the project has also developed group values. This may be best reflected in the decrease in serious conflicts we’ve faced and in the sometimes drastic changes in rapport we’ve experienced with some kids:

Shaun: Was it you who took one of the kids to a movie?

Ryan: I did.

Shaun: Do you feel that was the breakthrough, the breakthrough between...

Ryan: Hmmm. I don’t know if that was too much of a breakthrough. I don’t know if I’d do that again, But, it was interesting. It felt like a sort of friends sort of thing.

Shaun: Didn’t it feel like you were the big brother?

Ryan: No. It was pretty weird.

Catherine: I mean, Youth 1 was an interesting sort of...thing for us.

Isaac: Case?

Catherine: A case. Hate saying that, but it’s true. He was one of the most difficult kids we ever had, but, over a period of time coming, really did form relationships and changed his behaviour...But he was one of those interesting examples of kids whose behaviour changed noticeably over the time that he came. Towards us, towards the centre, and towards other kids at the centre, too.

November 2004
Reconciliation and Multiculturalism in Action

One of the most exciting outcomes of our ‘living room’ has been developing a sense of tolerance, another key aspect of Cox and Putnam’s social capital. With an all-inclusive approach to participation we’ve been building tolerance through action. This is especially relevant to the concepts of Reconciliation and multiculturalism:

Catherine: I think one of the best aspects is that the kids are multicultural and also the volunteers are multicultural and it’s sort of multiculturalism in action. I mean…it’s right there. Just the fact that I’m white and I’m English…because hopefully it crosses some sort of boundary but not in a sort of deliberate, hokey sort of way…In some small sort of way it’s just lessening a big gap.

Shaun: It’s a good point because I remember a couple of years ago there were racial slurs [from kids to volunteers, between kids], like 2 years ago. And I haven’t seen anything like that in the last year. And I think that’s through bringing out the perceptions, you know, that kids have. I remember two years ago some of the terms the kids used were very derogatory and racially…but I haven’t heard that in any e-mails or in personal experience at all in the past year. And I think that’s all sort of multicultural factor thing.

November 2004

Our experiences with ‘Reconciliation in action’ can provide some insight into the status of race relations in Australia:

Therese: I think it connects to how Australians view Reconciliation in this country. It’s such a structured approach. It’s like this little box with an action plan and you do set activities. I think it is much more about having an informal, on-going dialogue. And I think that’s what we’ve been doing…our subtle approach to bringing different cultures and backgrounds together does act as a form of intercultural exchange. This might be something a child will connect with in 20 years to come, so it can be hard to measure now.

June 2005

Of particular relevance in our experiences with Reconciliation has been the international flavour of the volunteer team. We’ve discussed how being ‘outsiders’ has made it is easier to have a more objective perspective:
George C: I had a friend in Israel doing a Palestinian-Israeli project, trying to bring people together and trying to solve the conflict in a way that I could never do in Israel because I am part of the problem. But here, it’s much easier for me – because I’m not Australian or Indigenous...I can help here but can’t help in my own country.

Flor: If you’re objective about it you can do something, if you’re subjective, you can’t.
November 2004

Building tolerance through action has also been a way to ‘model’ working relationships between males and females:

For some of the kids this may not be a common thing to see, and to experience this consistently is actually quite remarkable. On Saturdays, whilst we often are working with kids one on one, the kids are also seeing volunteers communicating with one another, speaking to each other with respect and consideration and also being co-operative whether it be on the computers, outside, or preparing the snacks.
Therese, June 2004 after speaking with a Redfern-Waterloo community councillor

It’s also been a way to address gender stereotypes, something very relevant considering the capacity of technology to transmit messages:

If with the boys being a positive role model is about teaching them there's more to life than violent fighting games, perhaps one day I will manage to convince these girls that there is more to life than make-over Barbie. you never know!
Catherine, November 2003

Shallow Relationships?

Despite all of these positive outcomes, often our excitement has often been tempered by questions over their depth and impact. In our weekly setting, a factor that we seem to often overlook, we’ve seen kids and volunteers have a great time together one week and then seem like strangers the next:
I tried to get Youth 6 interested in a basketball game but he refused even to acknowledge me, which was disappointing. I felt I'd really had a few good conversations with him over the last few weeks, and told him about my motorbike and everything, which he thought was cool, but this week he didn't even want to know me.

Ang, November 2003

We’ve had to be aware of over-romanticising relationships:

I didn't really expect much from Youth 1. I think it's cool that he 'likes' me, but I know we all have a limited interest to the kids. In my experience we have to do most of the instigating of interaction with them and they run out of things to say quite quickly and become engrossed in other things. I also don't think the kids think it's cool to be seen to be too nice to one of us...

Catherine, October 2003

Even more puzzling have been our experiences interacting with children outside the environment of the computer centre:

Ryan: Walking home from the station today I saw Youth 8 and Youth 1. I don't think they saw me but I didn't stop to say hi and as I kept on walking I wondered why. Shit, it feels like I've been through so much with them but there we were, out in public, and I didn't feel right approaching them. What does this mean? And what does it mean if they saw me and didn't care to say hey?

Bruce: When we're outside that environment all the rules are different...Along the same lines, I don’t want to play with Youth 25 outside of the centre. He’s asked me before to go over to his house to play with his xbox. But I just don’t feel comfortable with it. I’m worried his parents will think I'm a weirdo for playing computer games with their 8 year old boy. I'm worried that I’ll be stuck there (maybe uncomfortably too, I don’t know anyone else in his house) for hours. I'm just not comfortable interacting with him (or any of the other kids!) Without being in the security of the centre/the centre's grounds.

May 2005
Contributing to Literacies

The project’s relationship with literacy begins with our concerns over traditional literacy and computer literacy. Since early days we’ve remarked at the low levels of reading and writing skills have affected the ways kids have used technology:

Ryan: Sometimes I wonder whether it’s more important to teach the kids how to read and write rather than all these computer skills...Lots of kids can’t read or write hardly at all and that has been a barrier to things they can do on the computer.

George C: Sometimes I have to type the URL. This is basic literacy that is not there.

November 2004

Though we’ve continued to have these concerns, the specialised (and limited) scope of our project has pushed us consider other types of literacy:

George C: Because my bachelor degree is in cinematography...They don’t have to read and write first. They have to read and write sometimes but not first. And if they want to express themselves with a video camera or a still camera, we should encourage it.

Eddie: I remember when I was new to the whole thing. It had a much more classroom environment. Which I guess if you come from having an IT background, you see as an extension of your work environment...Giving them the space to experiment, it’s probably taken us more by surprise than anything else. Realising that they’d have some interest in making movies...or using a digital camera. Whereas at the beginning, computer literacy probably would have seen something like spreadsheets, browsing the Internet, showing them how to use e-mail. They’ve developed beyond that, in a sense, just maybe not in the way you expected.

November 2004

This is where Warschauer and Kress’ discussion of computer, multimedia and information literacies is relevant. What we’ve seen is that by playing and experimenting with technology, in a socially supportive environment, the project has contributed to all of these forms of literacy. This has all happened informally:
Without a doubt, with different kids, different ages, different levels, that they can use a computer better than they could before. I've seen kids learn to cut and copy and paste and just do things like that. And little kids, too...Sort of incidentally rather than directly. 'Cause they learn to do the things they want to do. It’s a desire thing, isn’t it? They want to find the song they want to listen to, they want to make a poster of their favourite pop star, so they find a way to do it, rather than being taught.

Catherine, November 2004

We’ve talked about how children have improved their typing, mouse-use and spelling through playing Age of Empires. The game has a chat function that allows players to type in codes to gain more resources for their team, and children have used this to learn words like ‘coinage’ (extra gold), ‘woodstock’ (wood), ‘quarry’ (rock), ‘photon man’ (a specialised soldier), ‘steroids’ (quicker building), and ‘big daddy’ (a car). More recently, kids have developed quicker ways yet to get around typing by using the copy and paste function (Ctrl + C and Ctrl + V). Age of Empires is only one of the computer games that have impacted literacy skills:

I had a quite satisfying game of Scrabble with Youth 27 and Youth 16. The good points about having it on the computer were that: a) the computer enforced the rules and spelling, not me. b) they got to understand how the scoring worked and compare that with how the computer added up the scores. nice practice at arithmetic. The bad point was that when it got too hard to find a word, they quickly resorted to using cheats, which tell you the highest scoring next move. I hope the novelty will wear off. On the other hand, it does seem to diffuse the ego-risk involved. I was surprised at Youth 27's literacy. I really enjoyed that there was lots of discussion and interaction around the game, rather than the rather hypnotic effect of the action games.

Isaac, August 2004

Suring the Internet has also contributed to computer literacy:

I saw a vast improvement with Youth 4's focus and skills on the pc. He sent an email by himself to a skateboard company asking for sponsorship...His typing and navigation skills impressed me...

Therese, February 2004
This slow and indirect process of improving skills has taken time to accept. It has also forced us to consider innovative methods of support:

Ryan: Sometimes I cross the line. I’ll say ‘You know how to spell that. You know how to type that. I’m not going to type that for you.’ Then the kids get frustrated and I think ‘Oh God, he probably didn’t know how to spell that and I just really embarrassed him.’

Nadia: I wondered if you could bridge the process by writing it for them so they can copy it into the keyboard. Also, I think saying to a kid "you know something" even if they don't totally know is about you holding a belief in that kid's ability its a thousand steps ahead of getting frustrated with them or ignoring them.

Ryan: You predicted what we've tried doing. We've been writing down lists of words (mainly cheats for gaming) the kids ask for, then they type them in from that. Almost like a negotiation of sorts.

November 2004

In terms of multimedia literacy, the dominance of images has been front-and-centre in music clips, gaming and other Internet surfing. Despite difficulty with traditional literacy, most kids have been able to navigate the Internet by interpreting images and hyperlinked symbols. A relevant anecdote here is the online gaming portal www.123spill.com. This is a European site with Norwegian text, but kids have still managed to play games by navigating through thumbnail images.

Furthermore, by introducing multimedia technology into the project (a digital camera, video-editing software, webcaming, song-making and website building), we have hopefully provided the resources for kids to develop multimedia literacy by experimentation. This is something I will revisit in Chapter 5.

In terms of information literacy, kids have learned how to pose basic research questions (figuring out how to search for game cheats or a photo of their favourite singer), how and where to look for that information (Google, the artist’ webpage directly, fan sites), how to save information (onto their own websites, onto disk, printing it onto paper) as well as how to refer to sources (linking to sites from their own website, memorising webpage addresses):
They were using the Internet to do research on skate parks. They were doing this on their own and without getting the idea from any of the volunteers...I was amazed that they were doing this research on their own - that they recognised the web could help them get access to more skate parks and then followed as I helped with the search...

Ryan, November 2003

Volunteers have played an important role in supporting these types of activities:

I spent lots of time working with Youth 9 trying to find country songs. It took some serious Google work and testing search strings and links to get onto what he wanted. Youth 9, I don't think, could do done this on his own, but he was watching and being relatively (!) patient. Later, I noticed that Youth 9 had picked up the successful search string: "Alan Jackson video clips" and was passing some of this information on...

This experience reinforced the fact that we do have a significant role to play in helping kids access things they want to. It was a lot of groundwork but was worth it in the end - Youth 9 and Youth 43 were singing along to the songs, looking at photos and talking about them.

Ryan, June 2004

However, as I discussed in Chapter 2, the analytical ability that is so crucial to information literacy, and the creative expression that is so crucial to multimedia literacy have both been difficult to gage. This is a topic I will cover in Chapter 5.

Celebrating the Small Successes

If building social capital and contributing to literacies are indeed the kinds of empowerment we want to embrace, we will need to understand that the project’s outcomes will continue to be casual and mostly intangible. As I discussed in Chapter 2, social capital is an intangible entity, and aspects of electronic literacies can be as well. We will therefore need to celebrate small successes - something well articulated in an exchange between Bruce and Isaac:
Bruce: Has anyone else been a bit depressed lately? Sometimes I feel like we have no effect on the kids, but sometimes it helps to put into perspective that we are doing our best, but for what?...Maybe we should have monthly goal re-evaluations. I think I've been depressed lately because I go to connect thinking I can help change some of the kids behaviour patterns, but thinking about it, that’s not what connect should be about...perhaps refocusing on the computer skills would be good for me personally...I know we are building good relationships with the kids, is that our sole aim, or should we have other aims?

Isaac: You're totally right about how we can't change the kids' behaviour...And I'd even go so far as to say we don't know how much we're even teaching them in terms of IT skills. I guess I see it like this. Life is complex but I'm pretty sure we aren't doing the kids too much harm, and possibly our presence has been positive for some.

* Youth 6 can now type and before he didn't have a clue. I think this has *something* to do with Age of Empires and us making it a fun thing to do.

* Youth 1 isn't always getting into fights and abusing the volunteers. I think he's learnt to trust some of us some of the time.

* Some of the kids email volunteers during the week. They are sensing that they are part of a bigger community.

* Youth 19 is starting to talk.

November 2003

Funnyjunk, Counter-Strike, Privacy and Protection

There have been many signs pointing to the need to reinforce our approach beyond trying to build social capital and improve literacies. The first of these is the capacity of technology to detract from the social capital building process and jeopardise the safety of kids. In Chapter 2 I discussed a range of concerns over questionable website content, computer games, and privacy and protection on the Internet. These concerns, though intertwined with the social-capital enhancing qualities I’ve just discussed, do have the potential to be harmful.

A major concern has come in the form of ‘borderline websites’. The best examples of these are www.funnyjunk.com and www.newgrounds.com (see Appendix 5 for screen
capture images). These websites are legal and free to use, but they host content that can be seen as violent, sexually suggestive, racist, sexist and homophobic. At different times they’ve upset the dynamics of our group, especially among volunteers.

Funnyjunk hosts a selection of images and videos intended for a laugh:

I sat with him as he watched a song about Smurfs licking each others’ asses, a “Backstreet Boys are gay” song and others. I recall thinking at the time – ‘I can’t believe I am sitting here watching a 9 year-old child listen to this crap. It certainly cannot be a positive influence?’. But I refrained from asking him to log off because I didn’t think it warranted being blocked.

Ryan, October 2003

Newgrounds hosts a selection of flash-animated games that often run like films:

Therese: At first I thought this was a good game - http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/76020. The Stick figure had to find its way about his new city by working, gaining 'intelligence', sleeping, paying back loans etc ... until of course the Stick figure could then get cocaine or a gun from a store or as a reward for helping someone out. I wonder if the kids are able to separate fact from fiction or if its one messy blur...

Ryan: There also seems to be a "PIMP" game. The funny thing - I'll more often then not leave them be because a) they seem engaged in the game and I'd rather them not be roaming around bored b) not wanting to intervene with censorship without having properly checked out the sites.

August 2004

Considering the popularity of gaming, it’s no surprise that we’ve also entered into the very public debate over censorship. The best example of this is has been the ‘violent’ game Counter-Strike:

Engage in a realistic brand of counter-terrorist warfare in this popular team-based game. Take out enemy sites. Rescue hostages...Each team has access to different ammunition and
equipment, and each player has unique attributes and the ability to upgrade their gear as they successfully complete each mission.

