

A tale of two cities: Blogging for reflective practice in initial teacher training.

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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. Oh, sorry, wrong start, the title fooled me...

This is the story of continuing collaborative research, (originating through ITTE) between Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) and Nottingham Trent University (NTU) (IFIP, 2008; ALT-C 2008) in which we are looking at ways in which we might support and assist trainee teachers to become improved reflective practitioners. Community blogs were set up at both HEIs in similar Post Graduate Certificate of education (PGCE) groups. One group (SHU) comprised 20 14-19 ICT PGCE trainees, and the other (NTU) comprised 20 ICT PGCE trainees.

The blogs were set up as part of the online support offered for both courses by their respective universities, and were held in secure private areas. Trainees were required to use the blog for reflection on their teaching and learning at university but mainly while they were away from each other on practice in schools. The purpose of the blogs was two-fold. Firstly, it was a space provided for them to learn to reflect and to store their reflections, for use in their own teaching and evidence files. Secondly, it provided a community space where they could learn from the reflections of others, and also share experiences and offer support through the blogs at a time when they were isolated from their peers in schools across a wide geographical area.

The blogs were made available to the trainees from the start of the course in September at SHU and prior to the start of the course at NTU. Trainees at both HEIs were encouraged to use the blog whenever appropriate but particularly from the start of placement in October, with a view to reviewing the entries when trainees were back in university for review days during placement. The blogs were reviewed within the groups on university days, to share with the trainees what makes for good reflection and what is more descriptive. This was intended to help the trainees who were struggling with reflection - as many do - to learn from the others who were good at it.

When the blogs were set up and trainees were on placement in schools, it was expected that there would be regular shared reflections from both sets of blogs. What actually happened, however, varies between cities. At SHU, with the current group, out of a group of 18 trainees at SHU, to date there are over 2000 visits to the blog, and nearly 300 entries (with comments) being made by the trainees. The level of support with this the group is phenomenal, with entries ranging from small to near War and Peace (or should that be Crime and Punishment as they are training to teach?) - with and without links, pictures, resources and so on. Entries also show an increasingly professional level of reflection among the group. There were a number of descriptive entries at the start, however, after the first review of the blog in October, when trainees were back in university, this has dwindled to near nothing and generally forms part of a longer more reflective weekly entry.

In the other city, at NTU, the tale is different. The number of blogs is lower from the first placement, but all students have shared their reflections, and now that their skills have developed it is expected that the blogs will increase as they start their next placement – which was the experience last year - to date this has not really happened yet.

Some of the voices from the blogs are given below to show the kind of reflection that is going on with the blogs:

At SHU:

"[...]feel like I haven't prepared as well as I would have liked, but looking back there are a number of things I have picked up that should prove useful for the future."

and:

I've been slightly disappointed this week, because I felt I went backwards in my usual 'stronger' lessons. I knew I was spending too much time talking, and not enough time getting the pupils to do activities, which is something I'm trying to remedy.

At NTU, the blogging tool used enabled emoticons and where trainees used those that reflected sadness, stress, or tiredness, the number of responses increased, thereby reflecting a level of support within the group that had not previously been available. One of the trainees from last year has also opened up his NQT blog for this year's students to view, which is proving a useful development:

'One of my targets for this week is to learn the pupils' names which I am finding so difficult. I've tried giving them name stickers but they swap them round, so this week I've done seating plans. So far I've tried it with one group and it's really worked well. I've been able to direct questions to named pupils who I knew were distracted and this has helped keep them engaged with the task. I'm feeling more confident.'

From the trainees point of view the blogs have been very useful in a number of ways. Firstly they have provided a very powerful means of support for them when they needed it most - on placement. Many commented in class that their evening routine started with a look at the blog entries before getting on with whatever work they had. It made them feel less isolated in their practice to see that others were also having the same issues and challenges. Secondly, they provided extremely useful evidence for their standards folders in terms of authentic proof of their development as reflective practitioners. Thirdly, the blog entries also supplied them with additional material for use in their academic work as their assignments required them to reflect on their practice over the course of the year.

What started out as an experiment to see if reflective practice could be supported and progressed through the use of community blogs, has in fact turned out to be a vital part of the course for the trainees and one which they have repeatedly said they could not now do without.

References

BOULTON, H., HRAMIAC, A, and IRWIN, B 2008. The use of web logs to develop self-reflection . In: ALT-C Conference, Leeds, 8-12 September 2008

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