

Teachers Are Doing It For Themselves: using social media for professional development and advocacy

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ABSTRACT Social media, such as Twitter and blogs, has opened up new possibilities for teachers to communicate. In the face of increasingly centralised policy agendas, social media has created spaces for teachers to talk to each other, share with each other and learn from each other. This article explores how teachers are creating their own spaces by using social media and how social media can support both autonomous professional learning and new forms of activism.

Since 2010 the education landscape has changed dramatically, and with this, the traditional routes for teachers to gain knowledge, share ideas and receive training. Although many of these trends were already well established, the policy changes introduced by the coalition government have resulted in many schools becoming increasingly isolated from both the local authority (LA) and other schools. The legislative changes since 2010 have often resulted in a climate of fear, with many teachers experiencing a 'high accountability and low trust' culture. However, at the same time the social media world has been expanding at an astonishing rate. For many teachers it seems almost unbelievable to acknowledge a world before Twitter! Social media allows teachers to forge new horizontal links by removing the barriers of the old hierarchy - it gives equality of access and direct interaction with individuals, which were previously very limited. These two factors have resulted in groundbreaking changes to the way classroom teachers receive, share and deliberate new ideas in education. Social media in general, but particularly Twitter, has arguably helped broaden the appeal of educational conferences and widened the educational debate to include the views of many classroom teachers who were previously disconnected from large scale debates. The growth in grassroots organisation of teachers through initiatives such as TeachMeets and educational

conferences, for example Northern Rocks, has freed many from any restraint or ideology imposed by their schools and made it easier for them to reclaim their own professional development.

Many teachers around the country are used to having their knowledge and ideas filtered for them. In practice, teachers are told by their own head teachers about the latest ideas, that are often squeezed in between school notices and reminders about uniform checks. Everyone has an intrinsic bias and schools are incredibly hierarchical, and therefore discussions on pedagogy are constrained by the motivation of whoever it is who sets the agenda and their position within the school. For the majority of classroom teachers this has led to the sharing and development of ideas being limited by school clusters, and while arguably this meant that local authorities were more homogeneous, it also meant that the number of 'ideas' discussed was limited by geography. It would take a brave teacher to initiate a discussion on pedagogy within the confines of a staff meeting, especially if this discussion questioned school policy and practice. Moreover, teachers' ever-increasing workload has resulted in many being unable to have meaningful and detailed debates during working hours.

I want to argue that teachers have always been hungry to develop and that teachers' engagement with social media has evolved from that need. The amusing blog on the '10 Stages of Twitter' summarises the fact that once teachers start using Twitter it's difficult to imagine a time without it. The latter stages of this process give a flavour of how this works.[1]

Stage 8

Thank colleagues for introducing you to twitter, impressed with the knowledge you have gleaned and your growing number of followers. Spread the word amongst friends and fellow educators. React badly when partner points out a mild addiction and a crick in your neck. Tweet how ridiculous it is that people aren't on twitter. Join in weekly twitter chats using education hashtags.

Stage 9

Reflect that twitter is an incredibly positive place and everyone is full of praise. Realise there is a need to filter information and make own judgements. Start a blog to better communicate ideas and tweet to garner opinion. Understand that the more you interact with followers the more honest the feedback. Direct message to your heart's content. Feel pleased you have developed a Personal Learning Network (PLN). Use the phrase 'twitter is the best staffroom/cpd in the world' on numerous occasions.

Stage 10 (the reason for this post)

When seeking opinion from a range of people, ask PLN to respond. Begin a twitter chat that not only informs but provokes fresh debate and develops your idea. Wonder what you ever did before twitter?



