



## Building Resilient Learning Communities: Using Evidence to Support Student Success

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# Beyond analytics: the impact of the Teaching Matters blog on learning and teaching

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## Abstract

Engaging in informal activities, like having a conversation with a colleague, is one way that higher education professionals can have an impact on learning and teaching. In this study, we investigate the conversational pathways enacted by HE professionals sparked by their engagement with the Teaching Matters blog at The University of Edinburgh. We collected and analysed data from a survey of 39 readers of, and 102 contributors to, the blog. The data analysis provided evidence that conversations have an impact in supporting HE professionals to learn about teaching from colleagues. The results of the study suggest that encouraging informal conversations around blog posts is one important way in which HE professionals develop, and sometimes even radically change, their personal understanding of learning and teaching.

Keywords: Blogging, community, conversation, professional development, impact

## Introduction

Informal conversations about learning and teaching are a characteristic of everyday life in university departments, and a growing body of research reports on academics' experiences of these conversations (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009; Thomson 2015;

Thomson & Trigwell 2018). Such conversations are becoming increasingly important to the Higher Education (HE) landscape as we move towards the development of more

opportunities for sharing practice, which can lead to informal learning (Boud & Brew 2013). This paper develops Gibbs' (2013: 2) assertion that 'new forums need to be put in place to build a community of practice about teaching'. These forums are increasingly materialising as informal, online spaces, often falling under the umbrella of 'social media' (McPherson, Budge, & Lemon, 2016). Yet a recent review of research surrounding social media and professional development in higher education shows that 'research and practice on social media-supported professional learning is still in its infancy' (Luo, Freeman & Stefaniak, 2020).

This paper generates insight to this literature by investigating informal professional development in one such social media forum: blogging. Both reading and writing blog posts offer a unique space to spark conversations between academics, professional services colleagues, and students, which can lead to changes in professional practice and hence have an impact on learning and teaching.

This paper explores how one blog site based at The University of Edinburgh, Teaching Matters, which aims to share multiple accounts of learning and teaching practice in HE, has stimulated informal conversational pathways. We argue that the kind of conversational pathways triggered by reading and writing blog posts are more informal and spontaneous than structured, formal learning and teaching initiatives and governance (Hardy *et al*, 2014). This take on impact is in line with the debate begun by Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) who established the significance of "backstage" conversations about teaching and learning for academic development, in comparison to "frontstage" conversations. It is to new practices of backstage conversations, and their impact on learning and teaching, that we attend in this paper.

### ***Teaching Matters blog: Sharing practice***

Since its launch in 2016, Teaching Matters, has become a major channel to showcase learning and teaching practice. It is multi-authored (Dunleavy, 2014), and posts are solicited

by the editor or volunteered by contributors. An editorial team collates these posts. The publishing schedule is organised into monthly themes, with three to five posts published every week. Each post is promoted on social media using the Teaching Matters' Twitter and Instagram feeds.

One aim of the blog is to encourage the sharing of practice across different schools, disciplines, and audiences and to generate conversation, which may lead to informal learning or professional development. The blog encourages a diversity of authors: from first year undergraduate students to professors; to careers advisors and educational technologists. Readers are exposed to the sharing of different practices promulgating from one easily accessible platform.

Due to its conversational tone, style and the invitation to 'leave a comment' at the end of each post, it is often assumed that blogging promotes dialogue and hence impact, particularly in comparison to more formal academic outputs, such as journal articles. On the surface, however, blogging often remains a monologic form of communication (Wegerif, 2013). Only 9% of the published Teaching Matters posts have stimulated an online comment in response to a specific post. Taking this figure as a numerical analysis of impact, we may assume that Teaching Matters falters in engendering dialogue and change in practice. Yet we know this is not the case: rich, anecdotal evidence suggests that Teaching Matters acts as a catalyst, sparking many conversations around teaching and learning. We are interested in exploring what these conversational activities (or pathways) look like, and how they generate communities of practice, or, as we will argue, practices of community.

