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### Teacher Professional Learning Networks and the ‘politics of circulation’

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#### Introduction and rationale:

This paper reports on a small scale study relating to the the growth of social-media-based Professional Learning Networks (PLNs). The study focused on school education professionals (teachers, teacher educators and leaders) and on networks motivated by concerns for comprehensive, equitable, research-informed schooling provision and practices.

Some existing literature is optimistic about the potentially positive impact of mobile and digital technologies on professional development. Studies have identified how PLNs might extend access to resources, materials, communities and expertise beyond geographic and temporal boundaries; promote new kinds of ‘curatorship’ and engagement with others in flattened hierarchies; even provide more ‘fulfilment’ and ‘authentic’ learning than traditional professional development routes (e.g. English & Duncan-Howell 2008; McLoughlin & Lee 2010; Mackey & Lewis 2011).

Others are more guarded. Beer (2013) describes how the ‘remediation’ of academic life through social media influences both the communication *and* production of knowledge. He argues that the ‘politics of circulation’ in social media may appear democratising and decentralising, whilst actually obscuring and silencing some important visions of the social world. Kennedy et al’s work for CCN+ (2013) has shown that social media analysis and use by many public sector organisations is still underdeveloped, with limited access to or understanding of tools that are themselves not easily interrogated.

School education is a particularly interesting site for study. In England, it is undergoing accelerated change, fragmenting into multiple ‘communities of practice’ with competing claims to moral and pedagogic authority, which in turn are likely to influence professional identities, practices, and school cultures. Ball (2011) describes the education policy field as ‘heterarchic’, involving global, local, multinational, commercial, state and non-state organisations, from HEIs, Local Authorities and quasi-autonomous public bodies, to start-ups, edupreneurs, knowledge companies, social enterprises, individual headteachers, and free school or Academy chains. His research traces ‘transnational advocacy networks’ across social media and other sites, through which key individuals and organisations promote neoliberal marketised or privatising policies and practices, such as for-profit educational provision. Commercial influence can also be seen in how many contributions under the popular hashtag #ukedchat consist of links to commercial software ‘solutions’ to educational ‘problems’. However, there is as yet little research investigating networks informed by concerns for equitable, democratically accountable and research-informed schooling provision and practices. This study, building on the work of Kennedy et al (2013), Albarran (2013), Beer (2013), Ball (2011), Pykett (2009) and others, seeks to develop understanding of how to conduct social media analysis in this context, and to comprehend patterns of influence in education policy and practices.

As one of the largest sites of teacher education in the UK, the University of Brighton School of Education (SoE) probably reflects the range of responses to social media in the teaching profession more generally. Some colleagues actively engage with social media personally, professionally and pedagogically; some have research profiles related to educational technology and digital learning identities (e.g. Loveless & Williamson 2012; Rudd 2013); whilst others are daunted by the scale and volume of the blogo- and Twitter-sphere, which one colleague likens to ‘standing in front of a water cannon’.

## Aims and Objectives:

- To interrogate the claims made about the participatory and developmental potential of social-media-based Professional Learning Networks, using the example of teaching professionals as an analytically rich vantage point from which to examine the 'politics of circulation' in new media.
- To engage HEI-based teacher educators, recent graduates, partner schools and other organisations in dialogue about online communities and how these might be shaping teacher educators', schools' and newly qualified teachers' professional cultures, identities and practices
- To understand better how to operate, analyse and organise within digitally shifting professional environments; in particular to support teacher educators in using social media to amplify the voice of academic research and maintain commitments and values, and their capacity critically to engage with the 'politics of circulation' in educational policy and practice.

## Methods:

Individual interviews (4) and group discussions (2) with UoB SoE colleagues.

Phone interview with Julie Lilly from @BeyondLevels (launched shortly before our research period, for 'assessment beyond levels' DfE project).

Online survey using Survey Monkey of SoE alumni about their professional learning networks, collating and analyzing 76 responses.