This use of social media opens up new possibilities for teachers to find an 'alternative space' to top-down policy and pedagogy. However, it also represents a challenge to those organisations that aspire to be the voice of the teaching profession. Those who were active in their trade unions could turn to them for training, advice through educational publications and meetings, and arguably have had this 'voice'. But despite the trade union membership being robust, it is unclear how many classroom teachers actually engage actively and therefore can access these opportunities. The NUT, for example, has always produced education publications, and it holds a popular National Education Conference. However, these do not always reach out to the wider membership. It is very welcome that the union has taken to hosting an 'Expert View' on its website. 'Expert View' is a series of pieces by guest authors published on the NUT's website on a twice-termly basis that reflects this commitment to fostering debate on education issues.[2] However, there is no way of knowing how much influence these publications have had because there is no comment or share option available, though I expect that the NUT is able to track the number of views. In this case a good initiative is limited by not providing the possibility to provoke debate and exchange ideas. This is why social media is so attractive to teachers.

The way this can empower teachers has been demonstrated by recent exchanges on social media about the role of lesson observations. When confronted with a head teacher who insists on grading lesson observations, active Twitter teachers have been able to challenge this by referring to the recent article written by Ofsted's Director of Schools, Michael Cladingbowl, and massively publicised across Twitter, which emphatically stated that Ofsted will no longer grade lessons.[3] They can also easily find links to a number of articles providing evidence against grading lesson observations via a quick and simple Tweet requesting information.[4]

Teachers have also been able to use Twitter to interact with professionals outside their phase, geographical area and subject specialism and, crucially, at a time that suits them. Twitter's structure is also very suitable for building up networks with teachers who share the same ideals and subject specialism. Of course, you cannot easily explain a complex teaching idea in one hundred and forty characters and this is why the growth of teachers using Twitter must be seen as only one development, with the other key phenomenon being the explosion of blogs written by teachers.

When asking prominent educational bloggers why they started, the motivations have been varied. Andrew Old started blogging in November 2006 because it was 'more of an outlet for my opinions and a chance to write about what I was reading'. Tom Bennett started blogging in 2009 'because **he I** read Andrew Old and realised you could write like that about education'. Some teachers blog because they have been asked to share their work or elaborate on an idea they shared on Twitter. David Didau 'wanted to write for an audience' and another blogger 'initially, to reflect and have a place to splurge out thoughts and tribulations'. Debra Kidd said she started blogging because 'I

think I was just desperate to connect with other teachers. School can feel really insular – people are so busy.'

A linked development has been the growth of host blogs which collate articles on similar topics or educational phases, with a recent example being *Primary Blogger*. This site was born out of a comment that there was less of a primary presence on Twitter, so primary bloggers developed a platform to share and promote their views and opinions. Of course, that is the beauty of social media. There are no financial costs, and the technology is, by and large, easy. Nor are there gatekeepers who might prevent teachers taking to cyberspace.

As blogging has become more popular, and due to the limitations of Twitter engagement, more teachers are joining the debate and #blogsync has been created. Christopher Waugh started this 'because I have a real enthusiasm for the potential that new media has for stimulating professional engagement'. It gives educators, teachers and policymakers an opportunity to all share their diverse views on the same issue in education.

With the explosion of teacher blogging there is a brilliant opportunity for us to synchronise our writing (at times) in order to provide a wider, deeper and more diverse canvassing of the important topics in Education ... The participants in this scheme are doing so of their own volition and represent all walks of the educational professions – from the classroom teacher to the high policy-maker and everyone in between ... Whether you are here simply to follow and read the monthly #blogsync or whether you are interested in contributing, be aware that this is a voluntary collective action. No one person controls it or determines its agenda. It's simply a point of coalescence for a group of educators who are passionate about getting on with the job in the best ways possible.'[5]

#blogsync has 120 contributors and it gets about 1000 visits a month. Over 50% of visitors click the outbound links to other blogs.

These examples all highlight the need teachers have to reflect and discuss, and the opportunities and space presented by social media enable this to happen more easily. Courses in the past, like *Leading from the Middle*, owed part of their success to the self-reflection aspect, but this reflection was not often shared or continued beyond the group. Using teacher networks based on Twitter to promote blogs results in feedback from a worldwide audience of educationalists and its strength is in the variety of people it is possible to interact with: from head teachers, to other classroom teachers, to LA officials, to trade unionists and politicians, including the previous Secretary of State Michael Gove, who has commented on teacher blogs in his speeches.