(Value Corporation 2004)

Often kids have asked us to buy this game. Our views have been partially influenced by the public hysteria I spoke of in Chapter 2:

I know you think that violence is not the obstacle to these games, and that violent images are everywhere in their and our worlds, but I feel we do have a part to play in giving them positive images at our sessions. Killing someone on the computer while may not be all that impacting for them, but it doesn't mean it's okay for us to give them access to it.

Ryan, May 2003

A step more urgent have been our experiences with pornography. During a six month period a handful of kids were regularly trying to access hardcore porn. Although there was an Internet content-filter in place, kids inevitably found ways around it (an example of the computer literacy we’ve contributed to leading to anti-social outcomes). Though there were technical solutions to this issue, they need to be looked at in a social context - connecting to Livingstone and Bober’s research pointing to the need for non-clandestine approaches to supervision:

I'm more comfortable with kids accessing porn surreptitiously for their own pleasure/excitement/curiosity rather than as a weapon to disrupt the class and to get under my skin...I guess I felt as though they were saying "If you have to do this job, then TAKE THIS, coz we don't like you and we'll do all kinds of socially unacceptable things to make you uncomfortable. And if you're not paid to be here, then what business do you have here?"...in my mind, the problem isn't that they are viewing porn or exploring chat rooms, but that they're doing it in our presence, and in full knowledge of our wishes that they wouldn't. To me this speaks volumes about their regard for us.

Isaac, December 2003

Our privacy and protection concerns have echoed much of Livingstone and Bober’s research. This concern is becoming increasingly relevant as online chatting is gaining popularity in our sessions. These concerns have required more immediate attention. For a
number of services online, children have had to register for password-protected accounts established through a sign up process. These have included Yahoo! for listening to music clips, Hotmail for e-mail, and www.tripod.com for webpage building. The sign up process usually requires birthdates, e-mail addresses, postal addresses, and other personal information. Volunteers have struggled to determine just how much to help to give kids:

We signed up for a Tripod account and I walked him through the setup process. During the sign up process he mentioned that in the websprawler service, you needed a credit card number...he asked me if he should use his real information or make it up. This made me wonder to myself if using fraudulent information to signup for Internet services was bad practice.

Ryan, January 2003

E-mail has also been an avenue in which children have shared personal information. We introduced e-mail with the intention of connecting kids to other people and improving literacy, but we didn’t anticipate the bulk of junk mail that has inundated Hotmail accounts. It’s been possible that kids have been confused by advertising or have even been contacted by strangers:

I noticed Youth 13 check his Hotmail account and delete a large amount of junk mail. I went over and tried to explain what junk mail was...I don’t think I really suggested a course of action if you get junk mail, but he seemed to be deleting them.

Ryan, November 2003

We’ve had similar concerns with webpage-building:

Perhaps we need to explain a bit more to the parents about what we're doing with websites for kids, and how it's available to the general public. I just started to worry that maybe some of these kids come from families where the mother is on the run from a violent partner and putting kids' websites up might be giving their location away.

Isaac, January 2003

Some of our experiences have also made us wonder about the connection between offline and online cultures:
Ryan: Will at-risk kids or kids that are disruptive naturally gravitate towards the seedy side of the Internet (seedy chat rooms, porn, eventual hacking)? The kids are basically having free rein on the Internet.

Isaac: Sadly, this isn't the type of miscreant our kids will ever become – they are about as likely to become rogue derivatives traders. Hackers are right at the top of the educational ladder.

December 2003

Finally, using a shared computer centre we’ve had incidents in which our project has affected other users’ experiences:

Can we please keep an eye on kids when they have 'administrator' access. Last week one (?) of the kids got onto the network and renamed a whole bunch of files used by adults during the week (i.e. From 'David' to 'David is gay'). Made for an awkward situation with the centre’s clients this week.

Ryan, July 2005

Though these are technically-inspired concerns, they have required social approaches. They have elicited mixed responses from volunteers, ranging from more liberal approaches:

There is a concern of course that they spend too much time on what we might subjectively view as "inappropriate" sites (trashy, rude, etc), but I don't think that's too detrimental in the long run. I would have probably looked at the same things in their age.

Alex V, July 2005

Funnyjunk – yes it's offensive and annoying, but I find myself smiling from time to time...

George C, April 2004

To more measured ones:

Therese: My view is that we perhaps should put a ban on the hardcore websites, but not the humour based ones. I think essentially the kids who are logging onto the sites, setting the images as the wallpaper etc are looking for a reaction
from their peers and the volunteers. From a volunteer perspective, if we don't give them the intended reaction the novelty will hopefully subside.

Jameela: I think it's important we set boundaries and that is not going to stifle the kids' rights or anything. Personally I find the screensavers quite offensive - but maybe I'm just a bit of a prude - and I don't like having to turn a blind eye and hope the amusement will wear off soon...It makes it seem to me that we are letting them do what they want because we want to be friends with them, and I think that, with these kids especially, they need some guidance and boundaries about what is right and wrong. We've all agreed on banning the hardcore porn sites and that is a good start. I know there is a fine line between what funny and what's funny in a sexual sense, and I'm not sure where I stand on that point.

September 2003

What the discussion of social capital gives us is the ability to work around public hysteria to take an approach to content which focuses on interaction and literacies:

There are a number of angles from which to consider this issue. Does it help us in building community? You can play Counter-Strike in any one of the gaming places around town and it's not expensive. If we go down this path, we become just like that, but cheaper...I played Counter-Strike with [some of the kids]. It was too fast for there to be much talking or planning. It's basically about reflexes...Something which is practically important is the question of what parents think...How many other parents will look askance at a project who's stated aim is to reclaim community values and yet gives kids access to something they perceive to work against that in their minds?

Isaac, May 2004

Censorship is only a short-term solution. Most of all there is a need to establish a safe and open space to socially support technology.

This chapter illustrates why Cox and Putnam’s concept of social capital, and Warschauer’s discussion of new forms of literacy best fit our contributions to empowerment. In our two-way space relationships and trust have led to social mobility, group values and ‘Reconciliation in Action’. This has been achieved though a social approach to technology, in which computers have acted as the reason and the means to come together.
However, because of the sometimes tenuous and the casual nature of these outcomes, we need to embrace the ‘small successes’ of the project. This may be easier said than done, and the anti-social capacity of technology is the tip of the iceberg in explaining how building social capital isn’t as simple as playing and experimenting with computers.
4. Not So Simple

While social capital and electronic literacies have been central to the project's experiences, coming together as we have has involved much more than just playing on computers. There have been a number of factors which have directly affected our ‘living room’ and what has gone on inside it.

Dynamics such as consistency, effort, gender, Aboriginality, communication, and power hierarchies have all contributed to the need to shape a safe and open environment. In the short-term this involved laying down boundaries. In the long-term it has meant a group culture leaning as much as possible on the trust and respect of growing relationships. This has culminated in the goal of ‘co-ownership’ which, though successful early-on, has left us with questions over how to foster expression and avoid ‘cultural invasion’.

Complex Dynamics

Since the project has brought together such different groups of people, it makes sense that children and volunteers have brought different sets of values and norms to the Centre each week. These dynamics have not only affected how we’ve interacted and used technology, but they have also affected the type of space we’ve needed to establish.

Consistency and Effort

Coming even before technology, consistency and effort have been the most important factors driving the project. Without these, the project doesn’t run and we don’t have any impact on empowerment. First, they’ve been a major factor in participation. For volunteers, this has meant getting out of bed on Saturday mornings after a work or study week. This was especially important early on to establish the project:

I think the main thing was consistency in the whole thing...we were trying to introduce the whole idea. Well, the participation wasn’t that good...so if everyone gave up in the
beginning it wouldn’t work at all. I think that’s what’s made it so successful.

Flor, November 2004

Though it’s been easy to dismiss the consistency and effort children have invested because of the organising role we play (evident in occasional comments that we ‘put more into the project’ than the kids), their commitment has fuelled the project as much as our own. Week-in and week-out, children have made themselves vulnerable to new situations:

Of course you're doing more than they are, putting more in, but they are children, their main task is to grow up and that is the responsibility of the adults in their lives. So they turn up, bundles of unbridled energy, and you hold a caring, non-judgemental, benign space for them to bounce in. For them there IS work in subjecting themselves to such a different experience - you're not teachers, you're not parents, it would have been hard work for them, especially in the beginning, but even now, you maintain certain expectations of their behaviour. The great part is that those expectations are well thought out and consistent. Then they can get on with the job of having fun!

Nadia, November 2004

Consistency and effort have also been vital factors in building relationships. The more volunteers have been around, the more likely they have been to make connections. This is something which connects to Freire’s ‘building trust through actions’ mantra:

Catherine: Kids who have been coming for nearly the whole time I’ve been coming and maybe only recently have they actually started forming a connection with you. Like some of the boys who never used to talk to me have started to talk to me and you’re like, ‘My God, has it taken this long?’ It’s such a slow thing to build a small level of trust...They sort of slowly recognise, ‘she’s here, she’s always here, might as well...’

George C: You think about how Ryan got his position. It’s being there every Saturday, all day...I realise when I’m there a few weeks in a row for a longer period, then they will approach me. I notice when I skip a few weeks and am only there a couple hours...It’s also I must connect...You have to be there for a long time and consistently. That’s the only way you can create relationships.

Shaun: Before there was a lot of volunteer re-cycling, a lot of volunteers coming in and out, now we’ve had a core group for a good year or so. The characters we build to the kids are, sort of, more important than they were two years ago.
Often, interacting and supporting the use of the computers has been about persistence. Making an effort to socialise has been crucial. Usually it has been volunteers who’ve had to ‘break the ice’, though there’s been a balance to strike between making and effort and forcing things:

It sometimes happens that kids (especially the older boys) really ignore you when you're asking if you can help them...you should just hang around behind them, paying attention to what they're doing and after an hour, maybe, if you're lucky, you might have some interaction with them. I know it's hard not to retreat sometimes (as I have often done) but persistence is all we have going for us.

Isaac, February 2003

Gender

With boys being in the majority each week, many of the experiences we’ve reflected on have been male-centric, yet there have been significant differences in our experiences socialising and using technology with girls. It’s also been clear that female volunteers have often had much different experiences than male volunteers.

In a social sense, our drop in format may be better suited for boys:

Ryan's point about girls being less likely to be allowed to wander around on their own makes sense. The older girls seem to come in groups of 2s or 3s when they come to the sessions...

Maria, September 2004

In the centre, girls have often gravitated towards female volunteers:

I was mobbed by the little girls when they arrived en masse, and even the ones I didn't know. I think though that this is a peer thing...I know when I was little I was fascinated by older 'girls' I guess you could think it's a role model thing or like as window into what being a woman is about, I don't know...

Catherine, November 2003
We’ve wondered whether girls, who are often in the minority, are more willing to interact with volunteers:

Ryan: I was thinking how I find it easier to chat and play with kids who are in the "minority". Is it cause they know they are in the minority and we're more welcoming than the other kids?

Bruce: I think girls are just friendlier than guys at that age with people they trust/like. Youth 34 like/trusts you Ryan, so I think that’s why she came up to you. I don’t think she even understands what a minority is! I don’t think that has an impact on her, except in the sense that "I'm not friends with anyone else here except for Ryan / Catherine / etc". As for the boys, well, boys at that age don’t wanna talk, they wanna go on the comps and nuke all their friend's nuketroopers..!

May 2005

Relationships between female volunteers and boys have often taken much longer to form:

Flor: Girls seem to have easier connections with girls, guys tend to be more rebellious and sticking with their gang.

Catherine: I have had some connection with boys but it seems to take longer to happen...

November 2004

Female volunteers have at times felt isolated from boys’ games and groups:

When there was that phase when we had nearly all boys all the time I felt quite useless, even though I have a good relationship with some of them.

Catherine, October 2003

Youth 29 challenged me with a game fooze ball. I see this as a highlight because as a female volunteer I don’t feel I get to interact with the boys with these fun type of games.

Therese, August 2004

These relationships have also been the source of worry. On a number of occasions, especially early on, a small number of boys sexually harassed female volunteers. We’ve also been concerned with boys being physically aggressive with female volunteers:
I've been thinking quite a lot about what happened and am still confused about it, trying to work out why it happened and how to handle it...there has been a few times before when he’s been slightly antagonistic to me - I'm not sure why. Obviously that's not an excuse to punch me but there's something else going on there and I don't think it was a wilful or malicious action on his part - it just happened and I think he was probably as surprised as me.

Maria, June 2004 after being punched for no apparent reason

We’ve had to consider that kids’ experiences with gender outside of the project may affect their experiences with gender in the project.

In terms of technology, young girls have often been interested in combining computer use with arts and crafts, working together in what seems like a girls’ club:

The young girls really enjoy printing stuff and then making things - the creativity combined with computer skills seems positive...Most of my time was spent doing “girlie” stuff at the craft table last Saturday with the crayons, scissors and paper. I enjoy these activities because they often generate engaging conversations.

Maria, July 2004

Since girls have not regularly played games like Age of Empires, we’ve had to consider the male biases inherent in many computer games. Valerie Walkerdine of Cardiff University examined an Australian Research Council funded study of children in Sydney aged between 8 and 11 playing video games. She argues that video games are a stage for temporary masculinity, where girls must navigate through their own female identities as well as the male identities that games are biased towards:

Attempts to produce games for girls are approaching the issue of the relation of girls to games in a way which fails to confront some major issues facing girls when playing games. If games provide a site for the performance of masculinity...How then do girls manage to display femininity while trying to win, if winning means performing masculinity?

(Walkerdine 2004)

Her research suggests that girls may be interested in playing computer games, but that they know there is a stigma attached to them doing so (Walkerdine 2004). This has been a theme for female volunteers in their experiences with Age of Empires:
...it got me thinking about the games and something that has been niggling at me for a while. I find that I haven't been able to get my head around Age of Empires or even get myself interested in it even though it's really popular with the kids. But I would really like to understand it and know how to play it. I think this would help me heaps in being able to get more involved with the game-playing and also perhaps go a little way to breaking down a stereotype.

Maria, August 2004

Aboriginality and Communication

Our experiences around Aboriginal identity, especially as it relates to communication, has been a major factor affecting interaction. In one respect this has been reflected in the pride children have shown in their identities and in volunteers’ perceptions of race relations:

Jameela: I didn't realise so many of the kids would be Aboriginal. I think they felt like outsiders in general and this contributed to their aggressive attitudes, and maybe also made them feel people wouldn't like them because they were Aboriginal (or part). It is hard when a lot of people in Australia don't have a good understanding of Aboriginal culture or history.

Shaun: They’re actually proud to be different. A lot of norms society actually pushes on them. I think a lot of kids are proud of who they are.

Ryan: On one hand I don't especially think the kids have thought we won't like them because of they are Aboriginal. I've actually felt a real sense of pride in their identities. It got me thinking about the different attitudes we all sort of inherit with our backgrounds - whether it be a sense of being an outsider to the mainstream or the opposite.

Isaac: I find that getting that initial level of trust is more difficult with Aboriginal kids than non-Aboriginal kids. I think partially it’s because they’re always aware of the interracial antagonism. Especially with kids from the Block, because life there is hard and kids just don’t trust other people, and partly also because there’s something about Aboriginal culture, that I don’t understand very well about how you communicate and about how you initially communicate which is quite practically different from what we’re used to. And it’s hard to learn.

November 2004

These experiences have also involved differences in the use of language:
Flor: My problem was, especially with the guys, I couldn’t understand some of their accents. In terms of communication because I’m not an English speaker. It was even harder than the normal Aussie accent. When they were saying something, asking them to repeat it, I don’t think it encourages [relationships] much.

