Transformative and troublesome: Reflective blogging for professional learning about university teaching

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The complexities of being an academic in the contemporary university mean that there is not often the time or space to reflect on teaching, and on academic life in general. In this study, four academics set up a private blog to share reflections on teaching. The members of the blogging project came from different areas of two large universities, and in joining the project their motivation was in part to refresh their thinking by moving outside their institutional confines. Blogging is an activity which can occur, as in this study, in learning spaces hidden (Savin-Baden, 2009) from institutional monitoring or valuation. The role of blogs in developing academic identity has included facilitating reflection amongst new teachers (Killeavy & Moloney, 2010), enabling academics to share research and practice (Mewburn & Thomson, 2013), and sharing reflections about academic life and its intersection with parenting (Petersen & Metcalfe 2013). While initial commitment to the reflective blogging process was good and all members posted once per month or more, over time this declined. After nine months of intermittent communication, we decided to wrap up the project and examine the experience. The group’s reflective posts and related emails were generated from two sets of prompts, and from final reflections about the project. A qualitative analysis of these posts, using NVivo, showed the topics initiated by the prompts supported the emergence of other themes, notably the emotions felt as part of academic life, and the shaping of experience by time. The balance of negative emotions about teaching expressed in the blog posts and emails (including themes of burden, difficulty, and fatigue) against positive emotions (appreciation, interest, and hope) showed the trade-offs facing the developing academic, while the representations of time in the reflective posts intersected with concerns familiar to many academics. The institutional constructs (Goodyear, 2006) of time, such as the ‘semester’ as a location of lived experience, issues of time and productivity as an academic, control of work time via institutional allocations, and the deadlines and unequal patterns of work against an academic calendar were mentioned by every contributor. Excerpts from these posts show the emotional turmoil that is experienced in participating in the measured university and in seeking shared reflective spaces to unpack these tensions. The blog was a space we created and provided for the purpose of reflection on teaching and academic life. We discuss why the space did not work as anticipated, and how such ‘troublesome’ spaces (Savin-Baden, 2009) may, paradoxically, be viewed as transformative. Our presentation will also explore how shared reflection about teaching might be achieved.
References

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