Focus group discussion of social media and PLNs with three SoE alumni, all (coincidentally) in their third year of teaching.

Collecting a number of Twitter handles of SoE staff.

Working with a UoB PhD student, Nikolay Burlutskiy from the School of Computing, Engineering and Mathematics, to undertake some initial 'data scraping' of Twitter accounts.

Presenting our project as a poster at the European Conference on Social Media in Brighton July 10-11 2014, see below.

## Key findings:

Our research identified significant **continuities** with older or traditional forms of professional learning. For instance, 72% of our survey participants stated that ideas from their teacher education course were important or very important to their professional learning and development (with a statistically significant difference between those over 35 being more likely to state that they were very important compared to those under 35); 99% of respondents stated the same of colleagues in the institution where they currently teach. Survey respondents and interview participants also mentioned trade unions as important sources in finding out about trends and developments in education policy, rather than the sources that are more prominent in accounts of the Global Education Reform Movement (Ball 2012; Lingard et al 2013).

While only 43% of respondents stated that Professional Associations were important or very important to them, more granular analysis of qualitative data suggested that some professional subject teaching associations were powerful gatekeepers (for instance, the Association of Science Education and the Geographical Association; the latter was described by a teacher we interviewed as 'the only one I would follow'). However, these could also be perceived as overly restrictive, 'old school', hierarchical or controlling. Social media played a greater role where relevant professional bodies did not exist (such as in relation to Special Educational Needs) or were rejected.

Amongst our immediate SoE colleagues, we identified some concerns in relation to social media about not wanting to seem self-promotional or too individual-focused ('self-obsessed'). These seemed to us to be familiar forms of academic 'habitus', which contrasted with the more obviously promotional (of self and related others) policy networks more geared to corporate values.

The project explored the transformative potential of digital technologies in teacher professional learning. It enhanced and extended our understanding of the potential impact of mobile and digital technologies in

identifying **challenges and opportunities** presented by mobile and digital technologies. The 'politics of circulation' that defines new media (Beer 2013) generates both the positive outcomes and the anxieties and problems participants described.

In terms of opportunities, participants identified key advantages of social media in relation to professional learning as including: being able to keep up with current policy trends; access to inside information, eg from those inside government policy; accessing 'snippets' of information, that could then be pursued in greater depth when time allowed; free resources related to teaching content. 79% of survey respondents stated that websites such as the Guardian, TES, Pinterest etc. were important or very important, compared to 42% who thought that blogs or micro-blogs were. There was a significant difference between primary and secondary sectors, with 84% of primary vs. 65% of secondary respondents stating that websites were important to them. Primary teachers were virtually unanimous in stating that they used social media to find practical ideas for teaching compared to 67% of secondary teachers. Overall 64% of respondents stated that 'social media (or online communities) offer me as a teacher valuable access to resources and expertise I would not otherwise get'; 80% that they 'used social media to find practical ideas e.g. lesson plans for my teaching'. Our survey identified a wider range of online resources than we had been aware of at the start, such as Twinkl (for primary teaching), Tumblr, or the popularity of TED talks amongst teachers.

One SoE graduate had developed a very active social media profile that engaged her in networking within and through the Association of Science Education; others were dismayed to find that their online activities prior to their becoming teachers left them exposed to being tracked down by students. Another focus group participant taught in a special school and argued that social media provided really important resources for her area, which was not well serviced either by Schools of Education or a professional association. It also appeared that social media could be a politicizing context, for instance for finding out about reasons for strike action or about campaigns against free schools and academies that were ongoing at the time of our research.

The challenges identified in most cases referred to the same features of social media that were seen as providing opportunities. Free resources, for instance, were also seen as containing inaccuracies and as threatening the viability of organisations that relied on membership fees to sustain the quality of their work: 'you see what's being passed off as good work' as an SoE lecturer commented acridly. Immediacy was reinterpreted by one SoE colleague as generating pointless controversy for the sake of it, based on misrepresentations on micro-blogging sites such as Twitter. Both SoE staff and school teachers described additional workload generated by controversies and (mis)communications online, whether by school or university students. There were concerns over commercial infiltration, such as getting followed on twitter by companies hoping to get products endorsed, or by organisations with problematic agendas (such as a US-based group advocating a particular treatment for autism).