Ryan: I see it come out in the language the kids use and some of the content they want to access online. When you get called ‘Blackfella’ you can’t ignore that.

November 2004

Our experiences have made some volunteers examine their approaches to inter-cultural communication:

This made me think of how I interact with the kids, and how I often start with asking them a question – sometimes I don’t get the response/reaction I had expected. But I know that some indigenous communities and language structures encourage more discussion and less questioning.

Therese, November 2003

As I’ve described in the context of ‘Reconciliation in action’, they have also opened us to new perspectives on Aboriginal culture:

Perhaps it is no surprise that Koori kids are helping us learn about social capital, about ‘reclaim[ing] public life’, since their culture is said to be based on interrelatedness rather than individualism. Perhaps healing community in Australia is more about immigrants (old and new) simply hanging with, and connecting with Aboriginal people learning about inclusivity instead of exclusivity: Social capital can have either quality.

Nadia, February 2003

Physicality

Related to our experiences with communication have been our experiences with physicality. We’ve followed a ‘hands off’ policy, but sometimes children have initiated physical contact – touching and hugging for instance:

When I am walking with Youth 9 he always leans on me, a firm hand on the shoulder. I am never quite sure of his intention but I noticed him doing the same thing to Bruce...
Catherine, October 2003

He's very physical with me now. I said hello and he was touching my arms and chest in a very affectionate way. It doesn't mean I have any more access to him when he's decided to do something like get in a fight.

Isaac, October 2003

On one hand we’ve interpreted physical gestures as signs of affection, but on the other hand they have elicited feelings of awkwardness:

Youth 22 was 'very' affectionate. I was a little uncomfortable and found myself actively creating a physical boundary by trying to redirect her behaviour [stroking of my arm or kind of flopping her head down onto my lap] into a more structured "do you want to sit on my lap" scenario. Didn't want to push her away altogether.

Nadia, November 2003

Connecting to Marvin and colleagues’ ‘circle of security’, it may be the case that our physical presence has affected a sense of security, regardless of if it’s been overtly physical or not. This has been especially relevant in situations when we’ve had to physically intervene:

As for picking Youth 1 up and removing him from the room I feel it is important to say that I sensed no aggression in that action. It was a protective act. Physicality does not = harm. Sometimes children need to be touched, it can be grounding and reassuring. I am certain that his mood shifted for the better as a direct result of feeling that someone else was containing his emotions which by that stage had over run him. It might be relevant to view him as the victim of Saturday as much as Youth 6. He had no control of himself by the stage of attack and I imagine would have felt scared as well as angry, scared of his own potential destructive self. You did not hit him, you did not use more force than was absolutely necessary to protect both boys from each other.

And if you are left with the residue of your own shock/anger/potential destructive feelings towards Youth 1, I would suggest that you just found out a lot about the mechanisms he is missing (and hopefully will learn) - the capacity to stop himself. You gave him a strong lesson in that - you showed him its possible to be physical and not harmful, to be scared and kind at the same time.

Nadia, May 2003
Exercise has also been an important part of our experiences with physicality. Playing sports outside has been important in breaking-up long, consecutive stretches of time on the computers. In the process, it has provided another avenue to socialise:

I was outside most of the day, and I'll say again that I think playing outside with the kids is a really good idea. I think they get to play their aggression and competitiveness out, and it's good for team and confidence building.

Jameela, September 2003

Numbers, Noise and Food

As soon as participation in the project increased, we began to wonder whether the ratio between the number of kids and the number of volunteers had a direct impact on interaction. We’ve come to an understanding that a 1:1 to a 1:3 ratio of volunteers to kids has allowed for more engaging exchanges. Anything greater than this has often led to volunteers having to ‘manage the situation’:

I find that when kids out-number volunteers as they did today there is less rich interaction and that we fall more into a “teacher-student” relationship or “helper and need-to-be-helped” relationship, as volunteers are more often than not running around the lab, answering to the kids’ screams and only sticking around not much longer than the time it takes to fix their immediate computer issue... I found myself being pulled away from interactions I wanted to remain engaged in.

Ryan, November 2003

Even when there has been a favourable ratio, volunteers have often commented on feeling ‘useless’. This has especially been the case for new volunteers. An understanding of the importance of the child to volunteer ratio can help alleviate these frustrations:

1:1 ratio of kids to volunteers is ideal and something I think we should aim at in general. Perhaps you could send an encouraging email to the list saying what a great job everyone did and what a difference *everyone* made by just being there, even if they didn't have lots of interaction the whole time. I think it's easy for people to think that just because they weren't busy the whole time they didn't contribute anything.
Connected to this discussion have been the effects of noise. For over a year, each computer was equipped with speakers. This made for an often noisy environment in which it was hard to concentrate. Speakers have since been replaced with headphones which has made for a less frantic feeling.

Though often overlooked, providing lunch each week has also been a crucial part of the project. It’s not a stretch to say that free pizza has been a main attraction to come to our sessions. We’ve also talked about its relationship to behaviour:

Isaac: A thought which only just occurred to me is that maybe some of the kids come partly because they're hungry and if we give them food up front, they might not be so ready to snap. This makes sense, since often we are getting the kids straight out of bed (probably without breakfast). Perhaps in some cases, there's no food in the fridge at home.

Nadia: The insight around breakfast and irritability seems worth exploring. I know other kids who go off when they are hungry and it’s usually not something they can articulate, they just lose self control and take it out on others. (There is a question about charity however that I’m a little unsure about - but that might be my problem and behaviour management is probably a higher concern).

May 2003

Like playing outside, ‘pizza time’ has been a good opportunity to chat away from the computers:

I enjoyed doing the food because it was a chance to talk with the kids without a computer in front of them, and they were mostly open and friendly.

Isaac, August 2003

**Power and Respect**

In Chapter 1 I discussed the range of confronting incidents we’ve experienced, and the recurring challenges we’ve had with particular groups of children. These clashes have all
seemed to involve power and respect. First, we’ve had to recognise and work around existing power hierarchies:

Ang: ...the other thing about that group is the hierarchy...it is SO clear cut.

Isaac: I'm also a keen hierarchy watcher...I don't see much of what goes on in the classroom, but I guess no one fucks with him coz he's big. Yeah, the size matters thing is something I relate to from school, but happily at my school there was more than one hierarchy: the sport hierarchy, the violence hierarchy, the social hierarchy and the brains hierarchy...These guys only seem to have the violence one. November 2003

We’ve also experienced the exclusivity Putnam discusses in his description of ‘bonding’ social networks. This has especially been the case in relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and in relations between kids from the Block and kids from other parts of the area. These experiences have led to difficult discussions over whether we should aim for an ‘all-inclusive’ approach or an approach focused on the most ‘difficult’ kids. Isaac’s words below came after one child warned another not to come to Centre anymore:

What if he decides to ‘teach her a lesson’? Guys, this is not a huge leap of imagination. We know (some of) what these kids are capable of...It's one of the risks of bringing together different groups, which is what we're doing. A couple of questions arise from this: While acknowledging that the ideal of social capital is valid, are we prepared to stomach the possible costs of pursuing that ideal? Is there a way we can pursue the ideal at less risk to some of the kids?

A. If our priority is our own relationship with the most troubled kids, then we should at this point stop bringing her to the centre, because no matter how badly he behaves toward her, he'll still consider the centre his turf and we'll always ultimately, have him back. This will also make him more bold about doing as he pleases.

B. If instead our priority is building bridging social capital, we need to make it clear that the project is for everyone who will play along. If anyone does something really untoward, they will be banished forever, because it's not their turf.

Isaac, November 2004
This question over which kids have been our ‘focus’ has also been prompted by experiences in which kids have shown little or no respect towards volunteers:

When Catherine and I were distributing food, Youth 12 came along and commandeered the whole bottle of juice for himself and ignored me when I said it was for everyone to share. He also grabbed more than his fair share of food. (I'm not saying other kids didn't do it too). The whole thing made me feel like I had really failed because my statement that it wasn't appreciated had no effect on Youth 12’s behaviour and if anything, confirmed to him that he had "done good" by pissing me off and "getting away with it". This is an example of something Youth 12 did to make himself feel empowered by putting someone else down (in this case, Catherine who bought it, me who said it wasn't cool, and everyone else who might have wanted some).

a) it creates an expectation that the kids will come and treat the volunteers and each other with disrespect

b) our passivity is reinforcing a negative life pattern which will serve them very badly

c) they will expect less of themselves and therefore respect themselves less for feeling empowered in that way.

Isaac, November 2003

These experiences have made us wonder whether the differences between kids and volunteers are too big to cross:

The bottom line: I don't know that they will ever offer us their respect...see the Curtis Mayfield song for a feeling of where he's coming from:

I'm from the other side of town
Out of bounds
To anybody who don't live around
I never learned to share
Or how to care
I never had no teachings
About being fair...
Ghetto blues showed on the news
All is aware
But what the hell do they care
You across the track
Completely relaxed
You take a warning fact
Don't you never come back

Isaac, February 2004
If mutual respect is missing (something I’ll examine in the context of volunteers’ motivations in Chapter 6), can we achieve a truly shared ‘living room’? These incidents have directly affected group dynamics. The more time we’ve spent on juggling safety and behaviour, the less time we’ve had to play and socialise. We’ve needed to lay down boundaries:

My question: where do *you* draw the line? Do they get to kick our nuts, grab our cunts, burn our cars, smear shit on us and then be welcomed back into the fold in their five minutes of civility? I never wanted to be Jesus Christ. Maybe the right thing would have been to hit *Youth 2* in the nuts. But then his Dad would have come after you and killed you. More seriously, maybe we need to set boundaries - for ourselves as much as for the kids. If all the volunteers leave, the project won't be much good with just you sitting in a corner taking abuse and being crazy...Are we going to "save" Youth 2? No - it isn't up to us. What we can say with certainty is that if he can't treat *us* with respect then the chances are he'll fuck up badly down the track. What we *are* capable of doing is providing a sane and creative environment where kids can build themselves up and look out into the world. That certainly isn't going to happen when kids bring their street antics into the place.

Isaac, November 2003

In part, the fallout from the riot made these decisions easier, because the group of kids at the centre of most conflicts stopped participating. On one hand we’ve felt guilty that the project may no longer work with the most ‘needy’ children, and on the on the other hand we’ve wondered if the opportunities for a safer space their absence has provided is for the better:

...part of me misses having those kids around too. If nothing else, it really gave us the feeling that we were reaching out to a part of the community that really, truly, needed reaching out to. And every successful exchange we had with them seemed like a triumph that justified the existence of our little group. I'm not saying that the absence of those kids is necessarily a good thing or a bad thing in and of itself; but it does allow some new opportunities to present themselves without having to worry about safety quite so much.

Ang, May 2004
Shaping a Safe and Open Space

The way you were describing 'consistency' and how important that has been as a foundation for building relationships with the kids made me think of the 'living room' as a 'secure base'...I think the agenda has been about maintaining that 'structure'. Once the kids and the volunteers know they have that structure then you can really 'follow' the kids because you've got guide rails so you won't get lost...You're saying 'I value you' That is empowering! You offer an opportunity for the kids to grow their own empowerment by offering a secure base. Self regulation, less need for defences (in the form of 'acting out', racial slurs, violence, spitting etc), well placed trust, etc.

Nadia, November 2004

As Nadia’s words above capture, to work with and around these complex dynamics we’ve had to establish a safe and open space. This is where Marvin and colleagues’ ‘secure base’ and Freire’s ‘dialogue’ are relevant in describing aspects of our experiences. The stop-gap measures we adopted in the early part of the project, and have continued to have in place in a more subtle way were intended to maintain physical and emotional safety. Since we felt like we carried little natural authority, our approach to enforcing these boundaries was to use the only leverage we seemed to possess – closing sessions and ‘banning’ kids from coming:

What does everyone think of this for this Saturday - If fights and that type of environment happens again and it is serious, and there is clearly not much positive happening, we close the session immediately and make it abundantly clear why - i.e.

'We are closing the class right now because it is meant to be fun and safe for everyone and that is not happening right now. We want the classes to go on, but there is no fighting and treating volunteers like that. It means we have to close down. I like everyone here, but the classes are fun and fighting and breaking things are not fun. We will be back next week.'

Ryan, May 2003

Threatening to shut-down began to place some responsibility for the project in the hands of kids:
It's not supposed to be a running battle. I guess we also find out how important the classes are to the kids that way and whether they get annoyed at the trouble makers…(or at us, of course!).

Catherine, May 2003

Controlling technology has involved both technical and social measures. Using an Internet content filter has been important to block pornography. We’ve also made an effort to lend as much support as possible to situations where privacy and protection have been concerns – especially in the case of online account registration and online chat, topics I will return to shortly.

Much like Marvin’s ‘bigger, stronger wiser’ mantra, laying down boundaries has required authority. This has been something we’ve struggled with:

Catherine: If you find it hard to take an authoritative stance it’s always easier to turn a blind eye to what’s going on. I think it’s a personal thing.

Maria: And I think if I say something they won’t do it anyways.

George C: I just told one of the kids something in an authoritative way and he wouldn’t talk to me for two weeks. Just cause I turned him off.

Maria: And then you think you’re letting them get away with things.

February 2004

Our style of authority has developed around having a recognisable ‘authority figure’. We’ve discussed how children have responded more to male authority:

Big tough male volunteers are successful in winning the respect of troubled boys. Weeds like me shouldn’t struggle against it, it's nature.

Isaac, February 2004

It’s been the case that I’ve primarily taken this role. Highlighting the importance of consistency, this could have to do with the fact that I’m around the most.
Our experiences with authority have made it clear that respect and trust are much more effective in maintaining boundaries than any form of enforcement:

I don't think the kids respond to Ryan because he's got more authority than we do; I think they respond because he's always able to reason with them, see their side of the story and so on. It doesn't come down to whether the rest of feel we could ban any of the kids – it comes down to whether any of us feel we could have talked Youth 1 down when he was throwing garbage cans at the centre, or talked Youth 3 into coming outside for a game of tip when he was trying to sneak in. It comes down to whether we could have made the kids feel guilty about hurting that bird, like Antoine did, or give Youth 2 some second thoughts about harassing Youth 23, like Therese did.

Ang, February 2004

It has, however, been important to keep a close eye on how much authority we impose:

Ang: Now, when the subject of banning first came up, months ago, I was against it. I was wrong, looking back – the behaviour of the kids has improved since we started banning them. But a gulf is also opening up between the volunteers and some of the kids, and upping the ante authority-wise would only serve to widen that gap. As I've said before, one of the prime attractions of the centre – the reason I love coming so much and the reason I'm sure a lot of the kids are there – is that everyone's on basically the same playing field. Let's cut to the point: how many times have we honestly felt like one of the kids posed a direct and real threat to the safety of anyone at the centre? The one and only time for me is the ‘fight’ incident.

Isaac: Well, the shit fiasco resulted in two kids no longer coming. I think that's a pretty serious setback.

Ang: What I’m saying is that, while the centre often seems bad, we have to take a step back and realize that with only one exception, we've kept things reasonably under control for well over a year, with a bunch of kids who are pretty much – and I'm not being mean here – probably the worst in Sydney city. And I, for one, have seen nothing in the past six months which would incline me towards giving ourselves more power to control the kids...

