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Blogging- The new research dissemination strategy?

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By Martin Webber



We spoke to a real life '*pracademic*' (n. someone working at the interface of research and practice) on the value of blogging for research dissemination. Blogging has come a long way in recent years, becoming a platform for many academics previously accused of inhabiting ivory towers, who now advertise the potential or real impact their research can have on society. Martin Webber is our '*pracademic*' who has created a successful blog on the 'holy trinity' of social work-research, practice and education. Here he discusses the power of blogging as a research dissemination tool.

Let's start first with the greatest limitation – blogging is a minority activity. Many social workers do not have the time or take the time to read blog posts, and those who do mostly do so in their own time, making it easy as a blogger to feel as though you are talking to yourself. Those who do engage with your posts are those who are social media savvy, and mainly fellow bloggers. The biggest consequence of this is the scope of your reach is restricted, and a frustrating fact is that you most likely will not reach a wide section of the audience with your post, thus limiting the potential impact of your research if this was your sole impact strategy.

But it is better than doing nothing...

...and you will reach some people. Traditional academic dissemination is not an activity aimed at practitioners. In fact the presentation of research in academic journals is a massive turn off for many social workers, who do not have the time to read through a 20 page journal article to take away a few key messages that may or may not be relevant to their individual practice. A blog overcomes this barrier, bridging the gap between research and practice by extrapolating practice relevant evidence and publishing it in a medium accessible to the masses.

For the [Connecting People Study](#) I am working on, we chose to use a blog format for the project website, as we felt it encouraged more widespread engagement, from those tracking the study to those involved in it. The problem with static websites is that they can be very dull. They require constant updating and maintenance to keep them appealing, whereas a blog allows you to work with a timeline and gives people a real insight into the progress of a project.

Having the project website as a blog has created a flexible format of engagement, which is more informal thus allowing those who previously may not have done so to feel confident engaging with the research through posts. We recently provided training to 16 health and social care agencies involved with the project. Our blog allows them to not only see how the study is progressing, but also the learning experiences of other agencies in the field, which has the potential to significantly influence collaborative learning and development in the sector.

The project is on-going until March 2014, but our blog allows the audience to engage with as little or as much of the project as they would like and select the parts that contain messages relevant to their work. It also facilitates participant recruitment, as practitioners are reached by small trickles of information that they find relevant to their work. Of course for some practitioners participating in research is the last thing on their mind and subscriptions may go little in the way of showing impact, but the small trickle of information may reach some and thus lead to better evidence informed practice.

Blogging as a sole dissemination strategy is likely to be ineffective, but researchers should consider using it as an engagement and dissemination tool alongside more traditional methods such as journal articles and conferences. Whether it informs practice relies heavily on practitioners having the time to read the blog, but it is important to remember that they are more likely to read a blog post that pulls together key findings and arguments, than an academic paper. As a researcher you can communicate your latest work, make it available (depending on publishing agreement) and thus create an instant knowledge portal.

Researchers can influence how their research makes an impact. The difference between simply allowing it to sit in an academic journal and using a blog to pull together points for practice is that you can create a channel to reach a new audience who can engage with it. Blogging allows you to blend practice, research and education together in a fluid manner and thus help broaden your reach to more people.

You can never predict what will happen with a blog, whether it will be read by one person or hundreds. It can be unpredictable, throwing up comments, queries and engagement levels that you may not have intended and certainly did not expect. It also exposes you to a world of contacts, with endless people you have the potential to reach. This is being helped along by communities of interest, influenced heavily by tools such as twitter, which can become a gateway between your blog and the people you wish to influence.

I started with blogging's greatest limitation; it seems apt to end with its greatest achievement. Blogging your research creates the opportunity for flexible engagement with networks of interested people from practice, research, education and users of services. These networks have the potential to throw up insights that may be invaluable in the creation of effective social work practice and efficient systems of social care and support.

Martin blogs at www.martinwebber.net and can be followed on twitter @mgoat73.

The Connecting People Study blog can be found at www.connectingpeoplestudy.net.

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