It is also the case as well, that even though there are people within the teaching unions who have a range of views about the reforms we are making, it is also the case that increasingly teachers are making themselves heard in the debate about our reforms – pro and anti –

and individual teachers and groups of teachers are shaping the debate. Those who follow the education debate will know that on the blogosphere it is often the case that there are teachers like Andrew Old, or Tom Bennett, who are actually the most articulate and effective supporters of some of the things we are doing, far more effective and articulate than I am.[6]

The desire for teachers to interact and discuss is illustrated by the number of organised talks held on Twitter. On a Wednesday night at 8 p.m. a primary teacher is chosen to host the educational discussion that has the highest number of votes, and each contributor uses the hashtag #primedchat. These Tweets are then collated as a Storyfi and saved and shared later. These discussions often provide the impetus for many blog articles. On a Sunday evening there is #SLTchat, and both the DfE and Ofsted have guest hosted this event in the past. On a Thursday evening there is a general #Ukedchat where, again, the topic for discussion is voted and hosted by a teacher (similar initiatives take place in other parts of the world, although the beauty of Twitter is that a debate might be 'hosted' in a country, but by definition the debate is open to all – it is global).

The founder gathered active twitter users who were going to help host the sessions, with the first session taking place on Thursday 24th June 2010. Hundreds of teachers have continued to take part in the weekly sessions ... with the sessions continuing to attract new twitter users, new teachers and promoting reflective practice for teachers with an interest in UK education.[7]

So far the education trade unions have not adequately responded to the potential for promoting ideas by building relationships and interacting with non-affiliated, non-political and non-activist teachers who would never have previously contacted their trade union. This is a wasted opportunity because through Twitter teaching unions know when teachers will be on Twitter, what they will be discussing in advance and what type of teachers they are. The spaces that Twitter has enabled teachers to open up are a perfect opportunity for organisations to share their ideas and promote their achievements, but it appears that the DfE, Ofsted and now Ofqual are the only ones doing this!

In February, five Twitter teachers were invited to Ofsted to be questioned and to offer their opinions because, '[e]vidently, there is a recognition at Ofsted that the twitter-blog world has something to offer in terms of two-way communication'.[8] It was interesting that they were selected not on their positions held within schools, a trade union, a political party, the LA or even an academy chain, but solely because of their influence and reputation on Twitter. One of the people invited was David Didau (@learningspy), and this is what he wrote about the meeting:

I blog about education in no capacity other than as an individual. I am beholden to no one. I have no constituency. I represent no one other than myself, and I am in no way an ambassador for the teaching profession. That said, I've been writing about education for

almost three years and have built up something of an audience both on my blog and on Twitter. I recognise that I have influence and that brings with it a certain amount of responsibility. I try to take this responsibility seriously, but in the end I'm just a blogger with a big gob and a certain way with words. I see it as important to express my opinion and stand up for the things that I believe in. Inevitably this will upset some people. I can live with that. (David Didau)[9]

The easy access to classroom teachers that Twitter gives hierarchical organisations such as the DfE could be used as a way of undermining trade unions because the DfE can interact with teachers and ignore trade unions as the voice of the profession by going straight to the general public. Evidently, teachers who are on Twitter can be made to believe that they have power and influence over Ofsted without having political or union affiliation, and unless an adequate change is made in the way that both political parties and trade unions interact on social media they could find themselves being viewed by some as increasingly irrelevant.

Tom Sherrington reported that his blog on the Ofsted meeting had over eighty thousand views and David Didau's blog had over ten thousand. If nothing else, this demonstrates that people are reading these articles and that there is a hunger to find out more about how Ofsted answers questions posed by ordinary teachers. It would be interesting to find out how this compares to the number of views on an official establishment website and to compare the profiles of the people accessing it.

