Collaboration and personalisation in teacher education; the case of blogging

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Insights into how blogging can lend itself to pre-service teachers' learning.
- Considers conditions for optimising collaboration and personalisation.
- Narrative is used in pedagogical and research design.

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ABSTRACT

Through narrative analysis, we find the process of blogging noteworthy in lending itself to pre-service teachers' professional learning in at least two significant ways. Firstly, blogging can open the potential for collaboration through the discursive space that exists for student teachers as they negotiate the demands placed upon them from school-based and University-based elements of their course. Secondly, blogging appears compatible with a narrative conception of professional learning in which pre-service teachers work collaboratively towards improved synthesis and understanding of their past and present pedagogical experiences, conceptions and beliefs, personalising their passage into the profession.

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1. Collaboration and personalisation in teacher education

The aim of this research was to explore the potential of blogging as a hub for a dynamic knowledge ecology amongst pre-service teachers, which could be supportive of their professional learning and provide them with the opportunity to synthesise their university and school-based experiences. Thus, our research addressed the question: How can student teachers' use of blogging yield a collaborative and personalised approach to their professional learning? This also begs the question of why collaboration and personalisation are seen as central to effective professional learning.

In the context of initial teacher education, we define professional learning as a complex process of becoming or identity formation, that is both collaborative and personal. A corpus of research literature attests to the importance of both collaboration and personalisation in professional learning, not as separate entities but, as inherently interrelated aspects (Schön, 1983; Shulman & Shulman, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Putnam and Borko (2000) emphasise the situated nature of professional learning, building on conceptualisations of knowledge as distributed within communities of practice as individuals grow into the various legitimised and reified ways of being (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pea, 1993). But Putnam and Borko (2000) also note that, even within models that emphasise the socially situated and distributed model of cognition, professional learning is not uni-directional as "the community, too, changes through the ideas and ways of thinking its new members bring to the discourse" (p. 5). In reviewing a decade of research into teacher professional development in this journal, Avalos (2011) notes that the "power of teacher co-learning emerges very strongly from the studies reviewed", but that "prior beliefs" and "perceptions of self efficacy" were equally important factors (p. 17). Similarly, Cheng and Wu more recently (2016) reiterate the reciprocity of both individual and social affordances, as key aspects of effective professional learning communities.

We do not contest the socially situated nature of professional

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learning. We argue that it is the relationship between collaboration and personalisation that offers particularly fertile ground for understanding the complex change processes that may, or may not, occur at the level of the person. From this perspective, there are strong imperatives for examining professional learning as an anthropomorphic process, as such approaches can help to "unveil the role of emotions in change" (Avalos, 2011, p. 11). Indeed, the recognition of anthropomorphic perspectives have in the past been advanced by proponents of reflection in and on practice with evidence of certain advantages such as, inter alia, deeper understanding of professional practice including the authentication or challenging of teacher ideals and beliefs (Schön, 1983; Killeavy & Moloney, 2010). Similarly, Eraut (1994) identifies the risk of not preparing teachers to reflect on and theorize about their professional practice, stating that without these important dispositions they may "become prisoners of their early school experience" (p. 71).

Thus, another imperative for further investigation of the nature of the relationship between collaboration and personalisation, and the ways in which blogging can support these in Initial Teacher Education [ITE],[1] is a tendency towards the marginalisation of the importance of theory and reflection in recent global education reforms and ITE policy. The United Kingdom (UK) government's education white paper (DfE, 2010) conceptualised teacher education as a craft to be learnt predominantly 'on the job' from established practitioners. McNamara, Murray, and Jones (2014) note the political aspiration in England, as in some other countries, is to shift control of ITE away from universities and into a more market-led mixed economy of providers, where schools become the central lead. Similarly, the emergence and promotion of programmes with minimal if any higher education input, such as Teach First (UK) and Teach for America (US), has further marginalised the importance of reflection in teacher education. For example, Kretchmar and Zeichner (2016) characterise such reforms as based on the "belief that teaching is merely a technical skill" and report a certain enmity towards educational theory amongst proponents of what they term "teacher preparation 2.0" (p. 423). Thus, we argue, there is a need to restate what we know to be the importance of reflection and theory in professional learning as well as, a need to investigate new opportunities for promoting such dispositions, where appropriate, through the use of digital technologies.

