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

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## Abstract

A collaborative research project between Sheffield Hallam University and Nottingham Trent University in the UK investigated the use of blogs with trainee teachers as an alternative to reflective paper-based diaries. An action research case study, involving focus groups of post-graduate (secondary) trainee teachers (one group from each University) was undertaken to determine attitudes and perceptions of blogging as an appropriate tool to support reflective professional development. The findings indicate that the use of blogs by the trainee teachers had a positive impact overall, and provide concrete evidence of their development as emerging professional teachers. Unlike traditional paper-based systems, blogs provided ongoing opportunities for the tutor to assist the trainees in their development as reflective practitioners. This paper seeks to share the findings of this research which the authors believe could be applicable to other areas of Higher Education.

# 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. Until recently, this has been supported mainly through paper-based systems such as traditional diaries, or annotated lesson plans. As Web 2.0 technologies are emerging they are providing alternatives to traditional diaries in the form of blogs, thus providing the means by which teaching and learning can embrace technology on such courses. At Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) and Nottingham Trent University (NTU) research took place in 2007/2008 on the use of personal diaries with trainee teachers using blogs.

A blog can be defined as a web application which contains periodic time stamped posts automatically arranged in chronological order on a common 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 to websites. 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. Thus, a trainee who is struggling with the concept of reflective professional development can be identified early and appropriate feedback can be given. The type of use blogs could be suitable for would be a regular personal reflection of a trainees' teaching practice.

Although small in scale, the collaborative project was undertaken to determine attitudes to 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 specialisms across SHU and NTU, to the provision of blogs as tools to assist them with their own development as practitioners. The primary aim of this research, then, was to address the question of whether or not trainee teachers could develop their professional identity as reflective practitioners through the use of an online medium, a blog. In addition to this, the research also investigated whether there was any advantage to using an online system as a method for recording reflection, over a more traditional paper-based system.

## *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 a tool for online learning at Master's level (Hoven 2006) and for management development programmes (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.

Some research has focused specifically on the use of blogs with trainee teachers. This includes the 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 looking at the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) 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. In contrast, further work on supporting inschool trainee teachers and encouraging reflection reported limited use of public blogs 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 resulted in 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. It has been reported that the public nature of their participants' blogs can result in contributors expressing concerns about the visibility of their blogs (Kerawalla et al. 2008b).

The speed of change in technology within education and in particular, within teacher training, means that it is essential for trainee teachers to be familiar with the latest technology as a means for enhancing their own teaching and learning skills, and those of their pupils. Using blogs in teacher training in this way also enables trainees to understand the wider implications of this type of technology in terms of integrating it within a wider e-learning context. This is further supported by the LSRN (2007) which reported greater engagement with other parts of the institution's online system or VLE, as teachers become more comfortable with this type of medium through their use of the blogs. An additional benefit here is the need for teachers to engage with this type of medium for teaching and learning in order to engage their own pupils with it. Many children

are arriving in schools fully equipped with the language and skills to utilise the most recent technology. The language of learning in schools is basically digital and interactive (Runde 2008). In addition, since young people live in a world of digital technologies, to focus on paper-based media in schools not only does them a disservice (Carrington 2008), but also risks them disengaging with their learning and as such may affect their attainment and achievement in schools.

## *Context and Setting*

The trainees involved in this research all followed a full-time post-graduate one year training programme in which students 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 placement. The work-based learning placement is split: phase one is for 10 weeks (SHU), or seven weeks (NTU) prior to Christmas and phase two is for 14 weeks 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.

The cohorts used for this study at both institutions had specialisms in Information and communications technologies (ICT), thus negating any problems with familiarity with the technology prior to the start of the research. Cohorts for each institution were of a similar size, with 18 trainees at NTU and 20 trainees at SHU. Both sets of cohorts were of mixed gender and ethnicity, and permission was requested from the trainees before the research was conducted.

Recent research has shown that blogging has advantages which include that of private use (Kerawalla et al. 2008a). Private blogs were chosen as an appropriate tool for the professional development of trainee teachers for three reasons. Firstly, as a means to share professional reflections with their university tutor whilst on teaching practice. The second reason was that it encouraged them to develop their own knowledge of the use of blogs in education, and so use them in their own teaching in schools. Thirdly, the blogs would provide a space where they could develop as professionals through description and reflection. Alternatives such as word processed documents, and threaded discussions on VLE 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 research involved the implementation of private blogs for use by the trainee teachers for the duration of their time on the PGCE course. The blogs were intended to support personal reflections by the students on their professional development and experiences on placement. These were open for

tutors to view in order to assist trainees with their professional reflective development.