In October, following the Ofsted meeting, five teaching Twitter users were invited to the DfE to talk about the Secondary Curriculum. It would be very easy for the DfE to find out the political persuasion of the teachers they invited by following their interactions, and since there is no democratic accountability or way for these people to be selected, this growing trend, while appearing open and transparent, could easily give a skewed representation of the views of teachers. This is what Andrew Old wrote about it:

I, along with six other 'influential tweeters' (and, no, I have no idea how we were selected), had been invited to a meeting at the DfE. Elizabeth Truss MP, one of the education ministers, was in attendance for the first part of the meeting. We were asked how teachers could be supported with the new national curriculum. The usual methods, CPD and support for intermediary bodies (like the NCETM), were discussed along with the problems of communication. I don't know how fruitful the meeting was.[10]

Twitter has tilted the power balance in the favour of teachers in schools by giving them powerful information and the opportunity to directly challenge decision-makers and forge new alliances without having to seek either the

permission or acknowledgement of their head teacher. The traditional hierarchical layers of interaction are being destroyed by Twitter.

Traditionally, opportunities to develop and collaborate came from the LA – though again, these used to be filtered. In the East Riding of Yorkshire, ICT subject leaders were invited each term to meet with other leaders to hear about the latest initiatives and share ideas and experiences regarding what worked well. The success of these meetings depended on the participants' enthusiasm and experiences, the educational advisors' expertise and the crucial fact that working time had been allocated for teachers to collaborate. Because of funding cuts and the reduction in LA staff, this no longer happens. Funding received by the LA has been dramatically cut as more schools either turn towards academisation or are forced into it.

Despite assurances that the LA would be 'freed' from increased costs caused by accelerating academisation, the following was reported in September 2012: 'However, some believe that rather than removing a budgetary burden from local authorities, academies might actually be adding to it. Councils continue to provide statutory services and other services to schools, but it is up to the academy schools which of those services they buy back. In reality, some schools buy back some of the services while others buy different ones or none at all.'[11] At Sandwell Council, resources boss Councillor Steve Eling said, 'As more schools become academies the amount of money that the local education authority gets from Government goes down and that is causing a problem. If the Government provides less money, that is going to mean more job losses in the education department.'

At a time when the Secretary of State for Education is preaching that we have the 'best generation of teachers ever in our classrooms – including the very best generation ever of young teachers' [12], his policies have, arguably, hindered access to quality continuing professional development (CPD) because of the funding cuts to the LA, and of course his legislation does not require teachers to be qualified in academy or free schools.

Statistics regarding the number of teachers attending NUT CPD events remain broadly similar, and Ros McNeil, Head of Education at the NUT, states, 'There is a real absence of good high quality CPD which meets the needs of teachers and answers the needs and hopes which they really have for the classroom. It is harder and harder to get released from school to attend CPD so we find that this is the barrier to attendance and it suppresses the take up of courses.' This issue of schools not freeing teachers up to attend courses is frequently mentioned as a problem, and as school budgets continue to be cut, it's unlikely to go away.

Freedom and opportunities to discuss, share and evaluate ideas with likeminded individuals are traditionally limited, especially since, as already mentioned, schools are so hierarchical. In every staff room there are varied opinions. It can be difficult to be honest, especially when your views don't correspond to the views of your Senior Leadership Team (SLT), and when dissension is seen as a challenge rather than something to encourage. Many

teachers have embraced the anonymity of Twitter to enable them to share their blogs and experiences which honestly reflect their teaching.

Previously, Andrew Old was anonymous and here he lists one of the reasons why:

So I didn't get it in the neck at work. Before I got the hang of this anonymous blogging thing, I once spoke to an educational reporter for a national periodical suggesting behaviour was an issue in schools (but with no specific examples given). The report gave enough of my real name to identify me if you knew me personally (but not enough for parents of kids I teach to pick up on). It didn't mention the school; it only gave enough information to narrow it down to about 5 dozen possible secondary schools. The very next day the head came to see me. He'd spent the morning on the phone with headteachers from those other schools who had been concerned to identify the culprit.[13]

A natural development of discussing and interacting virtually is to meet and share ideas face to face. The growing popularity of TeachMeets is a direct result of both the lack of quality CPD in schools and LAs caused by spending cuts and the fact that teachers, despite the media perception, are always striving to improve. One of the magical things about TeachMeets is their lack of hierarchy, and in the majority of instances they are set up around the country not by the SLT but by ordinary teachers who want the opportunity to discuss, evaluate and improve.

