

Trainee teachers' use of blogs as private reflections for professional development

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Abstract

Developments in Higher Education (HE) over the last decade have seen an increasing focus on developing skills through the use of technology as part of blended learning opportunities. At Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) and Nottingham Trent University (NTU) in the United Kingdom research has taken place over the last year in the use of personal diaries with trainee teachers using a private web log (blog). The purpose of the research was to determine if blogs could provide a setting for their continuing professional development as practitioners and emerging qualified teachers. This collaborative project was undertaken to determine attitudes and perceptions of blogging as a tool for professional development, and also to evaluate and review current practice within the two institutions in this area of teacher training. The rationale for the use of blogs with the trainee teachers in this study was to determine if they could provide a usable substitute for more traditional methods of recording their professional development throughout their course. This paper seeks to share the findings of the research which the authors believe could be applicable to other areas of Higher Education.

Keywords: reflection; blogging; professional development; teacher training

Introduction

Developments in Initial Teacher Training over the last decade have seen an increased focus on developing skills in becoming a reflective practitioner (Harland and Myhill 1997) and also in development as professionals during the course itself. Web 2.0 technologies such as web logs (blogs) provide alternatives to traditional diaries, and allow another opportunity for teaching and learning with technology on such courses. At Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) and Nottingham Trent University (NTU) research has taken place over the last year in the use of personal diaries with Initial Teacher Education students using a private blog. The authors believe this research would be relevant to a wide range of other Higher Education courses, particularly those that focus on reflective practice or developing professional practice.

A blog is a web application which contains periodic time stamped posts automatically arranged in chronological order on a web page (Mason and Rennie 2006). Blogs have become a widely used tool across the internet, partially because they make it easy for non-technical users to contribute content to websites. For the trainees, the type

of content expected within the blogs would be a regular reflection on their teaching practice. The advantage of using an online system such as a blog for developing reflective practice is that tutors can easily access it for each trainee at any given point in time. Thus, a trainee who is struggling with reflecting on their teaching practice can be identified early on and appropriate feedback given to improve future reflections.

Although small in scale, this collaborative project was undertaken to determine attitudes and perceptions of blogging as a tool for professional development, and also to evaluate and review current practice within the two institutions in this area of teacher training.

This paper focuses on the responses of trainee teachers from a variety of subject backgrounds across SHU and NTU to the provision of blogs as tools to assist them with their own development as practitioners. The aims of this research, then, were to address the question of whether or not blogging could be used as a means by which trainee teachers could develop their professional identity as reflective practitioners, through the use of online diaries through private blogs. The research also investigated using an online system as a method for recording reflection, compared to a more traditional paper based system as had been used in the past.

Background

A literature review into the use of blogs in education revealed limited research on the application of blogs to teaching and learning. Many possible uses for blogs in education have been theorised. Examples include uses such as improving communication from the classroom/school to parents and the community (Catalano 2005), students practicing writing skills online and keeping a portfolio of accomplishments and reflections (Bonk and Zhang 2006), communicating internationally and cross-culturally (Oravec 2003), and fostering student interaction online (Beldarrain 2006).

Martindale and Wiley (2005) reported that blogs were an effective tool for promoting student writing skills, as learners' blog posts became longer and more thoughtful throughout the course. Research from Australia has examined using blogs as the primary mechanism for online learning at Master's level (Hoven 2006) and for management development programs (Instone 2005). In a recent paper by Kerawalla et al. (2008a) researching the use of blogging on a distance learning course – which is arguably comparable with the course used in this study – blogging was found to be successful, with a variety of blogging behaviours exhibited to support students' own individualised learning. This variety of behaviours was also borne out in this study in which trainees exhibited different types of blogging during their time on the course.

Some research has focused specifically on the use of shared blogs with trainee teachers. This includes use of blogs as a means by which the isolation of pre-service trainee teachers can be alleviated through communication with peers (Dickey 2004). This also links with previous research done by the author Hramiak in this field, looking at the use of VLEs to reduce the isolation and loneliness felt by trainee teachers on placement

(Hramiak 2007). In both cases, these electronic tools have been found to be of value to trainees in supporting them through their training.

Further research on supporting and encouraging reflection in in-school trainee teachers using public blogs reported limited use by students and no evidence of reflective practice (Divintini, Haugalokken, and Morken 2005). Oti and Clarke (2007) investigated the use of blogs as public reflective journals for trainee teachers, which revealed concerns from trainees around privacy and confidentiality.