SoE colleagues highlighted what they saw as online **ethics** and their breaching by some active participants in online communities – for instance, bloggers who relentlessly criticized other blogs even when these were written by new teachers. Informal codes of practice in relation to the ethics of online behaviour appear to be very much a work in progress, with no agreed norms. The tendency of particular platforms to generate their own codes of usage was felt alienating by some: as one SoE colleague reported, 'I feel totally confused by what most people say on twitter – full of hash tag geek stuff and declamations that I don't quite understand'. Equally, some interviewees saw it as their role to support and amplify the voices of classroom practitioners, communicating directly with and encouraging them to share their practice.

It could also be argued that a picture emerged of **fragmented** and siloed social media usage. Even amongst our small sample, a wide range of social media platforms were being used for professional purposes (e.g. LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Academia.edu, Google +), with little crossover and exchange between them. Preferences for one or the other might relate to what was available when individuals first adopted social media as much as to the intrinsic merits of the affordances of these different platforms. Individuals who were seen as significant in our research were not necessarily ones who were perceived as having policy influence (eg the Heads' Roundtable). At the same time, features of social media inhibit discussion across

political positions. For instance, the 'public' nature of whom you 'follow' on Twitter might be seen as an endorsement, making one cautious about one's choices in these respects.

Using **tools for analysing social media** proved to be (even) more complicated, and less informative, than we originally thought. It was not easy to gain a clear picture of patterns of influence from the exploratory investigations the project could conduct within funding and time constraints. For instance, we asked our data-scraping expert to look at nine Twitter accounts: this resulted in around 26,000 tweets. Our request to calculate whose tweets were retweeted proved difficult to implement. In Twitter API, there is a counter but a limit of 60 requests per 15 minutes, which meant that to find out how many retweets all tweets had would have taken  $(26.000/60)*15 \text{ min} = 110 \text{ hours!}$  In any case, it would be crude to take retweets as a measure of influence or approval. In addition, we attempted to use Node XL (see Smith et al 2014) but found it had some limitations. For instance, NodeXL permits downloading only 200 of the most recent tweets from a twitter account, compared to Twitter API, which allows downloading of up to 3240 of the most recent tweets.

Nonetheless, we made some progress both in understanding these limitations for ourselves, and in visualizing data.

## Key issues

**Conceptually**, danah boyd (2014) has discussed **context collapse** in relation to young people, to capture the idea that new media profoundly changes boundaries between public and private - demanding new kinds of practices for managing and creating privacy and publicness/ audiences. A related project in which the PI has been involved has identified an underlying economy shaping young people's social media engagements structured along the axes of **participation** and **visibility** (Berriman & Thomson forthcoming). These conceptualisations have proved particularly relevant to teachers and teacher educators, albeit in somewhat different ways. Participants referred to the Teaching Standards of Professional Conduct and Behaviour in justifying their concerns about social media usage. One survey respondent commented of Facebook 'this venue is fraught with danger in this profession and use must be minimized to protect oneself'. An SoE lecturer noted that he told his students to 'remove their photos from Facebook'. The public nature of social media sites threatened individuals' privacy and capacity to maintain boundaries between personal and professional lives. One SoE colleague had been 'stalked' online and received little institutional support in dealing with this. Teachers described the energy with which students attempted to track their personal social media sites, generally in what they interpreted as a privacy-invading rather than friendly fashion. It was agreed that institutional policies were contradictory and often devised by people who lacked familiarity with social media (for instance, one participant recounted being told not to use Facebook in teaching, but then being asked to 'like' the institution's Facebook page in ways that could have made her personal account more visible to students; at the time of our research a Local Authority had issued guidelines banning the use of Facebook by employees despite its evidently careful and productive professional use by some). Rumours abounded, such as an anecdote about a student teacher failing their placement because of critical comments made about the school on a 'private' Facebook group. Participants tended to support the **responsibilisation** of individuals rather than the agenda of 'digital rights' for which Hope (2014) and others have called, in spite of the contradictions of this. For example, it was often argued that one should be accountable for one's privacy settings, even while it was also acknowledged that one did not have control over what others posted about or tagged one in.