February 2004

A point further developed by Isaac:
To understand one of the reasons I'm particularly cautious about "enforcement" of discipline, see http://www.prisonexp.org/... To save everyone else reading it, the experiment is all about one group of people (with authority) attempting to get another group of people to do things their way. The outcome is absolute chaos...I think if we can learn anything from it, it's that we can say "that's bad" or "that's uncool" but we need to accept that bad behaviour is going to keep happening, and that any strategy which we think will stop it will probably be doing more harm than good. The moral is probably "encouragement not enforcement". Does that make any sense?

Isaac, February 2003

As I described in Chapter 1, once our boundaries took hold children began to test authority less. This has given volunteers some piece of mind, which relates to Marvin and colleagues’ emotional ‘back-up’.

Not everyone has agreed with having more formal rules, though:

George C: It’s come to be more formalised. This is maybe easier for us and sometimes for the kids. I think we have lost some kids to this. We are an alternative to school.

Catherine: They swear, they muck around, they do all sorts of things they wouldn’t be allowed to do at school. I know what you mean, I think it has changed, but in my opinion it’s changed for the better because now when I go on Saturdays I don’t feel as worried. I’m not as scared as I used to be. These days most Saturdays pass without any major incident whereas it used to be that a lot of Saturdays I’d think ‘Oh God, I wonder what’s going to happen today?’

November 2004

Laying down boundaries has still allowed us to embrace an all-welcome attitude:

As for "prioritising our clients", I think that doesn’t mean we should ban the "bad" kids, because its true, they need us the most. Prioritising could mean we prioritise multimedia time to some kids, and prioritise "outside" time to the other kids. Kids that want to work on multimedia should be inside working on multimedia. Kids that want to play basketball should be outside shooting hoops. If we offer both these alternatives, we can foster the important inclusive drop in nature of our project while at the same time helping multimedia kids become Alfred Hitchcocks and turning the outside kids into super league/basketball players.

Bruce, February 2004
I do, however, need to qualify our use of ‘safe’, because there has remained a level of uncertainty each week:

Are you talking in relative terms? Like "the Baghdad Hilton is safe, considering it's in Baghdad"? In this case, maybe it's more accurate to say "we make it as safe as we can with the resources at hand".

Isaac, December 2003

By laying down boundaries but leaning as much as possible on the trust and respect coming from growing relationships, what began to develop was our ‘living room’. It’s become a space where children and volunteers have ambiguous roles, talk, and where a sense of group responsibility isn’t out of the question. The feeling has connected to Freire’s concept of ‘co-teacher-student’ roles and ‘dialogue’.

Our open environment has also allowed us to support technical activities in a more involved way – something that Livingstone and Bober, as well as Jenkins’ research suggests. Considering the popularity of gaming and the increasing popularity of online chat, this is something we should continue to focus on:

Ryan: Though we usually use jippii.com to game with each other, the capacity to play and chat with randoms has always had me a bit anxious. On Saturday Youth 4 and Youth 46 got playing with a guy from London. Alex V might be able to paint a better picture, but things appeared to started out well (though the ice-breaking 'age/sex/location?' question always worries me). After a while though the boys got giddy, seemed to lose all interest in chatting respectfully, and started to insult the guy with the usual ‘yo mama’ toilet humour we've seen before. It gave me a chance to try and 'talk' through the issue...

I don't think it played out the way I hoped, but here's what I had in mind: Having established relationships with most of the kids gives us the opportunity to have some kind of dialogue about these sorts of concerns to see (and work with) what the kids are thinking, rather than just getting mad and pulling the plug.

I wanted to get across my view that this was a real person on the other end and that you have to think about what kind of information you give out to people. I didn't want them to stop, I just wanted them to tell me what they thought. So I said 'What do you think?'. Maybe I didn't give them enough time to say something before rambling on further, maybe they had nothing to say, or maybe they're answer was obvious (it’s
fun), but there wasn't much coming back from their side. The next thing I was conscious of was trying to leave the conversation open-ended. So after a few minutes I sort of moved on to something else without standing over them.

Alex V: It seemed like harmless fun at first, Youth 4 was pretending to be a 20 year-old girl who lived in London. But then a little less harmless he asked the guy for a date, and the man (Jake, 21, London) seemed rather keen. From there it deteriorated into a series of insults and Jake seemed to take it fairly well. I think some of what Ryan said struck home and I reminded Youth 4 that Jake could be fibbing too, and might even live up the street in Redfern. Which in hindsight seems like a shock tactic, but it calmed him down a little. It must be par for the course in chat room type things like that, I guess? It's difficult to know when the right time to step in is, if at all. I think we handled it well, I like to think it's up to them to make their own decisions and make their own mistakes, as long as there's no genuine chance of harm.

July 2005

Co-Ownership: A Promising but Slow Process

As I described in Chapter 1, the goal of co-ownership involved making an effort to support shared decision-making and responsibility. The idea was strongly flavoured by the spirit of Freire’s dialogue - it can be seen as an attempt to extend the ‘living room’ of social capital:

I have this vision that by following through with the co-ownership model and by the kids having a hand in how we all do things we are building on community giving and may have a few future volunteers among us. Its a long term thing, but one which is exciting!

Therese, April 2004

We were excited by our early experiences holding ‘get-togethers’. Ideas ranged from lengthening the session time each week and buying new games to going for excursions to pools and parks. These ideas were encouraging because they indicated, perhaps, that some children saw the project as more than a free Internet café:

Unbelievable. It was quite a blur of energy and passion coming out. In the initial stages I felt it important to respond to each of the ideas brought up. I was trying to manage the expectations of the kids especially when they
brought up some of the more fanciful ideas. After a while I thought that this might be dampening so tried to stop. We did try to get across that some of the ideas would require more talking and organising. We also tried to validate as much as possible. I tried to say often that these were ‘great ideas’ or ‘I like that idea’, while adding the ‘this may be difficult to do’ qualifier. I was looking for an idea that we could act on and the movie one came up. So that’s what we can focus on doing next week.

Ryan, May 2004 after the first get-together

Getting together away from the computers (we held most meetings outside) also provided opportunities for discussion on violent games in the spirit that Jenkins, Livingstone and Oram discussed in Chapter 2:

Again I voiced my thoughts on Counter-Strike. Youth 8 then said that it was ‘real life’ and that in the game its killing terrorists. I think he sensed I was using my position of power to win-out the argument and he said something like, "Hey, I thought we are all in this together and we can say anything!".

Ryan, May 2004

We wanted to take action on kids’ ideas in order to validate the process as much as possible. There were a number of notable outcomes to this. Since extending the session to four hours each week, we’ve have fewer problems at shut-down. We’ve also held days on which kids could research and ‘vote’ for new games – we’ve then bought a number of them, including Age of Mythology (the sequel to Age of Empires). We’ve also put up a ‘have your say’ paper on the wall for kids to write-up comments, though it hasn’t often been used. These early experiences started to change volunteers’ expectations of the children:

Therese: Just by reading the reflections I have taken a big step in my thinking about the kids, their ability and thought process.

Maria: The way it changed my perceptions of the kids was that I realised they are motivated to try new activities, contribute their ideas and get involved. Previously I hadn't realised that they valued the sessions so much. I thought that there may be resistance or negativity from the kids so it was fantastic to see how excited they were even to be asked for their ideas. This changed my thought that we may have to work hard to get the kids interested to seeing that it may be more about creating
opportunities for the kids to express their ideas and be involved in carrying them out. Also changed my thinking about the volunteers' role - I think I underestimated the ability of the kids to take the lead in some areas.

May 2004

Though these have been fantastic successes, the reality has been that shared decision-making and shared responsibility are long-term goals. After these initial few months, the process has taken a slower route. We haven’t held ‘get-togethers’ since and we’ve sometimes been frustrated with the amount of interest kids have shown in taking more involved roles. A good example of this has been our efforts with mentoring. On one occasion we tried to set-up a tutorial session for kids who were experts in Age of Mythologies to show volunteers how to play. Like most of our experiences, a casual approach has been more appropriate:

Ryan: I made an announcement and set up 3 computers with the game. No one but me showed interest so I sat at one computer and Youth 19 came and sat a couple of seats away from me which I found odd. So I'm wondering how he is going to go about teaching me and he just tells me to click on the tutorial function which is basically a teach yourself to play lesson. At times I was sort of pretending I didn't know what to do so he could have a chance to show me, but generally it wasn't very interactive.

Shaun: I do believe that some of the older kids are starting to take a role within the group as a natural progression, and it is something maybe we should recognise to add incentive for the older kids to do that. I guess this is heading towards 'co-ownership'...but at the end of the day, I think they are kids, and we don’t want to add too much emphasis or pressure...

September 2004

Our experiences have also pointed to an issue which requires further attention. We need to consider the idea that we have attempted to foster expression but have only allowed that expression a certain amount of space. This connects strongly to Freire’s ‘cultural invasion’. Despite how much we talk about empowerment, we may always think we know what's best:

George C: I am not sure that we, as volunteers, are 100% ready to share our power and decision making. It seems we are "ready to play" but as long as we "set the rules".
Ryan: I think I have insecurities about losing "control" (my perception of my power and authority no doubt give me a sense of worth deep down), but it's my hope that my desire to see the project move towards a community in which everyone feels they have power and opportunity will win out over my willingness to keep things rolling as they are because I (and we) have a position of authority.

May 2004

This issue may have been best illustrated in our discussions on Counter-Strike:

Ryan: It's pretty clear that a good portion of the kids want this game and a good portion of volunteers don't. So who gives in? How about this...we buy one copy. This means (I'm hoping) not more than one child can play it at a time negating the group mind-numbing effects we are afraid of but still is us showing the kids we recognise and value their opinions but that they also need to recognise and respect ours.

Isaac: What do we mean by "shared decision making"? And just because the kids want it doesn't mean it goes - that's not shared, it's just another kind of dictatorship. As I said before, shared decision making is predicated on kids' levels of maturity. We have the role of guardians. We should be giving them parameterized decision making powers while respecting their fantasies - fairy floss for breakfast, CounterStrike instead of school - we need to trust our judgement about what will really contribute to their situations.

May 2004

As Isaac suggests, because of our role in maintaining a safe space, maybe there's nothing wrong with developing co-ownership only up to a point - the point where we think we know what's best. Regardless, there is a balance to strike between our expectations and our respect of kids’ choices:

Having the kids there of their own free will necessarily places the reason the kids are there (to have fun) in conflict with the reason we're there (to improve computer literacy, etc... I don't mean why we're there, individually, but rather, why the centre ostensibly exists in the first place). If we force the kids to sit there and listen, they won't come; If we drop all pretence to education, the centre loses its purpose.

...which has all worked fine, with us going about our business, and the kids going about theirs, until now, where the kids have direct input into the running of the centre. Unfortunately, a kid is never going to say "I think we should
concentrate harder on improving our computer literacy" or "please give us more tasks that involve advanced typing skills" - they're going to ask for things they enjoy doing. Which means that all the concessions come from our side of the fence...the point is, that the trick isn't going to be deciding what the kids can and can't have because of the perceived benefits, but in how to twist around the kids' wants into something which has a beneficial effect on them and the centre. Take them for excursions, but take them to a place where they'll learn something. Let them paint the walls, but get them to look up, for example, traditional aboriginal art on the computers beforehand. Give them a pool table and get them to look up the rules on the net. Turn the sandpit into a pool and teach them how to swim...informed is empowered.
Ang, May 2004

This chapter shows that, though building social capital and improving literacy are our main contributions to empowerment, it hasn’t been as simple as playing on computers. We’ve had to work with and around complex dynamics. To establish our ‘living room’, we’ve shaped a safe and open environment which the spirit of Freire and Marvin are helpful in articulating. Our approach has been to lay down boundaries while leaning as much as possible on growing relationships. This has culminated in a movement for ‘co-ownership’. However, though successful early on, co-ownership has taken time to develop and has left unanswered question regarding how to foster expression and how to avoid cultural invasion. In the final two chapters I will turn my attention to these issues.
5. Needing and Trying for More

Ultimately they need to play our game, or find a game which doesn't conflict with our game, because if they don't, they threaten our survival and unless things change markedly, our society will squash them. Maybe we need to think of another game as a METAPHOR for the real game.

Isaac, November 2003

Despite the meaningful experiences we've had in our safe and open 'living room', volunteers have continued to question the project's impact. Not only have we expressed doubt over the depth of relationships and the slow-moving process of 'co-ownership', but we have also expressed concern over how the project has directly addressed a number of other issues.

We've struggled to understand how the project connects to the 'big picture' social, political and economic challenges facing the community. We've also been concerned over the project's impact on culture, specifically Aboriginal culture. Freire's 'oppression' and 'cultural invasion' help in articulating these concerns. As a result of these concerns, the project has adopted a goal of supporting critical thinking and expression. However, our attempts to foster these through the creative capacity of multimedia have left us with mixed results. Our expectations have had to be grounded with the reality that we are working with young children in a voluntary environment. Yet recent experiences have shown us that the most appropriate way to support critical thinking and expression may be through infusing casual conversation and experimentation with Freire's 'problem-posing'.

Addressing the ‘Big Picture’ Issues

I was doing so many subjects related to Indigenous studies and when you saw where are the issues that are going on in that community alone and you wonder what our significance is there...At that time my mind wasn’t centred around all those issues. I was thinking I was going to this community organisation to volunteer on Saturdays, end of story...But when you started to talk about realities I did start thinking
about the way they lived, their social, cultural, political
and all those other factors that come in affect their life
and the community and the community’s life and...you just
wonder where the project fits into that because there are
other issues that are so important to their life.

Therese, June 2005

As Therese alludes to, we’ve often wondered how the project has addressed issues which
have seemed out of the realm of what casual socialising (social capital) or slowly
improving computer skills (new forms of literacy) can directly impact. Not only have we
questioned our large scale impact, but these issues have also manifested themselves in the
week-to-week running of the project. Concerns over health and nutrition is an example:

Ryan: Keep in mind I am not a nutritionist, but I had a look
at a McDonald's Quarter Pounder with Cheese and a Pepperoni
Pizza from Dominos...It looks like we are approximately giving
the kids a Quarter Pounder with Cheese each week. This
doesn't mean we are being neglectful, but we certainly aren't
contributing to healthy eating.

Antoine: I would say there's nothing wrong at all with
wanting to give the kids healthy food. I have a feeling they
don't exactly have a good diet as it is. Perhaps it wouldn't
be that bad of an idea just to buy a Vegetarian pizza if
possible...baby steps...

Catherine: I share Ryan's guilt but in the past we have
tried to feed the kids "healthy" food and in the main part
they were not interested. The pizza is far and away the most
popular food we have given them.

June 2004

We’ve had similar concerns with smoking:

Therese: I find it distressing to see an [8 year-old] child
walk up and pour himself a glass of orange juice while
ashing/smoking his cigarette. As an adult I feel compelled to
tell him not to smoke, especially with him being so young. I
don't think I am being as responsible as I would with other
kids if I saw them smoking.

George C: I don't think we should forbid kids from smoking,
because we are going to lose them this way. Yet showing our
disapproval is essential.

Therese: I agree...we aren’t the Health Authority.