In almost all of the literature reviewed, publicly available blogs were examined rather than private blogs, by which we mean those embedded inside a VLE or access control system. Some researchers found that the public nature of their participants' blogs resulted in contributors expressing concerns about the visibility of their blogs, (Kerawalla et al. 2008b; Oti and Clarke 2007). This paper attempts to fill this gap in the literature around private use of blogs, where visibility should not be a concern for students.

Context and Setting

The trainees involved in this research are all following a full time post-graduate one year training programme where they are in university for a total of 12 weeks, the remainder of their time being spent in a secondary school or further education college on work-based learning. The work-based learning is split into 2 placements: phase one is for 10 weeks (SHU), or 7 weeks (NTU) prior to Christmas and for 14 weeks in their second placement at both institutions from February to June. Trainees are often widely spread geographically, sometimes hours from their university, thus making shared contact during the placement periods difficult. It can be challenging for lecturers to keep in touch and monitor the progress of their students, and for the trainees to support each other. The use of blogs was therefore investigated as an alternative to traditional methods of personal diaries that would enable the lecturer 'virtual' access at any time.

Private blogs were chosen as the most appropriate tool for the professional development of trainee teachers for three reasons. The first reason was having an online reflective diary allowed university tutors to provide feedback during the teaching practices. With paper and word processed document diaries, feedback was only possible after final hand-in of the reflective diary. Commenting features in blogs allowed discussion around feedback that is more difficult with paper and word processed document formats.

Secondly, private blogs provide a way for trainees to share reflections with their only their university tutor, not the entire world as public blogs would have mandated. This allows the trainees the freedom to be open and honest in their reflections.

The third reason was to encourage trainees to develop their own knowledge of the use of blogs in education, and use new technologies in their teaching. Alternatives such as word processed documents, and threaded discussions on virtual learning environments were considered, but were discounted in favour of blogs as the latter gave an easily

accessible, private and convenient method by which trainees could reflect on their practice.

The cohorts used for this study were both ICT trainee teachers, thus negating any problems with familiarity with the technology prior to the start of the research. The research involved the implementation of private blogs (NTU and SHU) for use by the trainee teachers in the two respective cohorts for the duration of their time on the PGCE course. The blogs were for personal reflections by the students on their professional development and experiences on placement, and were only visible to the student making the reflections and their tutor. These were open for tutors to view so tutors could give feedback to assist trainees with engaging in reflection during the blogging period.

Cohorts for each institution were of a similar size, with approximately 20 trainees in each. Both sets of cohorts were of mixed gender and ethnicity, and permission was requested from the trainees before the research was conducted. The main difference in the research between the two institutions was that the trainee teachers at SHU were required to use a blog as a mandatory part of one of their assessments. The trainees were asked to describe their professional development over the course of one or both teaching placements as a requirement for part of their portfolio based assignment. For the NTU trainees use of the blog was not mandatory, but there was an expectation they use it to evidence their work-based learning. Trainees have always been required to keep a reflective diary or journal, thus using a blog as an alternative method for this would not add to their workload.

One of the benefits of this research has been the opportunity to share findings across the institutions; the use of such blogs has now been built into the assessment process at NTU with the successes at SHU being a contributing factor. This case study aims to examine the use of blogs as a private means to promote continuing development for trainee teachers, and also to enhance their emerging development as professional teachers.

Methodology

This research represents a small scale case study investigating a particular set of trainees at different institutions on similar training courses – the PGCE for ICT teachers. It was conducted at two separate higher education institutions, Nottingham Trent University and Sheffield Hallam University, both of which have large, well established teacher training programmes.

As has been noted with other research (Groom and Maunonen-Eskelinen 2006), the collaboration between the two institutions focussed on collating similar data sets to identify how the blogs were used to support the development of the trainees. This small scale collaborative project is interpretive and qualitative in design. The use of multiple sources of evidence, such as interview data and blog content analysis (see below), provides triangulation and adds rigour to the conclusions drawn from the data (Cohen,

Manion, and Morrison 2007). Both methodological and space triangulation – the latter being a form of data triangulation – were used in this study.

In this research the problems identified were the need to provide greater support in nurturing trainees' skills in reflection, as part of their professional development. At the end of the first placement a review and evaluation of the use of the blogs took place and that information used to make changes at the start of phase 2, thus making use of the cyclical nature of action research.

