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A Personal Reflection on Establishing a New Multi Author Blog and its Role in Developing Research-Informed Teachers

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Abstract In 2016 a Multi Author Blog was established to engage student participation in the community of research-informed teachers. This reflection discusses the reasons for its conception and some of the opportunities the Multi Author Blog could provide to schools. In a time when developing teachers as researchers is a priority for ITT providers and schools and when there is a national drive towards a research-informed profession, it is suggested that the use of new technology could be a way to satisfy both professional development and general teacher engagement with research in a sustainable and affordable way.

Keywords: Community of Practice; Identity; Legitimate Peripheral Participation; Multi Author Blog; Research; Technology Enhanced Learning

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WHY THE DRIVE FOR RESEARCH-INFORMED TEACHERS?

Currently there is significant guidance from the Department for Education (DfE) and government reports that schools and Initial Teacher Training (ITT) providers should aim to produce and support research-informed teachers (RITs). The 2017 ITT criteria report states that:

Training may be delivered in schools or other settings and is likely to include a combination of unobserved and observed teaching, taught sessions, seminars, workshops, tasks and assignments, and engagement with academic/professional research. The content of professional programmes might include, for example: (...) the use of evidence and research to inform teaching. (DfE, 2017, p.17)

The 2016 standard for teachers' professional development advises that:

Professional development is most effective when informed by robust evidence, which can be from a range of sources. In particular, effective professional development: develops practice and theory together; links pedagogical knowledge with subject/specialist knowledge; draws on the evidence base, including high-quality academic research, and robustly evaluated approaches and teaching resources; is supported by those with expertise and knowledge to help participants improve their understanding of evidence; and, draws out and challenges teachers' beliefs and expectations about teaching and how children learn. (DfE, 2016, p.8).

Additionally, Sir Andrew Carter in his review of ITT in 2015 wrote that “...it is critical that ITT should teach trainees why engaging with research is important and build an expectation and enthusiasm for teaching as an evidence-based profession” (Carter, 2015, p.22). Sir Andrew’s comments also suggest that ITT should provide a foundation for ongoing development and provide access to experts and engagement with and experience of relevant research. An additional focus of the report was on producing teachers who are reflective and professionally-engaged, who research their own practice and develop throughout their careers (*ibid.*).

My own doctoral research is based in professional development and identity; as such, the drive to create research-informed teachers who are well equipped to develop continually throughout their career is of specific interest to me. I have previously completed postgraduate research in the field of technology enhanced learning (TEL) and so the Multi Author Blog (MAB) project was an ideal vehicle to promote a research-informed teacher identity for the trainee teachers with whom I work.

MULTI AUTHOR BLOGS

A MAB is a blog hosted online, usually with an accompanying Twitter account that is set up by an organisation or individual which includes posts written by a range of contributors. The benefits of a MAB over a single author blog include having a variety of topics to engage a range of readers as well as a continual supply of blogs to ensure continuity of content. Some issues that create challenges when running a MAB include the varied quality of blog posts received in the early stages and some of the time taken to edit the contributions. In the early stages of the project, funding from the Warwick International Higher Education Academy (WIHEA) student participation grant allowed payment of editors and so the effects of this challenge on the blog quality were reduced.

Why Develop a Multi Author Blog?

The aim of the MAB project was to engage trainee teachers as contributors to a TEL project to increase their participation, and support their identity as a teacher researcher community. The MAB was established by the Warwick Centre for Professional Education (CPE) and provided a platform for trainees to reflect on their research journey, specifically on how their engagement with research affected their practice as teachers. The blog played a significant role in the development of critical engagement with the research they were being exposed to. It also contributed to a public discussion through the use of social media which proved influential for the students who engaged with it.

The blogs were informal, reflective pieces of around 500 words (carrying no academic credit) that were submitted on a voluntary basis. Some funding was allocated from WIHEA for payment to trainees who contributed material in the first iteration. This meant that the number of students able to engage with the blog for the purposes of writing posts was limited, although numerous trainee interactions with the blog have been recorded. As of this year (2017) the MAB has been opened for all students and teachers in schools to contribute, as Gilson and Dunleavy (2012) suggest that “blogging is quite simply, one of the most important things that an academic should be doing right now”. The teaching community uses MABs and other online dissemination of ideas as standard, students then need to be supported to engage with this community of practice (CoP) in order to feel that when they enter the profession they are a legitimate contributor to this community with a teacher researcher identity. Blogging in MABs is a great way to build wider knowledge of one’s own research within a CoP, to grow readership of useful articles and research reports, and to accrue citations.