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 it was anticipated that using a blog as an alternative method would not add to their workload.

## 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, NTU and SHU both of which have large, well-established teacher training programmes.

As has been noted with other research, the collaboration between the two institutions focussed on collating similar data sets (Groom and Maunonen-Eskelinen 2006) to identify how the blogs were used to support the development of the trainees. This small-scale collaborative project is interpretive and mostly qualitative in design. The use of multiple sources of evidence, such as interview data, and blog archives, provides triangulation and adds rigour to the conclusions drawn from the data (Cohen and Manion 2007). Both methodological and space triangulation (i.e., multi-site) – the latter being a form of data triangulation – were used in this study.

At the end of the first placement a review and evaluation of the use of the blogs took place and that information was 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, in 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.

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. Analysis of responses was done separately at both institutions, and then the responses from the two cohorts were compared. 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. This trainee 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 how they were being utilised. At SHU this was done close to assignment submission. Having read some of the entries, the SHU ICT tutor made one intervention 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 arising 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 was 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 did not 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, she had therefore used a paper-based system. Had she not been an ICT trainee teacher with a strong background in computing we would have questioned her technical skills, but she was very skilled and reported using blogs within her teaching whilst 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. Each trainee created a single blog and the number of entries per trainee varied from six to 92 in total. The length of the entries varied from 124 words to 2012 words. This is discussed in more detail in the following section. 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 skill 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 a 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, and 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. Whilst some trainees had found it a useful medium in which to reflect on their teaching and learning throughout the course, others did not. They said that it felt repetitive, that they preferred to reflect on their actual (paper) lesson plans immediately following specific lessons, and that having to do blogs as well resulted in them repeating what they had already done. Only two of the trainees agreed with this point. 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'.

## *Thematic analysis of blog entries*

We have focussed specifically on the development of professional identity drawing on the work of Sammons et al. (2007). They identified three individual interacting dimensions that together form teacher identity, these being *professional identity* – concerned with the influence of policy and social trends in defining what it is to be a good practitioner; *situated or socially located identity* – concerned with their immediate working context (school, department, class); and *personal identity* – concerned with life outside school. A detailed analysis of the blog entries revealed evidence of the development of situated identity and limited evidence of the impact of personal identity (as a student). We now illustrate the outcomes of our thematic analysis with specific examples.

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 she was: 'Terrified of school… need to keep my head so I don't forget to do and hand in assignments'. This trainee was still thinking of themselves as a student rather than as a trainee teacher thereby indicating an early stage of the journey from student to professional teacher. Whilst not surprising, this illustrates the need to consider personal identity as an aspect of teacher identity.

Once this student had begun the first placement, she recorded in the blog 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 portrays this trainee as a teacher in the real world of the school they are in, and not just attached temporarily to a school department. Whilst evidence of the development of situated identity, the implication here is that they have gained the respect of

the department they are working in and actually feel part of the professional team. The entry indicates that the student has moved from thinking of themselves as a student to that of a professional teacher. This theme was commonly revealed in 79% of the blogs by the half way point of the second placement, i.e., two thirds through the course.

In relation to situated identity, one trainee clearly recognised how her role was developing in the local context 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, 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 the relationship with 'the kids', however, a trainee was developing more confidence towards the end of the placement: 'I enjoy teaching and will miss the kids… there are some real diamonds there and I so want them all to do well… I wish I could just make them realise how important it is!!!' This again demonstrates the emergence of the trainee as a professional teacher who is able to develop an appropriate level of teacher pupil relationship.

A trainee near the end of the two placements also clearly distinguished between the first and second placement in terms of the way they were seen as a teacher:

> I also feel that Teaching Practice two is quite different from Teaching Practice one in the way that students relate to me. In Teaching Practice one I was always viewed by students as inexperienced and unfamiliar with the rules and expectation of the school. In Teaching Practice two students see me as just another teacher.

The development of a relationship with the pupils was also reflected upon during the latter stage of placement two where a trainee wrote:

> […] I absolutely love helping kids do whatever they want in the ICT room … you get to know them better and see more enjoyment. That's when you know you love kids … nothing better than being able to actually help them.