## **Methodology**

Crude WordPress statistics indicate that Teaching Matters receives between 5,000 and 7,000 views per month. Yet this data tells us little about impact: it does not reveal why the reader engaged with the post, nor does it help map the conversations sparked by

them. To investigate these issues, this paper uses data from an online survey with readers of, and contributors to, the Teaching Matters blog. This included closed and open-ended questions covering: motivation(s) for engagement with Teaching Matters; reader's preferences; the extent to which individuals engaged in online and offline conversations about the post(s); and, the impact of these conversations on learning and teaching. We solicited respondents through university networks, via Teaching Matters' Twitter account, and through a blog post on Teaching Matters itself. We also emailed contributors separately, inviting them to complete the questionnaire. We obtained ethical approval from the School of Education. We received 141 responses: 39 readers and 102 contributors.

## **Findings**

### ***Sparking informal conversations***

The survey responses indicate that Teaching Matters acts as a catalyst for informal yet significant conversations about learning and teaching. To further understand the ways in which impact is developed through reading and writing blog posts, we looked to the different rationales for these conversations to take place.

#### *Direct contact with contributors*

We asked readers if they had ever contacted the author of a blog, either by e-mail or by leaving a comment on the original post. This happened on only nine occasions: six e-mailed the author and three left comments. One reader noted the barriers to leaving a comment:

It's interesting that it doesn't often stimulate discussion in the comments.

I would guess University staff don't feel comfortable discussing teaching in a public forum. (R16)

One reader deliberately sought out authors at conferences while another wrote to the writers to thank them for their contributions. Relying on direct contact with the author of the post as

an indicator of impact would suggest that Teaching Matters' impact is limited, but a different picture emerges when we consider the kinds of conversations that took place in response to the blog.

### ***Conversational pathways***

16 readers (41%) indicated that they were aware of a Teaching Matters post which had stimulated conversations during their everyday work. Further, 67 contributors (66%) said they were aware of their post having triggered some sort of conversation. We asked the contributors and readers what these conversations looked like, and identified three pathways: purposive; discursive; and, promotional. Each pathway opened up the possibilities for impact, be it learning a new educational technology tool, personal or professional development, or reflecting on wider practices.

#### *Purposeful pathway*

During conversations about teaching there is an assumption that teachers are influenced to such an extent that they develop, or sometimes even drastically change, their personal understanding of learning and teaching (Roxå & Mårtensson 2009). The most common conversations about Teaching Matters posts across the readers and contributors related to the possibilities for change; we characterise these as purposive conversations. These were centred on a practice, with a view to encouraging others to implement similar approaches in their own teaching. Typically, respondents indicated that the content of the posts was the catalyst for conversations that were written with the expressed desire to inspire change, particularly in relation to the taught curriculum. For example, C52 had conversations about, 'What worked for us and would transfer to other schools', while C62's discussion was 'mainly about the findings of the blog and how they could potentially bring it into their own practice'. Conversations were developmental in nature and centred on what the readers could learn from other successful practices.

Underpinning these conversations was an explicit commitment to the enhancement of the curriculum, whether through student engagement or promoting active learning. C9, wanted to encourage colleagues to teach in a more inclusive way by 'discussing how easy it is to make things more accessible to more people'. These purposive conversations were all characterised by a commitment to enhancing and developing practice around learning and teaching. Here, the post's content was the major driving force of the conversations, with dialogue focusing mainly on problem solving and the implementation of new initiatives in order to improve student experience.

### *Discursive pathway*

We characterise a second pathway as discursive. The intention of the conversation was to generate reflective dialogue that shows the social practices through which teachers construct and maintain understandings about learning and teaching. Here the conversation was collaborative and reflective. C20, for example, deliberately wrote a blog post about assessment and feedback literacy that would 'contribute to the discussion on teaching policy at the UoE'. This took place in a range of spaces and scales:

The Assistant Vice-Principal for Feedback wrote a post in response to mine.  
[...] I've been told the blog post has been read quite extensively and has contributed to discussions about how to deal with low NSS feedback in this area.

Similarly, for C78, the post afforded them the space for reflective and dialogic feedback about how to enhance teaching practices that might not otherwise have happened:

My colleagues gave me comments on my blog, shared their experiences and discussed how we can make the most of students' feedback to improve our teaching.

