

# making the case

## “It forces me to reflect and reconsider what I thought I knew... and I was enjoying it!” Reframing CPD as dialogic blogging.

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### Theme(s)

**Learning:** Reflection

**Teaching/Professional practice:** Programme/Course Development, Continuing Professional Development, Managing e-Assessment

### Setting the scene

This is a multi-voiced text in which we (Julie, the tutor and Gavin, the colleague/learner) will explore our PebblePad experiences.

### The background context

This is a Masters in Education; all students are education professionals/para-professionals with an educational context/practice to draw upon. There are limited opportunities for blended learning at this level currently within the school, although this is a priority for future work and activity. There had been no earlier use of blogging as a collaborative reflective tool.

So I (Julie) decided that I would make the formative (assessment for learning) task a compulsory blog post (2 per week) which I hoped would engage learners, critically, with selected ‘texts’. The ‘texts’ were deliberately multi-media in nature and the task was deliberately open to interpretation. I had hoped that this echoed Barnett’s (2010) call to be courageous as he states “the will to live in creative spaces and their associated temporal rhythms require positive courage; the courage to live in the future and take on tasks that have to be uncertain as to their outcomes” (p.81).

### Why PebblePad?

I (Julie) have been very happily using PebblePad since 2002 with students. But I had never taught a Masters module with lots of colleagues (peers) as *students* before.

This was a new Masters level module in a new MA programme – Learning in the Digital Age. As an institution we are thinking

about how and where we might adapt our current curriculum to move to a more flexible, blended/distance learning ‘offer’ and I was asked to consider this in my curriculum design and delivery choices. Under the newly validated routes we were allocated 18 hours face-to-face contact time. I wanted to test out how I could *further* blend (and test) the use of PebblePad to encourage Masters level engagement with set ‘texts’ and engagement with the wider group.

Week 1 of 9 found me teaching in Palestine so I had to think through how I would use PebblePad at a distance. I have used PebblePad for pre-induction activities but this was week 1 of teaching – a first. This was a quite crucial development for me as a teacher as there would be no *physical* me in week 1 of teaching and I would have to scaffold and model what would be expected on the module. So I shared my teaching webfolio (with embedded blog page) and I utilised the scaffolding within the PebblePad blog format to allocate conversation groups with prompts and questions. Guided by the wise words of Ron Barnett (2007) I hoped to facilitate a learning experience where “(s)tudents (*read teachers also*) must come into a felt relationship with uncertainty in a space which supports a will to learn” (Barnett, 2007, p1). In this space “the main pedagogic task is simple to state and near impossible to achieve. It is that of releasing students that they come into themselves, in relation to their curricula challenges. They become beings-for-themselves...**They have their own will to learn**” (Barnett 2007, p.1).

## The purpose

Rationale – testing what I (Julie) thought I knew.

I am very influenced by Keri Facer's (2011, p.1) vision that, "education is a site in which visions of the future proliferate." Facer continues:

“*When technologies are released, they are adopted and appropriated within existing social values, structures and expectations: they are shaped and reshaped by beta testers, early adopters and marketers..... a useful way of considering how technologies 'shape' the world is to consider it as a process of 'co-production' between the potential capabilities of the technologies and the ways in which they are perceived and taken up.*”

(p7)

So in working with colleagues at this level I was interested in how 're'-appropriation might manifest itself. And Gavin's wonderful 're'-appropriation of the blogging space was a revelation.

## The approach

I (Julie) hoped that I offered structured blog prompts and interesting, provocative texts. As I have said above, this was a new venture, a risky venture – and I do think that 'risk' is good. The timeline was incredibly tight as I had to get the group to buy-in to this approach by week 3. What I learnt from Gavin's approach in week 3 set a powerful signifier/model for the module. Gavin's use of the blog structure was both revelatory and emancipatory. Gavin scaffolded and structured his 1000 word response to engage his peers in dialogue. He said:

*"I have found this exercise to be a very interesting one. I think writing it in sections has been useful, because I have found that the more I reflect on what and how I wrote the previous section, it has changed how I have written the next section – I would love to say that I intended to take a dialogic approach when I started but that is unfortunately not true but I found it to be a very useful exercise, to be honest, much more useful than I anticipated it would be. It has really opened my eyes to the potential of the approaches that you have shared and converted me to them in an almost 'Damascene' manner!"*