At the end of the year, the cohorts were interviewed about their use of the blogs by their respective tutors as separate groups. During the interviews, participants were asked about the frequency of their use of the blogs, and also about whether or not they had found them useful, and if so, why. Analysis of responses was done separately at both institutions, and then the responses from the two cohorts were compared. All blog entries were archived and printed for thematic analysis for the purposes of this research, and this is discussed in the following section.

A thematic analysis of the blogs was conducted in line with themes identified by the work of Oti and Clarke (2007) – specifically that of developing as a professional teacher. This involved a detailed review of the blog entries, identifying text that related to the theme of their emerging professional identity. Examples of this are given in the following section, and include issues such as respect, professionalism, identity and control.

Results

All the ICT trainee teachers at SHU made some blog entries (not surprisingly as this was a mandatory part of their course). The extent to which entries were made and the length and style of the entries, however, varied greatly between the trainees. At one extreme, one particular trainee had started blogging right from the start of the course – even though trainees were not required to do this as part of the assignment, and continued making very lengthy entries right up to the end of the course, even beyond the assignment hand in date for which the blogs were required. At the other extreme, there were a number of trainees who only made short blog entries because they were required to do so for their assignment, and as such made them all at once just before the hand in date.

During the course of the year, the tutors were able to access the blogs at both institutions to see that they were being utilised. At SHU this was done close to assignment hand in time. Having read some of the entries, the SHU ICT tutor made one intervention at approximately three quarters of the way through the course. This was to explain the difference between describing events and actually reflecting upon and describing their own personal development because of these events.

At NTU interventions were made throughout the year by the ICT tutor, particularly when reflections indicated that a student was struggling with a particular issue. The advantage of the blog in each case is that the tutors were able to access

student reflections during the semester, and this had not been possible previously. All trainee teachers, except one, made good use of the blogging facility. The one student who didn't make use of it was interviewed and said she had found it difficult to access a computer at the times when she was able to do her reflections, therefore she had used a paper based system. Had she not been an ICT trainee teacher with a strong background in computing we might have questioned her technical skills, but she was very skilled and reported using blogs within her teaching while on her second placement.

Entries across both institutions varied in quantity and quality, ranging from the very brief and descriptive, to more lengthy reflective entries. This is discussed in more detail in the following section. Such differences in blogging behaviour have also been reported in other studies (Kerawalla et al. 2008b). Blogs ranged from the largely descriptive to a mixture of descriptive and reflective, and the nature of the entries also changed over time for many of the cohort, from being mostly descriptive to mostly reflective towards the end of the course. One trainee commented that his blog had *'started as descriptive, but then became more reflective after [the tutor] had explained it more to me'*. The trainees who developed the most, were those able to demonstrate an increasing level of critical awareness in their reflection. This is an important professional development for trainee teachers, who, at the start of the course, describe the events of their day, and consider this to be reflection, when actually it is merely description of fact. As they develop as reflective practitioners, they come to understand reflection as a means by which they can improve their practice by explaining their thoughts and actions how these impact on their classroom environment and the progress of their pupils.

Informal group interviews at both institutions with the trainees resulted in sincere comments about the use of blogs during their course. While some trainees had found it a useful medium in which to reflect on their teaching and learning throughout the course, a few said that they felt that it was repetitive, that they preferred to reflect by writing on their actual lesson plans following lessons, and that having to do blogs as well resulted in them rewriting what they had already done. One trainee commented that it was okay for that *'touchy feely rubbish'*, which reveals his feelings about reflection more than the tool itself. There were also some positive comments that the blogs gave a *'broader view'*, and that the *'evaluation on the lesson plan was descriptive and different from the blog because the blog had more on the progression over the weeks'*.

Emerging professional identity as a teacher

Recent work by Sammons et al. (2007) identified three individual interacting dimensions that together formed the composite of teacher identity, these being professional identity – concerned with the influence of long term social policy and social trends; situated or located identity – concerned with the affects of pupils, and from their immediate working context; and personal identity – concerned with life outside school. Elements of the first dimension were located throughout the blogging data, and will be presented in this section.

Identity

One trainee, for example, clearly identified herself in terms of situated identity from very early on in the first placement, stating that:

“The pupils are starting to recognise me now and say hello in the corridors and in lessons they address me as ‘miss’”

Another trainee, showing links to their emerging situated identity, commented early on in the first placement about his mentor that:

“think its the first time hes mentoringand well its new to be sowere both lost!!!”