The discursive pathway then deliberately opened-up a space for reflective dialogue about learning and teaching. C38 used another post as the basis for a reading group:

I've had emails from people from outside the university who have used the blog - both as a focus for a discussion in a reading group and in developing their own practice.

Again, this dialogue was an essential way in which teachers construct, maintain and develop their understanding about learning and teaching.

### *Promotional pathway*

A third pathway was promotional in nature. Here, the authors deliberately used the posts as a platform to disseminate their learning and teaching practices with the expectation of generating conversations amongst their peers. C83 spoke of the 'desire to share my teaching practice more widely within (and beyond) the university'. This was realised through the conversations the post enabled:

Students were aware of the blog post and quite pleased about it profiling their work, and told me so in person and via email. Colleagues in my department were better aware of the project and approached me about it.

In another example, C57 wrote a promotional post that would 'highlight my job role and team's work for [our project]'. This post, 'stimulated conversations about how to better shout about our great work and make our work known among the University'. The contributor gained 'exposure to senior management team members who previously did not know me in a personal capacity'.

The promotion of the blog posts on Twitter and Facebook frequently triggered online conversations. Again, this dissemination led to new conversations. Various contributors stressed the importance of this promotional work:

The blog [post] has been tweeted, retweeted and has led to conversations on Twitter. (C67)

I saw friends in other institutions and beyond sharing the post on twitter and Facebook. (C99)

Readers, too, commented on their perception of the importance of the blogs for raising the profile of the work being undertaken in the University. For R16 the blogs was entirely

promotional, and a way to say 'Look at this thing that's been happening in our school'. Similarly, R20 saw Teaching Matters as a platform to reach a diverse audience and to laud the University's achievements:

As far as I'm aware it is a widely used and highly rated forum for communication about learning and teaching at the University. I have often pointed colleagues to the site [...] and I see it as an important part of our efforts to increase the visibility of learning and teaching at our institution and to highlight and share all the good practice we have and can be proud of.

As such, promotional conversations allowed participants to reflect on the value of the work undertaken within the University. As we go on to show, this led to conversations with multiple stakeholders in multiple spaces.

### ***Multiple conversations, stakeholders, and practices of community***

These purposeful, discursive and promotional conversations took place with a range of stakeholders, within and external to the University. For R13, the conversations unfolded within the University but across academic staff and professional services within her School. This sparked 'recurrent conversations' within her team regarding, 'the difficulties to create more cohesive staff communities within and beyond Schools....[and] the possible impacts of this situation on the individual student experiences, and on our ability to build communities within the University.'

Conversations, and hence impact, were not restricted to the University. For C35, who authored a videoblog, the post was a way to spearhead a conversation about the future of the University's estate. The conversation drew multiple voices at a range of different strategic levels within the University, as well as from the wider community:

This [the videoblog] coincided with the University's decision to sell the residential centre Woodlands and in an attempt to reverse senior management's decision the videoblog was circulated to a range of people including the Principal, Senior



VP, Rector, EUSA, Chaplaincy, other Schools, current students, alumni and colleagues in the field. [...] A lot of people saw the videoblog post and despite the sale going ahead the videoblog became an extremely important way of communicating teaching and learning to a wider audience.

In other cases, conversations led to invitations to extend the work in new ways, often involving actors who were external to the University. For C40, conversations about the blog opened new doors to collaborate with peers from outside the University:

I have entered into many collaborations with individuals who first met me through my blog: for example, I authored several papers with a Finnish colleague who read a blog post of mine and commented on it. I have been approached to do consultancies in much the same way.

While C15 commented:

Since writing for TM about the Clinical Trials open access course, I was invited to present at the University of Barcelona Business school and the ALT Winter Conference 2018 on that topic.

## **Conclusion**

Blogging can act as a catalyst for new conversations around learning and teaching. We have shown that impact can be engendered through the kinds of informal conversations that take place through the processes of engaging with blog posts. Through the materiality of online social media, these conversations are enacted both 'frontstage' and 'backstage' in a multiplicity of spaces and scales. The different conversational pathways engendered by blogging deserves further investigation as to how these pathways have an impact on cultural change. Perhaps, more importantly, we need to explore how to put value systems in place that can validate such changes through informal or 'backstage' practices as 'impact'.

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