These are some of the broader research aims and concerns that permeated this study during a time of unprecedented change in approach and policy towards ITE in England, but what of blogging and what it could yield for student teachers' professional learning?

2. Symbiosis between blogging and professional learning

As a cultural process, blogging belongs to a trend of increasing 'personalisation' of the web itself and 'personalisation' of the way people engage with the web through mobile devices (Deng & Yuen, 2013; Downes, 2004; Macià & García, 2016; Scanlon, 2014; Traxler, 2010; Wood, 2012). Blogging, we argue, offers a different vision to the common productivity memes in higher education often associated with technologies such as Massive Open Online Courses [MOOCs] (Barber, Donnelly, & Rizvi, 2013; Ng'ambi, 2015). Giving voice to the personal in a public arena, there is the opportunity for collaboration in the exchange of ideas and experience; a favourable condition for the generation and building of professional knowledge and understanding. This is not about scaling-up education in

terms of access, reach and delivery that characterise econometric models based merely on knowledge duplication (Department for Education [DfE], 2016). In blogging, we see the potential for developing a model of professional learning based on the practices of collaboration and personalisation; that is, harnessing the connectivity offered by the web to construct new professional knowledge ecologies. How this potential may be realised, remains contested. Killeavy and Moloney (2010) concluded that, whilst established professional communities can benefit from the use of such online networks, it is unlikely that "a supportive community can be initiated" merely through blogging (p. 1075). In a more recent review of online networks and teacher professional development, Macià and García (2016) call for more research into how participation in online networks such as blogs, "influence the depth of teachers' learning and reflection" (p. 305).

In a professional knowledge ecology, we argue, factors are held in an interdependent relationship. An ecology can be conceived as a dynamic system of multiple contingencies for both more and less desirable outcomes. This begs the question; what contingencies for beginner teachers' professional learning might be fostered by the introduction of blogging? To address this, we need to examine the potential symbiosis between the established characteristics of blogging and professional learning; that is, how blogging and professional learning can be mutually supportive.

Van Merriënboer (2016) argues that knowledge which is often compartmentalised in higher education courses is often not compatible with professional preparation. Teachers, for example, are required to develop "a highly integrated knowledge base, organized in interrelated networks of cognitive schemas" (Van Merriënboer, 2016, p. 20). That is, teachers integrate knowledge (for example, a priori, procedural, conceptual) from across numerous domains including, inter alia; subject disciplines, pedagogy, child development, child protection and safeguarding, school contexts, and government education policy. The real-life challenges student teachers face in developing their professional identities and pedagogical practice are also susceptible to the influence, not only of their own attitudes and values, but also others in the community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Biesta (2007) argues that education is a moral endeavour in which individuals make judgements and choices about teaching based upon their attitudes and beliefs, at least as much as they do on an agreed and shared pedagogical evidence base. This brings into play the affective domains. Studies of mentoring in teacher education in the UK and internationally have found that the various power relationships can render the position of student teacher as vulnerable and unstable (Cheng & Wu, 2016; Leaton Gray, 2006; Lasky, 2005; McIntyre & Hobson, 2016). From this perspective, the development of dispositions such as resilience, openness to collaboration, and a willingness to critically reflect on one's own and others' practice, are problematic. In short, the ecology in which the beginning teacher has to learn is complex and unpredictable. In the light of such vulnerability, what desirable contingencies might emerge for student teachers from the symbiosis of blogging and professional learning?

This particular vulnerability of the student teacher and the ecology they inhabit, gives several researchers cause to argue that teachers need benign spaces in which to explore their emergent teacher identities (Luehmann, 2007; McIntyre & Hobson, 2016). Cheng and Wu (2016) argue that effective professional learning communities are those in which "individuals and their community are engaged in a benignly reciprocal interaction" (p. 63). Similarly, McIntyre and Hobson (2016) in their examination of the role of secondary school (11–16 years) subject-based mentors of beginning teachers in England drew on Bhabha's (1994, p. 56) concept of "third space" which is defined as an "in-between space" where

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[1] Initial Teacher Education (ITE) is a generic term used in the UK to describe the various pre-service routes into the teaching profession and qualified teacher status. It is sometimes referred to as Initial Teacher Training (ITT). In this paper we use ITE.