Enabling and sustaining **communities** of teachers and teacher educators was a key concern of the project. One issue that emerged is how one might enable and support teacher educators to engage in social media collectively rather than as individuals, thus enabling participation without necessarily entailing the visibility that many saw as unwelcome (see next steps, below). There was a concern that academics might become marginalized in educational debates unless they engaged more with social media networks. Another issue that was highlighted by the research was the role of gatekeepers such as professional teaching associations, and the funding dilemmas that mean these have to strike a balance between restricting access

to paid-up members (to maintain a sustainable business model) and participating in public debates (by widening access to their resources).

As we have noted above, the same affordances of the **digital** have proved from this research to be both problematic and useful. Tools for digital data analysis have meanwhile not proved as helpful as might be hoped or indeed assumed, from the kinds of claims made about the value of 'big data' in some contexts. In particular, we have realized that it is important to make nuanced judgements about what constitutes 'good' or 'effective' use of social media rather than conflating high visibility with quality – more limited uses might be very effective for the communities they set out to serve, as seemed to be the case with some of our SoE colleagues who were usefully connecting students to sources of support and ideas at a local scale.

In terms of **policy**, we note our participants' active distrust or lack of engagement with networks that feature in analysis of the Global Education Reform Movement (such as certain academy chains or promoters), yet which appear to have more influence in terms of policy-makers' thinking. The disconnect between the latter and the perspectives of teachers and teacher educators might be seen as a cause for concern.

### Next steps

Despite many participants' evident enthusiasm for online resources and websites, 50% of our survey respondents did not feel that they had 'an effective social-media based PLN'. There is certainly scope for considering what 'effective' PLNs might involve and look like.

We are interested in pursuing ways of encouraging good practice and quality control in social media PLNs e.g. website awards, kite marks, centres of excellence. This could be extended to consider 'good' or 'better' uses of social media and amplifying ethical codes and issues in public fora. We are keen to extend our discussions with colleagues in health, youth and social work, and are working with the UoB social media manager, Mark Higginson, to do so.

We intend to develop issues that arose in relation to the role of teaching subject associations, as we had not expected these to be so prominent in people's accounts: there is considerable potential for influence on practice here (albeit less so in terms of policy).

There is also an urgent need for critical and pedagogically-informed analysis of freely available and commonly mentioned online resources as a service for education professionals; and to understand further the archiving, 'classificatory imagining' (Beer, 2013) and use of these materials.

Towards the very end of the project, we discovered that two colleagues in the SoE have over the previous year been developing and building, in their own time, a social media platform that enables participants to share practice and build their professional profile - @staffrm, which they describe as 'long form twitter'. This has been designed specifically to overcome some of the dilemmas of social media based PLNs (for instance, using a 'recommend' button rather than the more common like/ dislike buttons; using real names; building the community by invitation to ensure a context of trust; enabling longer but still manageable posts) while also benefitting from their more positive affordances (for instance, to build community in a non-hierarchical way and across geographical divides). We intend to observe and participate in this community as it develops over the next few months, because it may well represent a model of **good practice** that merits wider dissemination.

In addition, we are interested in how teaching professionals might be supported to engage in social media collectively rather than on an individual basis, and this will provide the basis of reflections with colleagues during dissemination activities. As we suggest below, it was evident that the discussions we held as part of the project were highly valued by those who took part, for both learning and critical reflection and comparison: we will develop and extend these activities in our programmes of teacher education, see below.

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