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Engaging in this form of activity allows trainees to begin to view themselves as engaged in the teaching profession and with activities that are valued in the research community. “The accessibility of new media, such as blogs, helps create a multi-way dialogue and exchange of ideas so as to complement traditional communication avenues used in research, teaching, learning” (Powell *et al.*, 2012, p.280).

At university, trainees are exposed to research and are encouraged to engage with and critique published research from the early stages of their training. The aim is that they are supported to develop into Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) who have the capacity to become accomplished teachers. Shulman and Shulman argue that “an accomplished teacher is a member of a professional community who is ready, willing, and able to teach and to learn from his or her teaching experiences” (2004, p.259).

A MAB provides opportunities for beginning and established teachers to experiment freely without the constraints of a peer reviewed research paper. Increasingly, blogging is being recognised as a legitimate professional and academic publication which means one’s blog profile can lead to wider recognition. We only have to look at the likes of Tom Bennett <http://teachertoolkit.me/> to see this in action for the teaching profession and to the BERA blog <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog> to see how the platform has been harnessed by researcher educators. The new standards for teachers’ professional development states that teachers should “Seek expert support and challenge.” it also states that schools should provide professional development which “includes opportunities for experimentation, reflection, feedback and evaluation” (DfE, 2016, p.9). Reflecting on teaching after engaging with research via a MAB is one way that ITT providers and schools can harness new technology to support trainees, NQTs, and established staff in their professional development without significant financial implications.

Why Contribute to or Engage with a Multi Author Blog?

Engagement with a community and the effect of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) of students in a research community is essential for the student development. Lave and Wenger (1991) discuss LPP as a way for learners to participate in these communities, moving toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of the community. LPP provides a way for ‘newcomers’ and ‘old-timers’ to discuss their activities, identities, artifacts, knowledge and practice. The MAB includes blog posts from Ralph Tabberer (Honorary Professor at the University of Warwick). The inclusion of an established education researcher allows the trainees to view the MAB as a legitimate platform as well as providing an opportunity for all students to learn from the posts that Professor Tabberer has submitted. The more posts that are attracted from experienced teachers and researchers in the future, the more effective the blog will be as a tool for students to learn from. Gilson and Dunleavy (2012) posit that “on a multi-author blog, you often benefit from the content that others provide, and they often benefit from yours”.

There are, of course, challenges with posting public reflections of students in the early stages of their careers and this blog is no exception. It is true that some of the reflections lack deep criticality, in some cases due to the word limit or sometimes the author’s experience. Students are in the early stages of evaluating both their own practice and the research they are exposed to and should therefore be viewed as such. An example of this can be seen in the blog post titled “Bloomin’ Marvellous: Taking my hat off to Bloom” by Lauren Atkins http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/cpemab/entry/bloomin_marvellous_taking/. There was public critique of this post by a member of the Twitter community as it did not include discussions of taxonomies other

than Bloom's. This is justified and in fact, spurred the author of this particular blog post to look further into questioning and the use of taxonomies. Geake says, "a more sceptical approach to educational panaceas could contribute to an enhanced professionalism of the field" (2008, p123). Therefore, this critique should not be ignored but openly engaged with, in order to harness the legitimate opportunity for the trainee professional development.

The experience level of the early career teacher should not be a barrier to their ongoing developing engagement with research, reflection or the research-informed teacher community. In fact, continual reflection and the ability to reflect on, learn from and develop their practice are key skills which must begin somewhere. Indeed, Carter in his review tells us that:

High performing systems induct their teachers in the use, assessment and application of research findings and that schools should be research-rich environments. The use and development of relevant research should be embedded at every level. (Carter, 2015, p.27)

So, whilst they may be novices, their development through this process is essential for students; schools and wider CoPs can support them in this. We should also include experienced staff in these new research rich environments. Many students have displayed significant strengths as reflective bloggers and their blog posts are well worth reading despite their entry level, particularly; http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/cpemab/entry/trainee_teacher_2/
http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/cpemab/entry/trainee_teacher_5/

One of the blog posts, http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/cpemab/entry/tweet_tweet_using/, aligns with Vigers' (2016) work on Twitter and LPP in Higher Education and highlights Twitter as a form of professional development. This demonstrates that, in some cases, NQTs and trainees can become the expert in these new technological fields of engagement and may well be able to contribute to the school community as a leader of staff engagement, bringing fresh perspectives to the staff room from within these new communities.