Teachmeets are gatherings of education professionals who get together to share ideas. They happen across the country and are publicised by word of mouth and via Twitter. No-one is trying to sell anyone anything at a Teachmeet, and people give their time freely to share ideas and spark interesting discussions and connections between professionals.[14]

These grassroots events are where teachers present an idea for a limited amount of time to ensure the maximum number of contributions. TeachMeets have been held in a variety of buildings, but the majority are hosted by a school to ensure costs are kept very low, and the majority of events are free. The NUT has sponsored TeachMeets in the past and various other education publishing houses have become involved.

One of the incredible things about TeachMeets is the fact that they are worldwide. As the same ideas about how and what we should teach our children are spreading across the world, for example via the GERM movement, so is the subversive reaction of teachers to reclaim their pedagogy and development.

Here a teacher from Australia writes about his motivation for blogging, Tweeting and organising TeachMeets:

The connection between teacher and student has never been more important and never under more scrutiny. We have the power to change students' perception of the world through our approach to teaching and learning – a mighty challenge but one we can support each other to do well. Those who know how to join the growing network of teachers around the world to consolidate and improve their practice will thrive. I hope I can be one of them.... I'm interested in the power of education and consider it a duty to make a positive contribution to the world in the meagre way I can. I am politically aware (which means I shake my head a lot and watch Insiders on the ABC). I'm happily married and living in Sydney, Australia, but consider myself a citizen of the world.[15]

It was a logical next step to grow the TeachMeet idea and create affordable, accessible education conferences solely advertised through Twitter. The first of these was ResearchEd, which was created by Tom Bennett and Hélène Galdin-O'Shea, with the tag line 'working out what works'. Tom argued:

The difference with this conference from others, is that teachers would have to be involved – have to be, otherwise there would be no point. The abyss between practical experience and desiccated theory born of a Petri dish and tortured until it says what the designer wants, was apparent to me the first day I walked in a classroom.[16]

Astonishingly, the tickets sold out within about 8 weeks. I ended up with a waiting list of several hundreds. Early on I decided two things: it had to be held in a school, and it had to be a Saturday. It seemed absurd to hold an event like that any other time if I wanted teachers, like me, to attend. Summer holidays meant that we would have to go with September rather than the chronologically more ideal July/August. Several people emailed me to say that teachers wouldn't give up their free Saturday the week they returned to school. None of these people were teachers.[17]

Many of the attendees were at their very first conference, and the fact that many had built up virtual relationships through Twitter gave the event a friendly feel. One of the other remarkable things about the event was the fact that many of the presenters were classroom teachers who had not addressed an audience in this way before. The simple fact that so many classroom teachers chose to travel from around the UK to listen to a full day's workshops on education provides all the evidence needed that teachers want to collaborate, and if they can't do it at school then they will take the initiative, reclaim it and build it from the grassroots. ResearchEd has now become a brand, and there are two other events planned this year around the country.

Northern Rocks [18] is a northern answer to ResearchEd, because the majority of the latter's events happen near London. The premise was not to

'work out what works' but instead that: 'We are teachers who think a major teaching and learning event in the North of England is long overdue. We are teachers who think it's time to reclaim our profession, self-organise and share best practice.' Despite being only advertised through social media, the event sold out seven months before the start, and the number of high-profile politicians, educationalists, lecturers and trade unionists who have given their time for free, and often offered to speak voluntarily, highlights the recognition that it is at events like these where their ideas can receive the largest audience. This is not just because of the number of people attending these conferences, it is also because the people attending live Tweet throughout the event and then often blog about it afterwards; for example, the York Research Conference collated twenty blogs [19], which were put on TES connect within two days. To date, the NUT is the only teaching trade union that has recognised the benefits of being involved in these conferences, and it is one of the sponsors of Northern Rocks.