However, for this particular trainee, the sense of teacher identity was far less developed than for the others. This is in line with other research suggesting 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 our study reflect the work described by Forde et al. (2006), in which over 25% of the cohort developed their sense of identity, dating back to their earliest classroom experiences as demonstrated by the entries quoted here in this study.

## Discussion

The results from the blog entries indicate that for many of the trainees, across both institutions, the online medium provided for them gave them a private space where they could describe their progress and reflect upon it over the course of the whole year. This gave them an opportunity to develop as practitioners in a more evolutionary rather than revolutionary way. It 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 enforcing a completely new teaching and learning regime on developing teachers. This was also felt to be a more appropriate transformation of practice for the tutors who had to familiarise themselves with the new technology and integrate it into the course prior to using it with the trainees.

Also evident from the blog entries, was the difference in criticality between the trainees – their differing abilities to reflect critically on their experiences in school. Inspection by tutors of how trainees' develop reflection had not previously been possible to this extent with paper-based systems stored by the trainees at their school placement. There was a clear difference in the quality of the blog posts of the more frequent bloggers, such as those quoted above, and those who saw the blog as an extra chore to be completed near hand in date. This links to the work of Kerawalla et al. (2008b) who reported that some students found blogging problematic, and that on such a short course – 20 weeks compared with the 36 weeks of the course run at SHU and NTU – blogging skills may not have fully developed. This is arguably so for the 'reluctant' bloggers in this study who preferred to keep it to the minimum required for their assignment at SHU. 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, whilst 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 use the technology effectively for independent learning, even when their ICT skills are high (Deepwell and Malik 2008). Ellis et al. (2007) suggest that students benefit more from the online experience if they understand its purpose more in relation to the task or learning outcome. Thus, in addition to increasing academic guidance, it might also be argued that its nature is equally 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 often required for trainees to understand the difference between descriptive text and reflective text within their blogs. Previously, using paper-based approaches, this was not possible as the tutor did

not have regular access to the developing reflections. Such interventions were infrequent because the blogs were set up primarily for the use of the trainees as a private reflective space. In some cases in this study, however, interventions by tutors were deemed necessary to enable some trainees to grasp the concept of developing as professional practitioners, and recording this on the blog.

The majority of trainees found the blogs constructive, worthwhile and beneficial to thinking about their practice. It meant that they were easily able to sort entries, keep them in chronological order and trace their own progress in a more efficient and organised way. This compared with what would have been the case for many with notes on paper lesson plans kept in a variety of files and folders, which had been the previous experience of trainees on these programmes using paper-based systems.

For two trainees the blog was an extra burden, a chore even – as borne out by their comments made during the interviews in which they indicated a problem of 'double entry book keeping'. These 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 rather than opting to directly type into the blog. They were unable to explain why they made this choice. These trainees were both very thorough in their approach to reflecting and wanted to use their own system. For these students this was an additional, rather than an alternative system for reflection.

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 previously used 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. The imperfections of a learning environment will always come to the fore when students are using it for the purpose for which it was intended (De Vries et al. 2005).

## Conclusions

This research adds to a growing body of knowledge regarding the use of blogs in Higher Education. What this paper has identified, is that there is a place for blogs and blogging in the professional development of trainee teachers.

Overall, there is positive evidence that the blogs were a useful tool for recording reflections and development as professional teachers, throughout the PGCE year, 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 occurs because of it, and the subsequent improvement in practice that arises as a result of this (Boyd 2006). However, by

using the blogging tool tutors were able to access trainees' reflective development which was a benefit to the trainees who were able to receive support that had not previously been possible with paper-based systems. In addition to this, using a blog as a tool for reflection enables trainees to utilise the technology and access a tutor as and when required. It also provides a printed record that can be saved, archived for future use and an opportunity for reviewing diary entries more easily.

Two trainees expressed the opinion that they found blogging a duplication of effort. Generally, however, 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 the blogs should be recognised. Trainees should be encouraged to keep them private, as opposed to opening them up to a wider audience, thus giving trainees the confidence to post their entries without the fear of them being read by anyone other than the tutor. In order to achieve this, it may be necessary to create wikis and forums, for more public discourse, and use private blogs for individual reflection. An additional benefit 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. Further research is now needed to explore whether the use of blogs in this way could be applied successfully to other types of distance courses, and to determine how the nature of blogging changes for trainees as they develop into professionals.

## Notes on contributors

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