There is a need for all teachers to be engaged in research and management to support this kind of activity as a legitimate form of professional development in order to promote a school researcher CoP and to support early career teachers as they enter the profession. When access to journal articles is limited in schools, a fact supported by the Carter Review, engagement with research can occur in ways other than purchasing expensive access to online publishers or subscriptions to journals. Being aware of, reading and contributing to blog sites is one of the best ways to become research-informed. BERA and RSA (2014) recently defined research literacy for teachers as:

...the extent to which teachers and school and college leaders are familiar with a range of research methods, with the latest research findings and with the implications of this research for their day to day practice, and for education policy and practice more broadly. To be research literate is to 'get' research to understand why it is important and what might be learnt from it, and to maintain a sense of critical appreciation and healthy scepticism throughout. (*ibid.*, p.40)

Universities play an important role in supporting trainees to become early career teachers who take an evidence-based approach throughout their careers. The best practice, however, is where school-based trainers are also actively engaged with research and evidence-based teaching (Sahlberg *et al.*, 2014), where mentors, for example, actively demonstrate engagement with research. "Effective mentors are also good role-models in relation to their own engagement with research" (Carter, 2015, p.41). An ambition for the blog is that, in the future, it will include more posts from experienced staff

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and ideally from mentors of the trainees who could possibly blog about their own perceptions of the same research, or particularly subject-specific research issues – thus acting as role models and guides through this new landscape.

MULTI AUTHOR BLOG EFFECTS AND NEXT STEPS

Analytics show that there have been over 630 unique visitors to the blog, with over 1500 page views during the period from May to June 2016 and January to March 2017 combined. There is active encouragement of all teaching colleagues at CPE to contribute to the blog with personal reflections on their research activities, critical reflections on research they have read or simply just to engage with the trainees' blogs. In the future, it is anticipated that contribution to the blog will become a key performance indicator for CPE's partner schools' engagement. A critical approach to research in placement schools is a shared goal for excellent research practice in the profession, as reported by Killeavy and Moloney while discussing teachers as researchers, "...the culture of the school has a powerful and at times an overriding influence on the development of beginning teachers (overriding the ITT provider)" (2010, p.1071).

The MAB is now in its second year and is accepting reflective blogs from any trainees who wish to submit informal reflections on their research activity. Trainees have reported that it was, and continues to be, a particularly useful project and have commented that:

I found it offered me the chance to reflect further on my practice and my academic work which, I think, definitely lead [sic] to improvements. Furthermore, it was extremely interesting to read points of views from fellow bloggers and see how the PGCE year and research in education was impacting upon them in different ways. I think starting this type of conversation about a topic can fuel further reflection and help to spark new ideas and engagement with a variety of people on the blog, and away from it. It has definitely inspired me to read more blogs and engage in information through other digital platforms. (Trainee comment, 2016)

As reported by BERA and RSA "a self-improving education system requires a teaching force that is research-informed and research inquisitive, and this will only be achieved if we can create a research-rich culture in our schools and colleges". Beginning teacher learning is enhanced through engagement with other professionals within the community (Forde *et al.*, 2006). Schools are becoming more research-informed communities, openly discussing and challenging research in their everyday practices. Encouraging staff to contribute to the CPE MAB could contribute to the continued development of a school research community and make discussion of research an observable feature of teachers' dialogue, demonstrating that a research-informed teacher community of practice exists in the school to those who engage with it.

How to Contribute to the Multi Author Blog

If you would like to contribute to the MAB please email the corresponding author with your 500 word reflection. There is no requirement to reference but you are encouraged to provide links to further reading for users of the blog to engage with, or specifically a reference to the research upon which you are reflecting. You can find links to the blog via the Twitter account @warwickCPemab or you can visit the blog directly at <http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/cpemab>. The blog is freely accessible to anyone, which makes it perfect for self-directed professional development as well as for whole staff engagement with research.

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