Gavin went on to say

*"As I was doing the exercise and it was getting longer and longer, I did wonder about the potential impact it might have on the others with a bit less experience/confidence but I figured you would probably moderate expectations at the next face to face if I misjudged what was required - and I was enjoying it! I think I also felt peer pressure to do a good job, if you know what I mean?"*

There are many examples of Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) approaches to promoting learning via discussion (see Dillenbourg & Hong 2008). The main aim of these tools is to solicit opinions from participants, and then present them with an opposing view expressed by one of their peers in order to promote effective argument through engagement with divergent opinions.

In this case the typical type of CSCL tool (e.g. Sensemaker) was inappropriate. The learners were from a range of backgrounds and a range of experiences and for some using a blog was a very new, challenging experience. The blog part of the discussions also took place asynchronously over a 9 week period, whereas the more structured CSCL experiences might happen over a period of a few hours in one location. This meant that the tool used needed to be accessible on a range of different devices. The reflective nature of the course demanded that students have time to think about the stimulus material, but also about the comments from their peers and how they might respond, and this again meant that the blog was a good tool to use.

The discussions took place on two social planes, the first within the whole group, and the second as an individual engaging with the blog. This was ideal for the part time nature of the course and enabled students to participate at a time of their choosing. Learners could also take time to reflect on the posts that others made, whereas in a classroom an immediate response would be required.

As this was a new group of learners and the aim was to be supportive and collaborative, a careful path had to be followed in terms of the amount of challenge that was offered – too much and participants would become disaffected and disengaged, too little and the learning would be less than optimal. The private posting feature of PebblePad allowed me (Julie) to offer messages of support/guidance to individuals without the rest of the group being aware that this was happening, which was useful for increasing the students' levels of confidence, and therefore participation.

## The result

The blogging activities not only allowed reflection and discussion on the issues at hand, but through their use I (Gavin) had to consider the nature of how I was learning, and how best to present material so that the others in the group might engage with it successfully. The incremental nature of the approach taken meant that a dialogic process evolved almost incidentally (from my point of view as the learner).

I believe that the approach Julie took of getting learners to review specific articles, and reply to these reviews could be seen as a type of 'macro-script' to guide online dialogic learning (see Wergerif et al 2008) that works appropriately with these Masters level part-time participants to enable shared creation of understanding, which exceeds what could be accomplished by an individual working on their own (Stahl, 2004).

## The impact

I (Gavin) have subsequently spent a lot of time reflecting on the value of this type of learning activity and have since changed my own teaching programme (PGCE IT for the Secondary School sector) to incorporate exactly this type of structured, focussed dialogic blogging activity with my trainee teachers. I am also encouraging them to use it in secondary schools with their pupils as part of their final written assignments.

## Lessons learnt

- I (Julie) have learnt that (critically reflective) blogging works with a Masters level group from the beginning whether I am there (face-to-face) or not.
- I have learnt again about how much I can learn from my learners/colleagues in this case.
- I have learnt that weekly focussed 'bloginars' managed by Masters level students are a powerful learning activity.
- I have recognised that this works because it is blended and not distance learning.
- As someone (Gavin) who has for the last eight years worked with Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), but almost exclusively with computer assessed and individual student task type approaches, I cannot understate the impact that this social learning process has had on my own professional practice and values.

## In brief – making the case for PebblePad

So you will have guessed by now that Barnett is a very important influence. He says, "teachers and the taught teach each other. Their roles are interwoven, such that their boundaries become indistinct to some extent" (Barnett 2007, p.132) and "the will to live in creative spaces and their associated temporal rhythms **require positive courage**; the courage to live in the future and take on tasks that have to be uncertain as to their outcomes" (Barnett 2010, p.81).

PebblePad is the creative, co-constructionist space that allows us to inhabit wonderfully temporal rhythms and delicious uncertainty.

- Supported effective collaboration between participants with very different skills and experiences.
- Supported asynchronous discussions to develop (including from Palestine!), fostering the reflective process in a more critical manner.
- Privacy tool allowed the tutor to prompt and support participants as needed without being seen to 'take over' the discussion – this changed the very nature of how the tutor interacted with the participants.

## References:

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