One of the unusual things is the lack of exploitation of the opportunities being presented. It appears that most teaching trade unions, the Department for Education and education publishing houses are all aware of the hunger that teachers have to collaborate, share, develop and meet. The education publishing houses are approaching educational blogging teachers with high Twitter followers to ask them to write books and these are being promoted at the educational conferences mentioned by other high-profile Tweeters. Everyone is aware that teachers want to meet to learn about teaching and that they will pay, give up weekends and even offer to present for free, but no union has offered to create something similar. This could be because of tradition, because of regional variations within the trade union movement, because they prefer longer events that need accommodation, because their locations are remote or because they don't engage enough or build up networks on Twitter. Perhaps an attempt to organise these education conferences would fail; arguably, the strength of these movements is in their grassroots nature, and an attempt to direct them could make them lose their power.

There are negatives to the world of social media, and teachers have fallen foul of the privacy rules. It is essential that everyone remembers that, unless you are anonymous, you shouldn't put anything on Twitter that you would not say in a staff room full of colleagues and parents. Of course, there is also the problem of 'trolls' and of being threatened online, and neither of these issues can be easily dismissed.

Another criticism of Twitter has been the polarisation of the debate and the joining together of groups of teachers to condemn other teachers. This has led to the title of 'pedagogy police' being used to describe teachers with a particular ideology which they effectively promote through social media. When blogs are ridiculed the net result is to shrink the space that teachers have created in which to debate as teachers become worried about being embarrassed.

The merits of social media are difficult to question, including the access it provides to a group of supportive teachers and worldwide learning networks,



the space and freedom it gives to reflect and discuss anonymously if needed, and the opportunity it presents to share ideas by blogging and meet like-minded teachers face to face, to gain experience of presenting at TeachMeets and to have powerful and influential knowledge direct from the policy makers.

However, there is a note of caution, and that is that while social media holds the opportunities to connect and create 'an alternative', Twitter is in danger of becoming a vehicle utilised by only those who agree. If that continues to happen, then this amazing space to debate, reflect and collaborate will also be closed and we will have to wait for the next big social media revolution before many teachers find another. To ensure the neutrality of TeachMeets and conferences as grassroots movements, teachers should be wary of corporatisation and question who and why they are being sponsored, and then this space that teachers have created will remain as powerful as it has already proved itself to be. Solutions seem very clear; teachers must keep blogging, keep sharing and collaborating and ensure that they continually reclaim this space as their own and continue to question and debate the all-important questions: what is education for? How can we all become better?

Notes

- [1] Daniel Edwards. Teachers The 10 Stages of Twitter. http://dedwards.me/2012/06/13/teachers-the-10-stages-of-twitter/
- [2] NUT Expert View. http://www.teachers.org.uk/expertview
- [3] Ofsted. Why Do Ofsted Inspectors Observe Individual Lessons and How Do They Evaluate Teaching in Schools? http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/why-do-ofsted-inspectors-observeindividual-lessons-and-how-do-they-evaluate-teaching-schools
- [4] Forbes. Lesson Observations Are No Way To Grade Teachers. http://www.forbes.com/sites/nickmorrison/2014/03/19/lessonobservations-are-no-way-to-grade-teachers/
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- [6] Who Owns the 'One Nation' and What Does it Stand For? Public lecture by Lord Glasman and Michael Gove. 15 May 2013. http://www.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/videoAndAudio/channels/publicLectur esAndEvents/player.aspx?id=1906
- [7] UK Education Chat. http://ukedchat.com/about-2/
- [8] Tom Sherrington. Meeting Ofsted: the game has changed. http://headguruteacher.com/2014/02/20/meeting-ofsted/
- [9] David Didau. What I Learned from My Visit to Ofsted. http://www.learningspy.co.uk/blogging/learned-visit-ofsted/
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- [12] Michael Gove. Michael Gove Speaks about the Importance of Teaching. DfE speech. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/michael-gove-speaksabout-the-importance-of-teaching
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- [15] Matthew Esterman. About. http://mesterman.wordpress.com/about/
- [16] Tom Bennett. researchED 2013 Is GO. If You Build it, They Will Come. http://behaviourguru.blogspot.co.uk/2013/03/researched-2013-is-go-if-youbuild-it.html
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