February 2004
First, as a project, there’s been a need to determine our perspective on these issues. This is where Freire’s concept of oppression is relevant. We have made very few of Freire’s assessments. Might children in Redfern-Waterloo be oppressed by mainstream society? We never thought ‘liberating’ was needed, but one can make a good case that Redfern-Waterloo may not be suffering so much from a lack of social or human capital, as from marginalisation. There are many signs pointing to Freire’s ‘unjust order’.

Fully-analysing these circumstances can be the subject of an entirely separate piece of research. I therefore only recognise, in passing, the holistic context of race relations in Australia – from the current Howard government stretching back to European invasion. However, whether in the form of inactivity, misplaced or mismanaged programs, government has contributed to circumstances in Redfern-Waterloo. A continual shuffle of policy by NSW state governments has often left Redfern-Waterloo in a state of flux and without a voice. Aside from the high density of public housing that I described in Chapter 1, the most recent example of this is was the formation of the Redfern Waterloo Authority (See Appendix 6). This state ministry was given unprecedented power over the sale and development of public lands, paving the way for what may be mass gentrification of the area. Though it remains to be seen what the net effect the ministry will have, its secretive approach has left residents and community groups anxious and feeling disenfranchised. Even small projects like ours have been affected – the Redfern Computer Centre is on the list of public lands that may be sold.

Media coverage has also been a powerful force shaping perceptions of the area, specifically its reputation as crime-ridden. Our experiences with the media during the riot in 2004 is an example. A significant portion of the media coverage was reactionary and sensationalist. The front page of The Daily Telegraph on 20 February 2004 (five days following the riot), shows a half-page photo of a man of unidentified ethnicity committing a bag-snatching with the headline “Redfern Riot: Extraordinary Photo Evidence – This brutal attack on an innocent woman is why police swooped on Redfern the day TJ Hickey died”. The photos continue on pages 4 and 5, where a double-page headline reads, “Crime that lit the fuse on a night of violence” (The Daily Telegraph 20 February, 2004, pp. 4-5). This type of
coverage perpetuated a fear of ‘faceless violence’ in Redfern, and its clear intent was to sway public opinion on the riot, and the police’s response to it. The coverage was manipulative and uninformed. The views expressed by the media are further blurred by stories which dumb-down the complexity of the issues in the area (see Kidman 2004). The media also acts as a powerful soapbox for politicians aiming to push their own platforms:

Mr Howard described TJ’s death and the riot which followed as a “very sad development”...Mr. Howard said trouble in places like Redfern arose partly because of a breakdown in family authority within Aboriginal communities. He also said: “I think the solution very much lies in treating everybody equally and as part of the mainstream as far as law enforcement is concerned.”

(Ninemsn 2004)

The fluctuating portrayals of the area have played on our minds:

I've been trying to figure out why I consider myself to be fed-up and 'over' media or even hearing about other work on Redfern. The area is almost like a media commodity - its value jumps up and down with the types of stories it produces. The media's "take" is why I'm suspect of the feel-good pieces they do, despite the fact that they *may* be providing some benefit to kids and the outside world. It all culminates in me getting feeling unsettled, rushed, unprepared. It's volatile.

Ryan, August 2004

This has brought up questions over our own information literacy:

You mentioned the ABC program, ‘Four Corners’ and try to analyse it, who is the director siding with and so on. I checked the shot angles the order of appearance of the 'heroes', it was very interesting. Anyway, I don't know if the cameras crews had the option, but all the shot were, 'point of view' of the police, so the viewer is automatically siding with them. The order of appearance were police first, they were the real heroes here, they didn't hurt anyone and took the bashing of the Redfern people. Although the Redfern people had their say too...They tried to be balanced, and pretty much made it.

George C., April 2004 on a, ABC TV program on the riot
Though some of these assessments of society may go beyond what the project is capable of addressing, in the least they require us to consider the idea that we are not doing enough. What has been within our ability has been supporting critical thinking and expression:

What should your agenda be? Is it to teach skills or do you try to help the kids and community gain a critical consciousness of these issues?

Ryan, November 2004

**Cultural Invasion?**

In my discussion of our experiences with co-ownership I discussed the possibility that we may be trying to impose our own cultural values through the project.

Connecting to Postman’s assertion that all technology embodies agendas, it may be the case that the project has exposed children to manipulative content through its casual approach to Internet use. We’ve had concerns that relate to Livingstone and Bober’s research on the commercial focus of the Internet. Gaming websites like [www.cartoonetwork.com](http://www.cartoonnetwork.com), product sites like [www.barbie.com](http://www.barbie.com), and even music sites like [www.launch.com](http://www.launch.com) directly and indirectly focus on generate kids’ online and offline consumption:

We were playing silly buggers on those websites with love matches which claim to tell you how much you're worth based on your education and penis size. It's all pretty scary that there are these sites which go straight to a person's self-valuation and feed their need for approval. Not healthy. It was interesting though coz it asked all kinds of personal questions like whether you smoke dope.

Isaac, November 2003 after playing on an online magazine

Directly related to this has been our questions over the cultural messages sent through video clips, and the lyrics of music so popular with kids. Specifically we’ve wondered what the effects are of Aboriginal children identifying with African American culture:

I think the issue many of our kids have is identification with African American culture which is at once alien, peripherally relevant, and a source of hope. Of course, they
know almost nothing about the reality - it's a case of taking the media's word for it.
Isaac, August 2004

Connecting to Steenbergen’s research, we’ve also been concerned about the representation of female identity online:

I was really drawn to the bit about girls and computers and it's really kind of scary thinking about the kind of stereotypes that we could be inadvertently encouraging. Perhaps we counteract them by setting positive examples.
Maria, August 2004

This is not a straightforward issue. We’ve had to balance these concerns with the opportunities for expression and interaction the Internet has provided:

George C: They can surf and see all these cultures, all this rap and things that are not, centred culturally, not mainstream.
Isaac: Alternative?
George C: Yes. And they express themselves in a way. And by watching and listening to these kinds of music and these kinds of heroes, they’re expressing what they experience on the streets everyday.
November 2004

Though our project has involved many different cultural groups, these issues have lead into concerns over whether the project is doing enough to both support and encourage Aboriginal culture. Has ‘Reconciliation in action’ been enough? A good example is a discussion we had around the story of Chris Sara, 2004 Queenslander of the Year and principle of Cherbourg State School in Queensland. Using a ‘strong and smart’ motto (Sara himself is Aboriginal), he turned around school drop-out rates and literacy rates:

Therese: Chris Sara, a principle at Cherbourg State School in Queensland has been named Queenslander of the Year. He has made some remarkable progress with Indigenous kids who attend the school, located in an Aboriginal community...
Ryan: Some things I took from the story...The importance of the teachers and principal being Aboriginal. There is a huge effort to empower the kids' sense of who they are and where they come from and to be proud of it. And I think this
is where the results are coming from for the most part. Just got me thinking how far can we go in helping the kids be proud of who they are and where they come from? Do we do enough of this? Are there ways to do this that don't mean direct verbal reinforcement? Is it wrong or inappropriate of us to try this being non-Aboriginal people? And even if we do does it have any significance for the kids?

Isaac: I think this is something we just shouldn't torture ourselves about. To me, "pride" is one of those strange words with many implications good and bad. To have a positive sense about their aboriginal identity is probably what the article wants to say. I think that when we show interest and respect for their aboriginality, that's helpful. As to the "tough love, no excuses" kind of pride the principal in the story is talking about, I'm not convinced it's a good thing.

June 2004

This highlights the main issue for us in the discussion of cultural invasion as it has related to Aboriginal culture. We’ve struggled with whether we can and should be actively supporting Aboriginal culture if we are not Aboriginal ourselves:

George C: It’s definitely something we don’t encourage – to bring their roots.

Catherine: Over the years I’ve had plenty of conversations with the kids about...well, not about ‘Let’s discuss Aboriginality’, but centred around race and race divisions. It’s also very hard to answer that question unless you also volunteer on the North Shore with a bunch of 8 year-old white kids and do they watch the same videos and talk about the same things?

Isaac: I’m ignorant on how to do that. I don’t think this project has opened it up a lot for me...they have a sense of identity as a group, and when their Aboriginality comes up, it’s to distinguish us from them. I can’t get my head around it because I don’t have any strong connection with the culture.

Ryan: It’s so touchy. How do you help someone talk about their culture?

Maria: There’s mixing of cultures as well. We can’t sort of say, ‘You should be doing this. It’s very hard for us to say, ‘Oh, let’s go out and do this and that’s Aboriginal.’

Isaac: Everybody has difficulty defining what it means to be a part of their culture...I’m not from an identifiable cultural ethnic group and I don’t live among other people from the groups I’m from. But here’s a group which lives together, on the Block, on the basis of their Aboriginal. The Block was conceived as a project where Aboriginals in the city could live in their own way. And I don’t think I’ve been able to discern anything about the way they live life which
distinguishes them from any other kids anywhere under similar circumstances...I think my frustration is that I sense that it is probably critical to being effective in being able to connect with the kids is to understand that cultural background, the cultural assumptions which they have, but the fact that they're kids and because our environment is effectively OUR environment, our living room, we don’t have the opportunity to really learn.

Ryan: Why, because we’re not Aboriginal?

Isaac: Yeah, yeah. So it’s not really accessible to us. But I do sense it would be beneficial if we could somehow learn about that.

November 2004

This has been a delicate issue. We’ve never been quite sure where the project stands on actively supporting kids’ cultures – something further exasperated by our experiences in struggling to find engaging Indigenous content online. This is why supporting children’s expression has been such an important goal. As The Central Land Council’s submission the DCITA report highlighted in Chapter 2, multimedia has a tremendous capacity to foster expression:

Catherine: A lot of them find it hard to express “Who am I?” sort of thing. And I don’t really blame them. When I was younger I probably had trouble with that too.

George C: This is why I think using a camera or using a video chat is a much better tool for these kids. The technology is there.

November 2004

Multimedia: Roadblocks or Expecting Too Much?

In terms of technology we engage with, I think we need to start looking at our project in terms of:

1. Transformative intent - do the things we do promote change, and how do we hope they'll promote change?

2. Transformative effect - how have we noticed transformations taking place?

3. Reflection - can we get the kids to reflect on change as it takes place? Can we get them to identify feelings they
have about stuff? Surely reflection is the most potent way of effecting change. So how about this: why not get them to record their reflections with *film* and text.

Isaac, October 2003

As Isaac describes above, we’ve tried to use multimedia production as a means not only to foster multimedia literacy, but also as a means to foster creativity and reflection. At different stages of the project we’ve introduced webpage building, digital photography, video-making and music-making. These efforts culminated in the Tuesday ‘multimedia’ session we ran in 2004. Results have been mixed. On one hand, we’ve had fantastic success. Multimedia has shown its ability to be both fun and supportive of expression. On the other hand, there’s been a large gap between what volunteers hoped to achieve and what we have achieved, especially in the area of critical thinking.

Webpage-building has been our longest-running multimedia project. We’ve used www.tripod.com for its straightforward web development tools (point and click functions such as ‘add a page’ and ‘insert a picture’) and its free hosting. For the most part kids have posted photos of favourite singers, sports players, actors and wrestlers on their sites. This has been fantastic for expression, and kids have often been proud to show-off their sites. It’s also allowed kids to be involved ‘behind the scenes’ of the Internet. They’ve learned skills such as how to upload images and ‘publish’ to the Web. It’s also been an activity which has kept kids connected to the group, as some have returned to their sites long after first creating them and after being away from the project for lengthy stretches of time. Our main frustrations have been its short-term popularity and the absence of much ‘reflective’ content:

We've been building WebPages with the kids for over a year now and the results seem to be similar. Kids get excited and interested for the better part of a couple of weeks and then usually interest wanes and the website sits on the Internet. Most sites have images, links to games but not much text. The possibilities of getting kids to ‘talk’ about things in their life and community seem to be much stronger using videos...

Ryan, January 2004
Digital photography and video-making have been the sources of our most exciting but also our most confusing experiences with multimedia. There has been significant interest in digital photography, especially in casually picking up the camera to take random photos. We’ve also had success with kids making comics, Power-Point presentations and slide shows:

What I can't stop thinking about is what Youth 10 was doing with the camera. He got a hold of it and off he went. I found him some minutes later sitting cross-legged on the ground outside taking photos. I think it was some of the most engaged things I've seen him do. He seemed engrossed and interested. I uploaded the photos from the camera onto the computer after everyone had left and he must have taken over 100 photos and videos. Looking through them gave me such an interesting perspective on what goes on Saturdays. And looking at his photos showed me a side of him I had never really seen before.

Ryan, May 2004

The Tuesday sessions best represent our experiences with video-making. What we hoped to accomplish was a quiet, one-on-one environment to engage in video projects:

It's hard to tell precisely what Youth 4 and Youth 27 took from the experience but I can say for certain I got a good feeling about how they were both really serious and focused on the work and interacted with us in a calmer, more reflective way. They were doing stuff which meaningfully contributed toward the work without being asked to, e.g. Youth 27 helping put together the 'set' outside. I do feel like we were engaging them at the upper range of their maturity and this was satisfying to me. It gives me hope that we are now relating to a part of them which won't fall away with childhood.

Isaac, January 2004

Another hope was to connect with families by creating work kids could take home:

He also seems very proud of his videos, especially the one he made last Tuesday. He brought back the cd and played it for a couple of volunteers. I asked him if he had shown his parents...I really enjoyed seeing the enthusiasm and pride he has in his work.

Therese, February 2004
We also wanted to focus on the planning process to spark thinking about design and content. We tried to have a ready list of topics kids could pick from:

* "Race around the neighbourhood": we ask kids to make a 2 or 3 minute clip about something in their neighbourhood or two or three things in their neighbourhood (e.g. The building is haunted!).

* Putting together a short film made up of still images. So we take normal photos using the camera and string these together with a soundtrack to make a sort of animation.

* Giving the kids a topic, say "walking home from school", and they have to do clips for it in a comedy, horror and thriller genre.

* "10x5": Making a film about a topic using 10 shots of 5 seconds each.

I think we should focus on making these projects lots of fun, giving the kids as much ownership of the process as possible and get into exchanges/interactions about topics that affect their lives or are important in their lives.

Ryan, January 2004

Most videos, however, have been short and random clips. Few have involved any planning. This has sometimes frustrated volunteers but has also produced a few remarkable experiences. Re-visiting a vignette from Chapter 1:

Ryan: For the first time I can think of a group of kids got together on their own and started to make a video. We had no idea this was going on until we stumbled across it at different points outside...

Maria: The video happening was just amazing. The kids were so excited and there was a range of kids involved and it was a really cooperative effort, everyone was being so warm with each other and not trying to dominate or take over. I thought it was just wonderful and I haven't seen anything since I've been there. And it "just happened".

George C: I can't say I was very happy about the location (toilet) or the theme (fighting), but who cares? We gave the kids the knowledge of how to use the camera, and the tools (camera and computer) and they used it. It's only when we don't interfere with imposing our "values" or "ideas" on them, we get this kind of beautiful results.

March 2005
On the whole though, in relation to our goal of supporting critical thinking, we’ve had difficulty supporting complex and ‘reflective’ projects:

In the case of Youth 27, eliciting his own "voice" was pretty hard work – I was talking to him about school and trying to find aspects of it which were peculiar to his own experience. It turns out that he draws rude pictures in class, so George C and I built a film around that idea. It was essentially me and George C who put it together but we were bouncing ideas off Youth 27 and trying to read his responses, though perhaps not as diligently as we should have. We also felt the need to make progress so he didn't feel frustrated. Anyway, I think it's a continuing struggle to help the kids feel confident about making their voices heard. I think my job is to try to "amplify" anything I hear from them and incorporate it into the thing we create together.