Very early on in the course – prior to the start of the first school placement (blogs were not required until placement two unless by choice) a trainee wrote that they were:

“terrified of school...need to keep my head so I don’t forget to do and hand in assignments”

The trainee is still thinking of themselves as a student rather than as a trainee teacher.

Respect

Further on in the same placement, the blog of this same trainee records that:

“I did remember that I have to set the level and that I am the teacher and they are the pupils and they are not my pals either!”

This clearly sets themselves as a teacher in the real world of the school they are in, and not just a trainee attached temporarily to a school department.

Control

Another trainee, very early on in their second placement noted that:

“I get the impression from the students that they see me as being in charge as opposed to a teaching assistant”.

In terms of their relationship with “the kids”, however, a trainee was developing more confidence towards the end of the placement:

“I enjoy teaching and will miss the kidsthere are some real diamonds there and i soooooooooo want them all todo well.....i wish i could just make them realise how important it is!!!”

Professionalism

A trainee near the end of the placement also clearly distinguishes between the first and second placement in terms of the way they are seen as a teacher:

“I also feel that TP2 is quite different from TP1 in the way that students relate to me. In TP1 is was always viewed by students as inexperienced and unfamiliar with the rules and expectation of the school. At TP2 students see me as just another teacher.”

This was in fact their last blog entry as the course finished shortly after this.

Comments from another trainee who had produced a very extensive but largely descriptive blog, showed a clear progression from having little if any identity as a teacher through to their emergence as a professional towards the end of the second placement.

This developing relationship with the pupils is also reflected further on in placement two where a trainee writes:

“[...]i absolutely luv helping kids do whatever they wantt in the ict room.....u get to know them better and see more enjoyment.thats when you know yiu luv kids.....nothing better than being able to actually help them”

For this trainee, their sense of developing as a teacher was far less developed than for the others. This is in line with other research that showed that not all teachers develop a coherent sense of professional identity by the end of their PGCE course (Forde et al. 2006). The data in the blogs analysed for this work reflects the data given in the work described by Forde et al. where over 25% of the cohort had developed their sense of identity. What is also similar to this research is that this feeling of identity dated back to their earliest classroom experiences as demonstrated by the entries quoted here in this study (Forde et al. 2006).

Discussion

The results from the blog entries indicate that for many of the trainees, across both institutions, the blog medium provided them with a private space where they could reflect on and describe their progress over the course of the whole year. This gave them an opportunity to develop as practitioners in a more evolutionary way, and is in line with the findings of Kirkup and Kirkwood (2005) who describe the adoption of ICT in Higher Education as being one of support and improving existing practices, rather than radically changing them. This is, in effect what was attempted in this study at the two institutions. The use of ICT was blended into the usual teaching practice of the tutors, in such a way as to encourage a gradual change that trainees would respond to, rather than placing a completely new teaching and learning regime on developing teachers.

Also evident from the blog entries, was the difference in criticality between the trainees – they displayed varied abilities to reflect critically on their teaching experiences. The more frequent bloggers, such as those quoted in the text here, and those who saw the blog as an extra chore to be completed near hand in date, showed a clear difference in the quality of their posts to the blog. This links to the work of Kerawalla et al. (2008b) who found that some students found blogging problematic, and that on such a short course – theirs was 20 weeks compared with the 36 weeks of this course - blogging skills may

have developed more over time. This could explain the poorer reflective accounts by the 'reluctant' bloggers who blogged solely at the last minute to meet the minimum assignment requirements. This group wrote mostly descriptive posts, which were of less long term use to the trainee in terms of their development as a practitioner and as a teaching professional, while the frequent bloggers were able to develop their posts into a more reflective style.

More frequent blogging was probably most beneficial because writing more posts gave those trainees a chance to review previous posts, receive comments from the tutor, and become familiar with writing and the blogs (Martindale and Wiley 2005). It may be, as other studies have found, that more academic guidance is needed to ensure that trainees, including those with high ICT skills, can use the technology effectively for independent learning (Deepwell and Malik 2008). Ellis et al. (2007) determined that students benefit more from an online experience if they understand its purpose in relation to the task or learning outcome. Thus, in addition to increasing academic guidance, it might also be argued that the nature of the academic guidance is important, as has been shown by the research of others in this field (Kerawalla et al. 2008a). Tutors need to ensure that students, in this case trainee teachers, fully understand the links between what they are doing in completing the blog, and the actual purpose of the task in terms of developing their reflective practice.

