0472

Trainee teachers' critical reflection and identity development: Investigating the integration of a community of practice using web 2.0 technology with school-based placement

Bruce Nightingale
Keele University, Staffordshire, United Kingdom

Background

It's difficult to make strong claims about the strengths and capabilities of 'digital natives'. This is partly because the term 'digital native' covers such a variety of alleged competencies. More of a problem is the fact that realising the claims can be fraught with difficulty. So, what follows has to be read with a degree of scepticism. This is 'work in progress' rather than work completed.

Social networks support high degrees of interaction between one learner and other learners. In traditional forms of education (not computer mediated), interaction between self and others requires a co-presence. Social networks support interactivity and flexibility over the time and the place of learning.

In asynchronous environments, the learner has 'time' to reflect prior to making their personal contribution. This opportunity for reflection prior to comment (and response) can allow for deeper thinking, and consequently a more considered response, though this is not guaranteed.

The integrated nature of reflective journals and communities of practice builds upon existing understanding – Moon and Wenger et al. The use of web 2.0 technologies to situate the practice offers affordances that suggest this will become common practice.

Research Questions

The blog and forum components of ning are used to critically reflect upon and identify key issues relating to the trainees professional development whilst on school based practice. Through the implementation of action research principles, it is possible for trainees to reach a deeper personal understanding of these key issues. As the operational context of school experience varies between host schools, so the action research generated produces a variety of findings based upon the same themes. The sharing of these 'findings' facilitates a dialogue between co-enquirers fostering collaborative research and contributes to the development of a sustainable 'community of practice'.

Reflection has been described (Boud et al) as a process of turning experience into learning – a means of exploring experience, in order to learn new things from it.

During this reflective process answers to the following questions were sought: What were the trainees findings on these key issues? Are these findings significant? Do they support personal development? Is reflection in ning an acceptable medium to use? If not, why not and how does engagement correlate to age? Does the use of ning enable the community to extend individual reflection into supportive commentary upon other members reflections? Is the social capital of the site valued by it's members enough to want to keep returning – and either reading or contributing? Does the trainees style of writing progress from the 'descriptive' to the dialogical/critical style? If not, what needs to be done to support this development.

Methods

1. To gain qualified teacher status the trainees need to evidence that they have met thirty three standards as determined by the Teacher Development Agency (TDA). Additionally, they need to pass four University assessment's set at level 6 and M level.

2. The approach builds on the recognition that the cohort possesses a range of functional capabilities with ICTs that are commonly attributed to 'Digital Natives' (Prensky, Oblinger et al). The project seeks to leverage these capabilities developed in informal, often social settings, into a means of developing professional 'voice'. Ning was chosen as a tool over (say) facebook because it's not used socially by the students but has a similar feature set enabling it to be adopted quickly and easily.

3. The overall method, starts with what the student has learnt (i.e. their evidence for the TDA standards) and then helps them to look back to articulate how they got there, is a metacognitive exercise. This metacognitive component is submitted as a formally assessed piece of work.

4. The process of tracking and tracing the development of the reflections is supported by the use of a reflection rubric devised by Ward and McCotter. It is designed to demonstrate what reflective writing looks like and enable trainees to write at a deeper, less descriptive level. The exercise is grounded in research and additionally supported by a theoretical framework from Moon and Wenger.

Frame

The theoretical framework is grounded in Freire's statement

"only through communication can human life hold meaning. The teacher's thinking is authenticated only by the authenticity of the students' thinking. The teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thought on them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication"

Freire, P., Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Research findings

The project has a range of outcomes:

1. The methodology. This is developing considerably, and has been tried and tested with trainee teachers.

2. Rich empirical descriptions of learning: we have collected stories that meet these requirements, and which are told in the trainee's own voice.

3. We will progress in the analysis between now and the conference. Initial analysis indicates that the rubric is an effective way of describing and analysing the complexity of how trainees document their reflections. Ning is an accepted medium by most (but not all) trainees in which to work.

4. The process of learning to reflect and working collaboratively appears to provide the trainee with the wherewithal to develop and to act as an effective reflective practitioner.

References

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