Isaac, January 2004

Reflecting on our experiences, we’ve identified two aspects to our approach which we’ve needed to be aware of. First, volunteers have had difficulty with taking too overbearing a role in the process:

On the projects that kids offered, we must give them the lead and responsibility. We want to help so much, that sometimes we are doing all the leading (I remember myself in video making)

George C, May 2004

We’ve also learned that straightforward video-editing software (we’ve used ULEAD Video Studio) and capable computer hardware (RAM and CPU especially) are important because of the computing power needed to render images, video, text and sound. Loading time has been a factor in kids losing interest:

Fearing that I'd lose him if I tried to play it all together, I tried to shorten the clips and identify the bits with the most action. This was a bit complicated and I was fumbling around with the software, learning how to do it. Youth 18 started giving me attitude about taking a long time and not knowing what I was doing. I asked him if he wanted to do it, and he got up and walked away, returning periodically to remind me that he's waiting to see his movie. As far as he was concerned, he was Steven Spielberg and there was the problem with the projectionist! Learnings:
1. Let the kids drive things.
2. Don't let the kids think you're responsible for making things happen unless you really want to be responsible.
3. Speed of the computer is a real issue.

Isaac, October 2004

Our experiences with music-making best illustrate the trouble we’ve had possessing the expertise needed to ‘model’ multimedia projects. We were inspired to try music making after hearing the work of Australian hip hop artist Morganics who travelled around NSW running workshops for kids in Aboriginal communities. He came to our project one Saturday and gave us a demo of the process using Sonic Foundry’s Sound Forge and Acid Pro software. He gave us some useful pointers:

*We make this a very creative activity for the kids. Get the kids to think of how they want their beat to go in their head before starting to make one. If someone wants a beat like say, a 50 cent song, we can try to make one "similar" but do it our own way.

*NO swearing when rapping and we rap in our own accents. No put-on American accent. Rap about yourself.

*Might be slow getting the activity popular but once we get a couple of songs done and onto Cds for the kids, there should be more interest coming from the kids rather than us.

Ryan, June 2004

The programs are user friendly but complicated to master without experience. We’ve also found that musical acumen is needed:

Ryan: It's harder than I thought to make a track. First of all, the way we did it we assembled a basic beat by sampling different aspects of a normal hip hop beat ("kick", "snare", "hat") from other songs, then added vocals and played around with the whole thing - this can get very elaborate - I just spent 4 hrs making a 30 second clip.

Therese: I think it is important that we as a volunteers have our head around the software and concepts before taking it to the kids. I find that if I am not confident with the program, I will often lose the interest of the kid.

June 2004
Another idea to encourage expression and community ties has been to stage an ‘open day’:

Catherine: 'Exhibition' might be a bit of grand word...some sort of forum where the kids can show off what they've been working on. This can be as varied as our spectacular 'videos', to their websites, drawings, PowerPoint presentations or cartoons. We could encourage the kids to produce things that they are interested in showing off (different for all, I imagine) and then invite parents, relations and people from the community to come down at 12 one Saturday and have a look at it all. If the kids are at all interested, it might serve the following purposes: Giving the kids a 'goal', something to aim for, making their multi-media stuff, Getting the kids thinking creatively, or about expressing themselves to the world, Involving the wider community in what the kids get up to on Saturdays, Recruiting, or re-recruiting (such a word), as kids who don't come, or used to come, might come and have a look, Making us feel all warm and fuzzy...

Isaac: I too like this idea. I think it's time we helped the kids and ourselves to contextualize our work in the rest of their lives.

February 2004

We’ve yet to act on this idea, especially since our initiative has waned since the riot, but we should strongly consider it in the near future.

With critical thinking and expression being such important goals, and the exciting potential of multimedia to foster them, it’s been easy to carry high expectations. The reality has been that we’ve never really known how much critical thinking or expression has been happening with young kids:

Catherine: Some of them grasp things very quickly and some of them are clearly more creative and some are lateral thinkers...I think that some kids would probably grasp these concepts more easily than others.

Isaac: Do you think critical thinking is happening?

Ryan: That’s my frustration. I don’t think so.

Isaac: Aren’t they just a bit young?

Ryan: Yeah, they’re just a bit young. It may not be happening on the ground yet, but maybe it might be setting the stage for it.
Antoine: If you think about it, it’s probably the only environment they could be doing it in their daily lives.

November 2004

We may be projecting concepts meant for adults onto kids:

Catherine: If I was a trained teacher, I’d know what to expect from an 8 year-old. I’d probably know what an 8 year-old can and can’t do and the concepts they can grasp...so you just learn by trial and error...which maybe in some ways is good cause you don’t have any expectations what the kids can and can’t achieve.

George C: That’s not true. I’m sorry. We have a lot of expectations on what’s going to happen. Sometimes we give the kids stuff they can’t handle, like making movie or creating music with this complicated software that we can’t hardly control and then Isaac is frustrated. [laughing]

Isaac: Excuse me. I didn’t expect them to master the software. I was hoping for some sort of commitment to the project.

George C: Maybe it’s too much, because they’re itchy, they don’t want to stay too long.

Catherine: But we live in hope that they will.

Eddie: One thing with those kids just they’re probably like everyone else - they have a limited attention spans, so they cannot master software, whereas Antoine or George C or anyone here could look at it for 20 minutes. If it doesn’t work for them, they will never use it again...

November 2004

This is especially relevant in the case of analysing online content like music video clips:

I wonder if they evaluate the music videos at that stage. Maybe we are asking too much of them. I have been thinking that whilst they grow up in an environment very different to many other kids...in the end they are essentially children growing up. Would we expect a north shore boy who attends Shore school to critically evaluate Eminem's music and see that most of it is theatre built into rap?...I guess the way we can create some critical thought with the kids is by contextualising it to suit their position in the world. I don't know enough about their realities to do so...

Therese, November 2003
Though we’ve been frustrated with fluctuating levels of interest and a perceived lack of ‘reflective’ content, as we move forward we should be more realistic in our approach to supporting critical thinking and expression. Not only do we need to have a better understanding of ourselves and the activities like multimedia production, but we should continue to embrace casual experiences.

**A Casual Approach**

Indeed, sticking to our safe and open living room and the casual channels of social capital may provide a much better forum to support critical thinking and expression. With relationships becoming more established we can aim to infuse casual conversation and experimentation with the spirit of Freire’s ‘problem-posing’. This has already begun to happen slowly:

Here's the background (excuse the third person): At the beginning of the project Ryan thinks he should teach kids. Ryan finds out that kids don't want to be taught. Ryan comes to be more comfortable with just hanging out and playing. Ryan learns from just playing and talking. Ryan wants to add more challenging talk than just banter and gaming all the time. Ryan tries but it feels awkward and silly most times.

Instead of speaking, Youth 34 was trying to use hand gestures. I was making silly guesses and she got frustrated. She told me I was 'gay'. It's happened before with the boys so I came back with my standard response: 'I'm not, but if I was, what's wrong with that?'. I'm trying to be honest but also hoping it'll at least spark a second thought. Instead of the usual non-response or reiteration, she said 'because gay people get diseases'. I assumed she was talking about HIV and I told her that being gay didn't mean you have diseases. She seemed confused. We talked about it for a couple more seconds more before moving on.

Ryan, July 2005

This approach has come *around* technology use:

Youth 25 and Bruce were playing the 'I try to hit your land with a missile or nuke' game. Youth 25's been much more conversational of late so I asked him if he knew about nuclear weapons being in the news. He said no. I told him that countries make a big deal about other countries having
them and asked if he knew which countries might have 'em. He said Canada. So I gave him a 30 second rundown of the situation as I saw it. I was waiting of him to interrupt or just tune me out but it actually seemed like he was listening.

Ryan, July 2005

It has also been directly about technology use:

I told him that usually you can’t really tell in music videos how tall or big singers are because of the camera angles they use. I told him to look at the videos he was watching and see if he could tell they were “shooting up” form a low angle to make singers look tall. I thought this was a great exchange. He seemed interested in the idea. I was hoping that this bit of information on Tupac’s height and the discussion might spark some (who knows how much) critical evaluation…and perhaps allow him to “cut-through” the marketing and packaging of the videos.

Ryan, November 2003

Though traumatic, this approach has also helped us look differently at experiences like the riot:

A bit of a setback perhaps, but on the other hand it might also be an opportunity for them to question things. Maybe now is the time for critical thinking?

Isaac, February 2004

I helped Youth 8 and Youth 36 look up images from the riots on the net. This was one of only a handful of times I've heard any kids talk about the riots and the first time I've seen any want to access information about it on the Internet. I was asking them about their experiences with it, I told them some of mine, and they were pretty open to talking. I found this exchange important and intriguing - like it was touching on a taboo topic (taboo in only my mind?) on which I really wanted to hear what they had to say. I was pleased that they felt comfortable talking about it, at least in minor detail, to me who's obviously an outsider to their community.

Ryan, September 2004

However, whether talking or using technology, it’s been crucial to respect the need for mutual interest:
...the centre isn't a school; we're not there to try and get every kid computer literate, or even most of them. We're there to provide a service to these kids that they may not otherwise have in their lives: a safe environment to talk with their friends, play computer games, sports, and access the internet. We also give them the opportunity to learn computer skills, social skills, whatever...if some, most, or all don't choose to take this opportunity, it doesn't matter, what matters is that the opportunity is there...I mean, as important as these skills may be, and whatever factors may conspire to prevent these kids from having jobs or whatever without them (i.e., being Aboriginal, being from a poor part of the community, etc), at the end of the day, they're just kids. Most of the kids are only nine or ten years old, for crying out loud - let 'em have their fun on the weekends. We go, as volunteers, because these kids are cool and hella fun to be around. and the small miracles...make it all worthwhile: we can make a difference to these kids lives, yes, albeit only if they let us - but really, would you have it any other way?

Ang, November 2003

Lingering around the project has been the question of whether or not we should and can be doing more to contribute to empowerment. Our concerns over how the project has addressed the 'big picture' issues in the community and over how it has affected culture has led us to support critical thinking and expression. However, our experiences in doing so show that the casual and mutual avenues of conversation, play and experimentation may be best suited to take up these goals.
6. Behind the Scenes

To tell the final part of our story we need to remove ourselves from the project's on-the-ground environment. As the vignettes throughout the preceding chapters have illustrated, volunteering has been an emotional experience. We've also been concerned with the delicate connection to the community the project has had. Both of these areas have directly affected the project's impact and need to be examined.

Though full of good intentions, we must consider that our commitment to the project may be driven by ego-oriented motivations which have manifested themselves in notions of charity and voyeurism of Aboriginal culture. However, to move beyond our own agendas volunteers have begun to gradually developed an open, flexible mind. An on-going process of reflection has been crucial, and will remain so, in building on this. Finally, Warschauer’s ‘community informatics’ helps us to see that, despite a growing emotion connection to Redfern-Waterloo, the project’s structure has not fully tapped into the benefits of community involvement. Though this area has been hampered by limited resources, we can better prioritise our efforts in the future.

Getting Flexible Through Reflection

Freire proposes that the motivations behind intervention projects completely flavour their impact, specifically the levels of trust and respect invested into a project. Have we really respected and trusted the kids? Subconsciously, I believe volunteers have struggled with this question. In looking into the possibilities Freire raises we should avoid self-damning reactions and look to first recognise our intentions.

Redfern-Waterloo’s identity as the heart of urban Aboriginal Australia has been a major factor in volunteer participation. Though based on sincere commitment to learning and Reconciliation, it seems that our interest in Aboriginal culture may have at times been
voyeuristic in nature. This has shown itself in our frustrations over not getting enough ‘access’ to Aboriginal culture through the project:

Isaac: I think what took me there was my prejudices about the place and race relations in Australia, something I felt quite strongly about but was actually quite uninformed about – at least in a practical, experiential sort of way. Things are less clear for me now on everything.

Alex V: One of the things I get from it is a sense of coming from a culture that’s partially responsible – I don’t see it as my fault – I do fantasize about that guilt about the state of the Indigenous population… I don’t think I’d be as excited about going to youth group if they were white Australian.

Maria: I was looking for a community IT project. I wasn’t particularly thinking, ‘oh, these kids will be Indigenous kids’.

Antoine: There’s one thing I realised the other day… the biggest thing I wanted to get out of it for myself was learning about Aboriginal culture and I was thinking about it a couple of weeks ago, I really haven’t learned that much. But if you think about it, that was the big attraction… I mean, I’ve learned a lot, more than the average person, but for how much I hoped to have learned.

November 2004

This sparked a discussion over how intentions to learn about culture may easily become patronising:

Ryan: Well, it depends on what you think there is to learn. You learn by meeting the actual people, not by watching in a movie.

Catherine: The thing about saying ‘I want to learn about Aboriginal culture’ is this stereotype about what Aboriginal culture is. Especially when you come from overseas. It’s didgeridoos and dot art and that sort of stuff. But that’s just a perception. But surely when you’re dealing with Aboriginal people, in whatever environment, that’s reality, that’s real. Just because they’re not talking about didgeridoos...

Ryan: We have learned heaps about part of Aboriginal Australia because we know what the kids are doing every Saturday. They’re with us. They like skateboarding and they like 50 cent. This is what part of their culture is...

Catherine: And I know about their families and what they’ve told me. And conversations they have all the time. I feel like I know a lot more about that and what it’s like to live there a lot more than I did before I went there. But I don’t feel like… to me it almost seems patronising to suggest the
kids should be teaching us about what it’s like to be Aboriginal because their just kids!

George C: Exactly. And not all of them are Aboriginal.

Catherine: And a lot of them come from very mixed backgrounds.

November 2004

This ties into the role ‘charity’ has played in the project. This was a strong theme in the project’s early days. Our unspoken goal was that we could help children ‘get ahead’ and not ‘fall behind’ in our society. This was evident in sweeping statements made after only a few months running the project:

I’ll always keep in mind is that all of the kids are kids that really need the attention and skill-building. So getting one child out is a success. It's not in the quantity of kids, but in the teaching and time we spend with the ones who come.

Ryan, September 2002

‘Giving something back to the community’ has been a motivation we’ve wrestled with:

Ryan: What’s it done for us?

Alex V: This is a question I'm constantly wrestling with in my head. It's given me a few things, but they sound so clichéd. It's given me a sense of "giving something back", of doing something for others (though it's hardly selfless, and I'm constantly battling with the idea of whether I'm really doing anything worthwhile - couldn't I be doing more, etc?), that gives me some sort of small inner satisfaction. It's helped deal, again only a little, with the disappointment I've felt for the racial divide in Australia. And given me some hope for the future.

Ryan: I don't wrestle with this question too much anymore. I think I used to have the same considerations as Alex V, but my thoughts on volunteer work - especially in this context of youth work, changed. It's not charity. Depending on what you're there for, there are complex issues involved. Complex problems. It's not like say, planting a tree in a forest that has been clear-cut. Or donating money. The feel-good and meaningful outcomes aren't that quick or simple. And that's frustrating but ultimately, maybe, more real. So for me, who likes linear results, I've come to take pleasure in a jumble of experiences.