Interventions by the tutor were sometimes required for trainees to understand the difference between descriptive text and reflective text within their blogs. Such interventions were infrequent in our use because the blogs were set up primarily for the use of the trainees as a private reflective space. In some cases, however, interventions were deemed necessary to enable some trainees to grasp the concept of developing as professional practitioners, and recording this on the blog. However, we would recommend more frequent and earlier interventions by tutors using private blogging to ensure students are not procrastinating with their blogging, especially as students who engaged with the blog later produced less reflective accounts on the whole. To reduce additional marking burden on tutors, task feedback could be moved from the assessment hand-in date to set intervals during the placement periods. In this way, trainees would benefit from early feedback while tutors would be spared additional marking.

For a minority of trainees the blog was an extra burden, a chore even – as borne out by the comments made during the interviews conducted. However, the majority of trainees found them constructive, worthwhile and beneficial to thinking about their practice. One benefit of using blogs was that trainees were easily able to sort entries, keep them in chronological order and trace their own progress in a more efficient and organised way. For trainees in past years, reflective logs often consisted of scrappy notes on paper lesson plans kept in a variety of files and folders.

That trainees found blogs beneficial to organising thoughts about their teaching practice runs contrary to results that found students did not understand the purpose or benefit of using blogs, resulting in the blogs being ignored even when part of an assessment (Divintini, Haugalokken, and Morken 2005). This could be evidence that the

public nature of the blogs in Divintini, Haugalokken, and Morken (2005) created concern for the learners rather than the tool itself. Further research needs to be done to compare and contrast public and private blogs in the same context to better understand the situations for which each is appropriate.

The main disadvantage of using the blogs as a developmental reflective tool, as reported in the trainee interviews, was the problem of '*double entry book keeping*' for the blog entries. Two trainees reported that in order to complete the blogs, they were cutting and pasting from word documents into the blog, or typing up notes made on successive lesson plans to create the blog entry. The research on this aspect of blogging is somewhat contradictory with some studies showing similar results (Oti and Clarke 2007), and others indicating that learners found the blogs more convenient and effective than paper based systems (LSRN 2007). As De Vries et al. (2005) indicate in their study, a transition to e-learning is fraught with difficulties of organisational, technical and pedagogical nature and students experience some of these also. We theorize that many of these technical and organisational barriers will be reduced in coming years, as ubiquitous access to the Internet and familiarity with blogs becomes more commonplace.

Conclusions

This research adds to a growing body of knowledge regarding the use of blogs in Higher Education. What this research has identified is that there is a place for blogs and blogging in the professional development of trainee teachers. However, it is important to recognise the private and sensitive nature of reflection, meaning that blogs which are not publicly available will be more suited to this task.

Overall, there is positive evidence that blogs were a useful tool by which to record reflections and development as professional teachers for the majority of each of the cohorts of trainees at both institutions. The crucial point about the blog is that it is not the tool itself that counts, but the reflection and learning that can occur inside the blog entries and the subsequent improvement in practice that arises as a result of this (Boyd 2006). In addition to this, using a blog as a tool for reflection enables tutors to give feedback to trainees earlier and in context. It also provides a printed record that can be saved and archived for future use if the trainee wishes.

Generally, the quality of the entries demonstrated that the use of blogs on the PGCE had a positive impact and gave concrete evidence of their development as professional teachers. This is in line with other research which indicated that mature full time professionals, (as cohorts of trainee teachers invariably are) prefer the flexibility of online learning, despite the problems that often accompany it (Wheeler, Kelly, and Gale 2005).

In terms of lessons learnt for future applications of this type of technology in teacher training, the following should be considered. The private nature of reflection must be recognised and blogs should remain private between trainee and tutor, thus giving trainees the confidence to post their entries without the fear of them being read by anyone

other than the tutor. If a space for public discourse needs to be created it should be kept separate from the private reflective blogs. For instance a community blog or discussion board could be used. Tutors should also consider the availability of Internet access to students to ensure they are able to access blogs in their work context. Finally, tutors should also design in more continuous feedback on blog entries, rather than waiting to the end as is typical with many reflective diaries. The potential for just-in-time feedback represents one of the greatest benefits of using blogs instead of an offline electronic format, though consideration should be taken that the marking burden is not too great.

Further research is needed to explore whether the use of blogs in this way could be applied successfully to other types of courses, and to determine how the nature of blogging changes for trainees as they develop into professionals.

Short biographical notes on all contributors (to be added post-review)

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