ABSTRACT

This study aims to provide a comparative account of teachers’ experience and views of their role when using digital games in primary classrooms in England and Italy. Interviews and a survey administered online and in hardcopy were used to find out teachers’ perceptions of game-based learning and how these impact upon their role as a teacher. This research also considers the interview findings in relation to the dynamics between curriculum design, learning culture and practice when implementing game-based learning. A strong link was found between how learning is designed to incorporate digital games, the theories and strategies that have been used in the context of a given curriculum and how these are realised in practice within the classroom. The research also showed that teachers are aware that their roles when using new technologies in education have changed. However, because of the lack of necessary training, teachers are not clear on how to adopt these changes. In some respects the curriculum was regarded to be flexible enough to accommodate game-based learning, however, in other respects it was felt that a more radical reform this would be needed. The difference in country-specific curricula, pedagogy and practice highlights the need for a flexible model or approach of embedding digital games into primary classrooms in a way that is sensitive to context. Some practical guidelines based on the current work are also provided.

Keywords: Curriculum, Digital Game Design, Game-Based Learning, Pedagogy, Teachers’ Perceptions, Teacher’s Role in GBL

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INTRODUCTION

Digital games, as with games in many other forms, provide a setting, rules and constraints within which players can interact, either with each other or an aspect of the game environment in order to achieve some form of goal. In addition to the variety of commercial games aimed primarily at the entertainment market, there are many digital games that have been developed for educational purposes. These can present problems to be solved, allow exploration of a model of some aspect of our world, invite collaboration, role play and so on. Drawing on these qualities, the scope for facilitating learning and the educational value of digital games has for some time been of interest to many reviewers (Allsop, 2012; Robertson & Howells, 2008; Spires, Rowe, Mott & Lester, 2011; Buckingham, 2007). However, the implementation of digital games into primary classrooms is still at the beginning phase. While it appears that many children spend hours playing digital games and researchers continue to investigate the potential for learning with this medium, teachers are still not fully clear about their role in the game-based learning (GBL) environment (Futurelab, 2006). Reasons for this may include a lack of established and clear policy for both learning through games and game making in schools with regard to the teacher’s role, or not providing enough time for teachers to become familiar with the mechanics of digital games. Another important reason, however, could be teachers not having the pedagogical knowledge that they need for teaching with digital games. According to Jessel (2012: 28), “Innovation arising from new technologies makes a variety of demands upon the role of the teacher”. He continues, “At another level, the introduction of innovation makes major demands upon teachers’ pedagogical, professional and managerial skills” (ibid.: 28). Using traditional methods of teaching may not be the most effective approach if teachers aim to maximise the potential of learning with digital games. As new technologies evolve, it can be argued that the focus point should be moved from the technology itself towards developing a model so that teachers can consider how it can be used in terms of what can be achieved in practice and which pedagogical strategies need to be adopted. If games can provide a dynamic learning space that is extended in time then effective utilisation of this may require adoption of different teaching strategies and classroom management skills.

In a recent conversation during a Comenius project between one of the authors in her role as a teacher based in England, and educators from other European countries, an interest arose on the use of digital games. The similarities and differences in implementing technology into education across the curriculum, and the tools that are used including digital games for learning, were then discussed in detail with a teacher from Italy. This discussion laid the foundations for the present study, where the placement of digital games in the curricula for Italy and England and how they have been used by teachers in primary classrooms would be investigated.

AIMS

The current study aims to present a review of teachers’ perceptions on the use of computer games in primary schools in England and Italy. It also intends to find out the key factors which impact on teachers’ attitudes towards using digital games in teaching.

We first outline some aspects of the curricula relating to the two countries and then consider the pedagogical approaches and demands that are relevant to the use of digital games. We then report on the data obtained from teachers regarding how digital games are recognised in relation to the primary curriculum for each of the two countries. Finally, we will explore what works well in supporting teachers to embed digital games into their teaching practice through investigating the interrelation between pedagogy, curriculum and practice.
Social Networks: Implications for Education

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