November 2004
Volunteers have also taken satisfaction from being ‘part of the group’. This is a difficult theme to classify as selfish, because as Cox’s alludes to in Chapter 2, we are social beings who enjoy acceptance:

Ryan: I guess I get a kick out of the kids liking me too. I like it when people like me. Maybe I identify with the kids because of skin colour. I don’t know. There are too many possibilities.

Antoine: My girlfriend gives me a hard time. She says, ‘You know you probably go there ‘cause the kids look up to you, don’t you?’. Maybe, you know, in a really strange, strange sort of way, maybe.

Ryan: I totally admit that. I take with a serious amount of responsibility the bigger brother role. I think it’s important. I think if you have it, the kids’ respect and trust, you have to…it’s precious.

Catherine: Whatever keeps you doing it. Whatever keeps you going as long as you’re not abusing any situation. That’s fine to feel proud that the kids like you.

Shaun: For me, personally it’s like being a child again, not having all this social responsibility. Not having to deal with people as an adult.

George C: But you’re still a volunteer…I’m sometimes really scared something’s going to happen. I am playful, but no it’s not a relaxing, back to childhood experience.

November 2004

We’ve also had a desire to ‘feel important’. This showed itself in our response to the riot:

Ryan: It seemed like such a big thing. And part of me actually wanted to be involved and doing something.

Therese: It’s hard, mine was a mixture of responsibility and guilt...

Ryan: I think one thing that’s come out is...I think there’s some selfish notions in what we’ve been doing. I think that ties in a little bit with how I felt at that time. I just wanted to have an impact in that situation.

Therese: Like a pat on the back? There was a time that I could have said ‘Okay I don’t need to be involved in this’ and stepped away but I chose not to. And that’s touching on that whole selfish idea. Am I just putting myself into this situation to value my input into this community? It’s probably a subtle intention there.

June 2005
How then have we dealt with these dynamics to move forward as a project, and how can we continue to do so? As Shaun and Nadia capture below, rather than Freire’s revolutionary ‘re-birth’ it’s been by developing an open, flexible mind. This consciousness has allowed us to process our experiences, examine our motivations and make ourselves vulnerable to new experiences:

Shaun: I used to think it was all for a greater goal, to achieve some substantial goal at the end, but sometimes we need to reflect upon the reality of it, what does it mean to each of us...I think keeping a personal diary on your experiences allows you to see the growth and meaning of connect...

Nadia: Thinking about, discussing, reflecting on the sessions is what makes it conscious intervention and ensures the volunteers don’t just get caught up in the kids’ dynamic/chaos...It is also what makes you guys the ‘secure base’...responses are measured not just re-active (possibly damaging).

If poverty and drugs are some of the issues that that community of people live with then they most likely live in a state of perpetual stress and often trauma from crisis. And this rolls into the way the children are 'held', thought about, responded to, guided, etc...from the day a group of uni students walked into the Block, they were intentionally intervening, whether by offering more computer access than the kids would otherwise have or by offering 'social capital'. Sustaining that intervention responsibly has meant learning to transcend the immediate drama of a Saturday.

November 2004

This flexibility has manifested itself in how we have taken to viewing and pushing our ‘agendas’:

Antoine: My parents always call and say, ‘So what are you actually doing over there?’. If you think about it, we don’t really have like a mission or a guiding sort of statement like a typical charity would. But on lose terms, if you look at Redfern you’ve got religious groups that go there, you’ve got some interesting people going in during the week and pushing their own agenda. We really don’t have one. We have a lose structure...

Shaun: I think the kids come because they see there are no other forces influencing it.

Isaac: I don’t think kids perceive agendas.
Catherine: I don’t know. I remember having this interesting conversation with Youth 21, when she used to come about one of the church groups that used to come and taken them. Cause she was telling me about this Jesus and the Devil rap that they obviously taught them. And I was asking, ‘Where did you learn that?’, and she said, ‘From the people with the big blue bus.’ [laughing] Obviously the people with the big blue bus would come and take them off and do the religious rap stuff and she obviously had a concept that that’s what they were doing...

Ryan: If the kids don’t perceive agenda, then they perceive people. My perception is that there’s so many organisations in the area…I mean, they have a lot of relationships with teachers, and then they have relationships with social workers, and other organisations. And the fact we keep getting kids coming back and there have been some friendships developing shows that it is of value to them...

November 2004

The key to developing this flexibility has been an on-going process of reflection. This has taken the form of sharing experiences, asserting opinions, raising questions, supporting each other, and discussing ideas. There have been two important spaces for group reflection. Though it happens less often now, in early days we sat down each week to debrief meetings and chat about our experiences. Our main space for reflection, though, has come in the form of our group e-mail list:

My experience is that not everyone will talk all the time, but when the environment is friendly and respectful almost everyone will get something from it, and that keeps people engaged and thinking about what's happening there. Particularly for newbies like me...there's a huge amount going on there each week and it's some effort to come to grips with it.

Isaac, January 2003

Reflection has been sparked by both necessity and choice. Confrontation, especially, has been the cause for serious reflection. We’ve often mulled over our actions and reactions, and by doing so we’ve found out more about what we can handle and what we can’t, even on a very personal level:

Why am I doing this? I've spent my whole life trying to insulate myself from this type of reality. I've wanted to be safe. I live on my own surrounded by creature comforts, and the trappings of affluence and safety. And these kids deal in
violence and force day to day. Is my reality better - more right? Perhaps since they can't get more than the crumbs from my table, their approach to reality is right for them. Intimidation, violence, violation, power. My power is through association with authority, establishment, respectability and knowledge. The secret handshakes. They can't easily access this, so they only see one avenue to power. Am I better off for the type of power I have? Certainly not in their world. One day they may set upon me and I'd be physically and psychologically defenceless.

Isaac, August 2003

Reflection has also been a way to stay connected with other volunteers during the week and a way to support each other in stressful times:

I know there is much serious discussion to be had about fallout from Saturday, but in the meantime I just wanted to express to you guys what an incredible undertaking this is every week, and that no-one should feel disheartened with their own efforts to deal with the kids. These few boys are doubtless among the most troubled in the city (country?!?) and we are not trained professionals. By the sounds of things, the trained professionals have a pretty hard time dealing with them too. You are all amazing, strong and committed. I just wanted to say that.

Catherine, February 2004

It's also allowed us to coordinate and collaborate:

Can we use the "reply all" function to discuss what we're going to do now. At this point I'll take into account all the feedback and make a final call.

So, can you have your say on:

1) What do we do as volunteers if Youth 2 shows up this Saturday?

2) At what point do we contact the police (both this Saturday and for other incidents)?

3) When, if at all, do we allow him back?

4) How do we communicate this to him?

5) Do we address the kids about the boundaries of our sessions and our contact with the police?

Ryan, February 2004
However, reflection hasn’t been something all volunteers have embraced:

I do read them but don't ever feel a need to join in... over-analysis... self-congratulatory...there's a tone of "I played a game with little Johnny for two hours and at the end he smiled at me and I felt really good about it." It feels a bit like we're having cyber group hugs. It's not an issue or anything, but I don't really feel compelled to join in with that at the moment...the main theme seems to be patting each other on the back rather than what more we can do for them (though sure, I haven't done anything to help change that). Like I say, not meant as a criticism, I just don't feel like joining in with that at the moment.

Alex V, August 2004

Some volunteers have found it useful while others have found it has involved too much discussion and analysis:

George C: It kind of reflects of a bigger issue cause I am under the impression that we’re putting much more than the kids into it. We think about it, we sit, we e-mail, we think about what’s good, what we do bad. All these new programs, like consistency and trust.

Alex V: We also might be getting more from it.

Ryan: I mean the kids aren’t in a position to sit down and reflect on their experiences, really. I’ve only recently started to use my brain properly. It makes sense that we can do this. For me, that whole process of reflection that you’re describing happened because I was completely overwhelmed by the experience. It was just so confronting, yet so exciting, yet so deflating, and yet...Just so much was going on that I was thinking there’s no way I can keep doing this if I don’t try to understand it better. And for some people it seems too much. Superfluous. But it works for me. And that’s what allows me to come back each week.

November 2004

Community Informatics: A Way Forward

Warschauer’s ‘community informatics’ is based on the assumption that technology projects should act as a resource to achieve community goals, whether economic, social or political. His model is built around ‘who you know’ and ‘what you know’ about the community.

The project has had trouble with both of these. As a result of not having many links in the
community we’ve received most news about the community in anecdotal form. We’ve therefore often been confused about what’s ‘really’ happening in Redfern-Waterloo:

I honestly had no idea what it was like for a cop working in Redfern ‘til I read that submission, and now, I’ll never bag a cop again. Its tough when everyone hates you and you’re just doing your job, yknw? What really blew me away was that I had assumed she was male, up until the part she wrote: "I had to whack my kneecap back into place... people would keep calling out: get that bitch!" That gave me a real shock, and really opened my eyes...everyone in Redfern seems to go there with an open mind, but problems keep arising no matter how hard everyone tries to be sincere to everyone.

Bruce, July 2004 after reading submissions to the NSW parliamentary inquiry into Redfern-Waterloo

About the social worker, it was very interesting to talk to her about Redfern and so on, yet she drew a very gloomy picture of Redfern and the kids, one that is giving no hope, or in other words saying that whatever we do is useless considering the environment the kids grow up in. That was not very encouraging.

George C, February 2004

A distorted perspective may have been leading us to make uninformed assumptions:

On the way back we passed some youths sitting on the curb...Youth 10 said to Ryan and I 'You let us smoke, thanks for letting us smoke'...It made me wonder if sometimes we make negative assumptions about the kids' home lives (like assuming that no-one would care if they were smoking, aged 9 or 10 or whatever...) and if, at worst, we are providing the 'bad' kids with an environment in which to 'play up'.

Catherine, January 2004

However, despite this, volunteers have begun to develop an emotional connection to the area – a direct result of the process of relationships and trust building that social capital encompasses:

Alex V: I'm aware that I'm a cultural tourist to an extent I can just walk away from everything whenever I want to. But my feelings definitely go beyond the centre. Absolutely. I care about what may happen to the area the government's ill-thought through proposals about regenerating the Redfern made me cross. I felt kind of protective. I feel I want to know the kids are doing well at school, staying away from drugs,
have healthy role models, things like that. I used to find the graffiti on the wall outside the station vaguely threatening, now I love it and think it's an excellent celebration of a remarkably enduring culture. I find it quite emotional walking through Redfern now.

Ryan: And you feel this connection has been developed mostly through the project?

Alex V: The "race riots" turned me onto it. I sided with the Redfern residents instantaneously. But I wouldn't have cause to go into or even through Redfern very often at all if it wasn't for the project. So almost entirely my connection is because of it.

July 2005

This connection has also been forged by working through difficult situations. We’ve learned first-hand that being involved in community work can lead to unexpected personal experiences. The riot is the best example of this. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, another volunteer and myself were called as witnesses in the Coroner’s inquest. We felt personally involved despite feeling guilty about being outsiders:

Therese: With my involvement it was more like I felt responsible...That comes down to the building of relationships and the project sort of is a medium for that...I think for me it was very important...our actual self worth actually going there was quite important.

Ryan: I felt bad because...during that whole process during the riots I felt like I was so personally involved. I felt stressed out, I took it very, very seriously. But then I think about it. I don’t even live in the community, I wasn’t really too directly involved and then I keep thinking about the riots and all these issues around it and why it happened and all the tensions that were around it and I felt that I was in the middle of it.

Therese: But at the same time you’re an outsider. Maybe it’s just a personality thing that you feel responsible. I think it is valid that you think you’ve invested time and it’s a human interaction...If [she] hadn’t of come up to me that day and told me what she saw I maybe wouldn’t have felt the need to sort of involve myself?

Ryan: My involvement with the project created this connection, certainly to the kids, but also with the community.

June 2005

With this growing emotional connection in mind I want to examine the areas in which we’ve have had weak links to the community, and find direction for how we can addresses
these areas moving forward. Warschauer’s model of community informatics is helpful in doing both.

First, he suggests involving community members in running the project and working through existing community organizations who have expertise in the area. We’ve seen the importance of this in our success walking down to the Block to pick-up kids. This was time consuming and didn’t guarantee better participation, but it was a good way to motivate children who would not normally come on their own (especially girls), and a good way to meet people. It provided us with a physical presence in the community, and bringing new volunteers on the walk was a good way to induct them into the project. Since we’ve stopped going down to the Block we’ve had a much less participation from children who live there.

This also touches on relationships with parents, an area of concern for us. We’ve only known a handful of parents, and when they’ve dropped-by it’s made for awkward moments:

Youth 33’s mother came with her late on in the session. I tried to introduce myself right as she came in but got a luke-warm response. I wanted to make some sort of connection so I went back to her later and babbled on for a while. Felt a bit embarrassed doing this, but thought it was important.
Ryan, June 2004

Furthermore, the drop in format of the project hasn’t been conducive to meeting parents:

As I walked Youth 25 home he was trying to talk me into watching a comic video with him. I dropped him at the gate and we were chatting but when his mother came out, he completely lost interest in talking to me. I guess if I put myself in Youth 25’s shoes, I remember being quite embarrassed by my parents at his age. Anyway, I guess this is one of our hurdles in making wider contacts in the community.
Isaac, August 2004

There have also been additional barriers to building relationships to take into consideration:
I tried to engage both Youth 34 and Youth 35's mothers in a conversation about taking part and giving us feedback about what they would like to see us do on Saturdays. Ran into some strong language barriers here. It got me thinking about the possible barriers there are to getting family and community involved. Sometimes an effort on our part isn't all it might take.

Ryan, May 2004

We’ve certainly seen the importance of connecting with existing organisations, especially in our relationship with the Redfern Computer Centre. Having relationships with existing community organisations has also been helpful in dealing with difficult behaviour. When we made contact with the police to seek advice it not only practically supported the project but also helped us to develop an understanding of the perspective the police have on the area:

Ryan: I felt this was a positive meeting. We now know that we can call the police as an alternative and that we have a contact there who knows we exist...I felt that it was a great step to extend our network of relationships in the community and more importantly, in the network of people that deal with the kids. The fact that [the police officer] knows us, that he knows the kids and that the kids should now know this, is important.

Isaac: The more the kids see society as a highly connected network, the more likely they will be to see that respect towards weak members (our project, the kids) earns respect from strong members (the cops) and conversely, messing with weak members earns trouble from strong members. I think that's how society works and to a large extent, this is the fabric we're trying to weave.

February 2004

Furthermore, our relationship with Domino's Pizza has provided a big boost to the project. However, it has been confusing to know how we’ve fit into the mix of groups operating in Redfern-Waterloo. Sometimes it has felt like we’re ‘competing’ for children’s time:

There seems to be many different aid agencies working in the block yet they don’t coordinate with each other nor the police so there are always conflicting things going on. Like us, we have Buddhists dropping in on us all the time!...It’s a mish mash, with everyone havening different purposes/agendas?
This is something Warschauer’s second suggestion helps with. He proposes that projects like ours map and connect to community resources. This is something we haven’t done and it could be useful in navigating through community work in Redfern-Waterloo to identify groups relevant to us.

Third, Warschauer calls for partnering with existing social movements, using the Bresee community centre in the United States as an example. When we have made contact with existing groups, we have benefited. For example, making contact with NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the Aboriginal Land Council of NSW have been important in connecting to bigger picture issues such as Reconciliation. It should be an important step moving forward to identify other movements with which we can form working relationships.

Fourth, Warschauer calls for organising new social alliances to lay the ground work for bridging types of social networks. This ties into influx of volunteers from our relationships with UTS, DSTC and Sydney University, as well as from our own personal networks. It also relates to our limited fundraising efforts, during which we’ve wondered what sort of involvement donors could have in the project:

Well, we appealed to Sydneysiders to support the activity to improve their community, but they aren’t going to turn around next week and find that Redfern-Waterloo has turned into another Kirribilli, so we need to keep them abreast of what’s actually going on. By donating, I think they’ve bought themselves into our community. Perhaps not in the same way as participants, but somehow I think we need to be supportive of them as donors and help them to see how they are helping.

Isaac, May 2004

Focusing on these four aspects of Warschauer’s model should push the project towards a more integrated place in the community, and, increase its potential impact. However, aside from the challenges I’ve mentioned above, there are additional obstacles to community involvement that have been a factor in our experiences and need to be considered. With most volunteers busy with full-time study or full-time work, the amount of time available to
forge relationships and make contacts in the community has been constrained. There has been a time/benefit decision to make in many situations, especially in our experiences with grant applications and fundraising:

Sorry to be undiplomatic but I gotta draw some boundaries...I'm learning that if you're running a "charity" then people think they're doing you a great favour just by talking to you for a few minutes and slapping you on the back and expressing an intention to help you. In fact, when you're on a shoestring budget of time and money, it winds up being a serious drain on resources to spend time on things which don't produce outcomes.

Isaac, January 2004

There have also been constraints on volunteers’ emotional investment. The Redfern-Waterloo area is full of challenges and the fact remains that we will always be outsiders. Is forging a relationship with the community too hard and slow a process? This has been evident in hopeless feelings we’ve had dealing with children’s behaviour and in the changing perspectives we’ve taken on our commitment to the project. In my case, as time has gone on I’ve felt more protective of my time and more guarded with my emotions:

A brief exchange I had walking home...I ran into a couple of kids I've seen on and off over the past couple of years. One of them has come to the sessions only once or twice but ALWAYS says hi to me. Every time something like this happens - getting recognised outside of the centre on the street or whatever and saying hello - is great. But I think maybe these feelings are evolving. This time I almost anticipated the exchange but I sort of thought that this wouldn't really mean the kids would be any more likely to come to our sessions. I think this was reflected in my body language - I kept walking and didn't make eye contact...Don't know if working in the area a while has made me more business-like...being 'open' for intensity for a certain amount of time and then turning off. I think being aware of the shit that goes on in the area all the time has affected me.

Ryan, July 2004

The final piece to my discussion has been an examination of the project ‘behind the scenes’. It’s emerged that volunteers’ motivations and the project’s integration into the Redfern-Waterloo community have directly affected the project’s impact to date and its
potential impact in the future. First, to move beyond the notions of charity and cultural voyeurism that have floated around the project, we’ve used a process of reflection to develop an open mind – and we should continue to do so. Second, despite a growing emotional connection to the area, Warschauer’s ‘community informatics’ helps us identify the importance of community involvement and aids us in prioritising limited resources.
Conclusions

This research was inspired by the complex experiences of a group of volunteers of the Redfern Kids Connect project. For three years, the project has been aimed to empower children in Redfern-Waterloo by learning around information technology. However, as the vignettes I’ve presented illustrate, our experiences have been as confusing as they have been exciting. They’ve begged a simple question: What impact are we having? My goal, in the spirit of action research, has been to explore this question. In the process I’ve intended to develop future directions for the project and develop insights into its wider implications.

Determining the project’s impact has encompassed four key questions: First, how can we explain the benefits we’ve felt in casually playing with technology and socialising? Second, how can we explain the challenging dynamics at play and the environment we’ve had to shape to deal with them? Third, how can we describe the need we’ve felt for different, and often deeper types of learning? Finally, how can we explain and address the contradiction between the intensely personal experience volunteering has involved and the weak ties the project has had to the surrounding community?

The project’s main impact, and main contribution to empowerment, has been through building social capital and improving electronic-related literacies. Through Cox and Putnam’s framework, in its two-way ‘living room’ the project has been casually building social capital by developing social mobility, group values and ‘Reconciliation in action’. These outcomes have affected both kids and volunteers. Warschauer’s computer, multimedia and information literacies describe how the project has also been informally improving children’s literacy beyond reading and writing. These key outcomes have been achieved, foremost, through a social approach to technology. Technology has provided the reason and the means through which children and volunteers have come together and interacted. Incorporating aspects of Warschauer’s ‘rethinking’ of the digital divide in
favour of ‘social inclusion’, this has entailed surrounding play and experimentation around computers with social support.

However, the project’s impacts have not just involved these factors. The anti-social capacity of technology and complex dynamics such as consistency, effort, gender, communication styles and challenging behaviour have pushed us to develop a safe and open space. Relating to Marvin and colleagues’ ‘circle of security’, this has been an environment in which boundaries (both social and technological) have been established and authority has leaned as much as possible on the trust and respect coming from growing relationships. Connecting to Freire’s concept of ‘dialogue’, this space has been shaped around socialising, which has not only propelled relationships but also propelled the use of technology.

Despite all of these outcomes, we’ve had to support deeper engagement in the forms of critical thinking and expression. This need has been sparked by our questions over how the project has addressed ‘big picture’ issues such as political, economic and social marginalisation and questions over what impact the project has had on culture, especially Aboriginal culture. Freire’s ‘oppression’ and ‘cultural invasion’ have helped in articulating these concerns. However, our experiences with multimedia production as a conduit for critical thinking and expression have shown that deeper forms of engagement, in a voluntary environment with young children, need to be grounded in realistic expectations.

The project’s impact has also been affected by what’s gone on ‘behind the scenes’, by way of volunteers’ motivations and the project’s integration in the community. Though we’ve had good intentions, our commitment to the project may come with ego-oriented intentions, especially around charity and voyeurism of Aboriginal culture. However, as the project has grown, volunteers have begun to develop a open, flexible mind to move away from our own agendas towards the mutual experience the project has involved. On-going reflection, by means of sharing experiences, has been crucial in driving this process. Finally, Warschauer’s model of ‘community informatics’ helps us see that our efforts to develop
community involvement, though constrained by limited resources, are important and can be better prioritised.

Moving forward, these understandings provide much direction. Most of all, we should continue to focus on what act as catalysts to the project – our social approach to playing with technology and our safe and open space. These are what the unique circumstance of the project’s drop-in format and our children-driven agenda both allow for and necessitate.

On a conceptual level we need to decide if the project’s main approach to empowerment should continue to be through building social capital and improving literacies. If this is what we chose to support, we will have to embrace the often casual, shallow and intangible nature of these outcomes. However, as relationships continue to grow, we can start to focus more on supporting critical thinking and expression. Through the casual avenues of conversation and play we can draw on Freire’s ‘problem posing’ to scratch the surface on the ‘big picture issues’ and avoid ‘cultural invasion’.

We should continue to look at our motivations though on-going reflection. This has driven the growth of volunteers’ flexible approach to the project and can continue to do so. We should consider recognising the ego-oriented motivations we may carry, but rather reacting in a self-damning way, we can use this knowledge to consciously and slowly move beyond our own agendas towards ‘co-ownership’. Finally, we can use the spirit of ‘community informatics’ to spark a renewed effort to develop our community presence. Specifically, we can better map-out possible connections to be made and focus more on fostering more direct community involvement. This will require a sustained and measured push, considering our limited resources – including emotional resources.

The project’s experiences have much to offer the field of community technology and academia. The project shows that there is a connection to be made between technology and social capital. However, this connection needs to encompass the challenges these concepts present, not the least of which if that social capital and technology theory are only beginning to be explored through research. In this area, our experiences provide a ‘hands-
on’ account of the frameworks put forth by Cox, Putnam and Warschauer. Our experiences show that any discussion of social capital needs to take into account the complexities of bringing different groups of people together and the additional complexities that technology presents. Our experiences with the use of games, the Internet and multimedia shed light on both the empowering and disenfranchising potential of technology and reinforces the need to socially support children’s use of computers. They also show that there is a place for more revolutionary views on intervention in community technology projects, specifically in the spirit of supporting critical thinking and expression – something of great relevance to the topic of fostering Warschauer’s electronic literacies.

The project also highlights ‘Reconciliation in action’. The international flavour of the project’s volunteer team and the potential of technology to support dialogue contribute insight into this important movement in Australia.

Finally, the project’s volunteers, whose words have filled the pages of this thesis, and the children who have participated in the project, for whom the project has been developed, have shown that commitment, effort and presence of mind can make community technology an exciting forum for empowerment.
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Thompson, H 2003, ‘Community Building via Online Communities and Regional Web-portals’, paper presented to the 5th International IT in Regional Areas Conference, Caloundra, Queensland, 15-17 December.


Supplementary Bibliography

Please note: All of the following sources were integral to specific points in my arguments. In order to present an uncluttered text, the decision was made not to include them specifically.


NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Issues Relating to Redfern/Waterloo, Public Submissions 1-93, Parliament of New South Wales,


Appendices


Fifty police injured in Redfern riot
ABC News Online, Monday, February 16, 2004

Calm has returned to the inner Sydney streets of Redfern after a night of rioting during which more than 50 police were injured.

Four people were taken into custody after anger erupted at the death of 17-year-old Aborigine Thomas Hickey, who was impaled through the neck on a fence on Saturday morning.

Police used high-powered water hoses to break up a big crowd of people who had pelted police with rocks, bricks and bottles, and set fires during the lengthy riot.

The Redfern railway station was set on fire during the riot but has re-opened this morning.

Police commander Bob Waites says police cannot remember a riot "of this size". Eight of the injured police officers are receiving treatment in hospital.

Mr Waites says the riot began after the death of Mr Hickey, who was impaled on a fence in the area on Saturday.

"The misinformation was that they were under the belief that the police were actually involved in a pursuit where an Aboriginal youth was killed and that wasn't true," he said.

He says officers who were on patrol drove past the boy, who was riding his bicycle in the opposite direction.

"They continued on their patrol," he said. "They weren't aware that after he'd passed them, he accelerated on his pushbike and gone around a corner and lost control of it.

"It wasn't till they came around the block again and people flagged them down and told them what happened [that they knew], so the suggestion that police have in some way been the cause of the death is fairly questionable."

The teenager's mother, Gail Hickey, yesterday said police caused her son's death.

"I don't believe the police, I don't care what they say, I don't believe them," she said. "They did chase him at that time.

"I got a witness to all that. He seen everything that happened. He told me he seen my son riding the bike real fast, next minute he seen cop cars coming, chasing my son to the building there, where it happened."

Local resident Donna says people are grieving.

"It all started over the coppers chasing a young boy," she said.

"It happened yesterday afternoon or last night and it's just that everybody has gone off because they believe the coppers are involved in doing away with the young fellow."

Donna says people are angry because they believe police are responsible for the teenager's death.
"He was murdered," she said. "We've been down to look at the spot and everything and there's no sign, they cleaned it up that quick."

Redfern Aboriginal elder Lyall Munro says police harass local young people on a daily basis and have them running scared.

"The community here is very much aware of what happened," Mr Munro said.

"This type of thing is going to happen and our young people are going to die in this way whilst ever the police are allowed to get away with it."

Mr Munro says relations with police are at an all-time low.

"Community programs that we had going here ... all fell through because Aboriginal people saw what the street police done immediately after the meetings," Mr Munro said.

The president of the Indigenous Social Justice Association, Ray Jackson, says police could have managed the situation better.

He is a friend of the Hickey family and says a police car was driving in a street where the teenager's mother was grieving on Sunday afternoon.

"One report that I got was the police were smiling and sniggering and all this sort of thing and it was common knowledge that there was going to be a problem as soon as it got dark and that's exactly what's happened," Mr Jackson said.

A witness to the riot, Robert, found himself in the middle of the riot.

"They started throwing rocks," he said. "They threw a big rock at my back, [it is] still sore and then I just walked towards the police.

"Then the police grabbed me and then they punched me a couple of times, then dragged me along the ground, two of them.

"I don't think they knew. I'm going to give them the benefit of the doubt and say they didn't know. They probably thought I was one of them [the rioters]."

Another witness, Doug, says he saw rioters throwing things at police.

"There was smoke billowing into the sky," he said. "I don't know what else they've had alight but the cops were ducking and weaving because there were projectiles coming out of the block, just rocks and things like that."

[End]
Appendix 2: Screen captures of Microsoft’s *Age of Empires* (1997).
Appendix 5: Screen captures of [www.funnyjunk.com](http://www.funnyjunk.com) and [www.newgrounds.com](http://www.newgrounds.com).
Appendix 6: Media report of the Redfern-Waterloo Authority.

Sartor keeps right to annex land around Redfern
Lisa Pryor Urban Affairs Reporter
Sydney Morning Herald. Sydney, N.S.W.: Dec 9, 2004. pg. 6

The new State Government body that will oversee the redevelopment of Redfern and Waterloo will be able to bypass heritage laws and consent to its own development plans despite amendments to the Government's proposals yesterday.

The new authority will have to consult the Heritage Council before it demolishes heritage buildings, under changes to the proposals which were put forward by the Government itself.

But the authority is still exempt from heritage laws and can go ahead with demolition if the Minister for Redfern-Waterloo, Frank Sartor, is satisfied that it is necessary to improve the area.

The Redfern-Waterloo Authority Bill was expected to pass through the Legislative Council last night with support from the Opposition.

Sydney's Lord Mayor, Clover Moore, said the Government's amendments were very weak and did not go far enough. "My view is that the bill needs to be amended so the minister can't annexe lands without coming back to Parliament," she said.

Mr Sartor will still have the power to annexe land outside the Redfern-Waterloo area without the oversight of Parliament.

There are also specific provisions to allow Mr Sartor to claim levies paid by the developer of the Carlton and United Breweries' site in Chippendale, even though the site is outside the areas of Redfern, Waterloo, Darlington and Eveleigh that the authority has been formed to administer.

A new amendment to the bill makes it clear that the funds will have to be used within a reasonable time and for their intended purpose - affordable housing.

Further details about the Government's secret plans for Redfern and Waterloo are likely to emerge in the next two weeks, after a successful motion by the Greens MP Sylvia Hale seeking tabling of the plans. "Before developers start sizing up the valuable land in Redfern, the public has a right to see what they intend to do," Ms Hale said. "Community groups, members of parliament and the public were lied to when the Government told us there was no plan."

Geoff Turnbull, a spokesman for the local resident group REDwatch, said the tabling of the plans would give residents a chance to see how advanced the plans were and "give the community a chance to go into the discussions with the Government over the setting up of the Redfern-Waterloo plan with the same lot of information that the Government has".

Mr Turnbull was disappointed there had been no amendments to the bill to clarify the way the community would be involved in making and revising the plan.

Councillor Moore said the fact that the Government had been willing to amend its own bill showed it had responded to the widespread criticism that came after Cabinet documents were leaked to the Herald showing secret plans for the area. "I think they're sensitive to the leaking of the Cabinet documents," she said.

"I think they're sensitive to the very large rally of traditional Labor voters and I think they're sensitive to all the Aboriginal groups getting together to oppose what they're going to do to the Block."

[End]