The University of Edinburgh
Principal's Teaching Award Scheme

PTAS Application Proposal Cover Page

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Project Title: Conversations, community and collegiality: Exploring the effect of blogging on teaching and learning practice.

Abstract (up to 250 words):

The Teaching Matters blog has become a key channel though which to showcase the many exciting initiatives around teaching and learning at The University of Edinburgh and, anecdotally, operates as an important spark for discussions that can change individuals' practices. The range of analytics and reader statistics currently available to us, however, do not provide an adequate overview of user interaction with the blog and, if taken at face value, could suggest that it is failing to 'have impact'. This project seeks to provide a more nuanced view, building on a preliminary study (within the IAD) that explored how and why staff and students engaged with the blog. Using qualitative and innovative techniques, the project will: (1) map the motivation of (UoE) staff and students to engage with Teaching Matters; (2) explore how conversations generated by blog posts travel; (3) examine what this engagement looks like, and how it can be evidenced as having 'impact'; and, (4) investigate how Teaching Matters might further support the informal sharing of excellent practices and community building. The findings will help us to understand how better to support conversations, community building and collegiality around teaching and learning, to better identify the types of physical, intellectual and temporal spaces that can stimulate and encourage dialogue and debates on teaching and learning, enhance Teaching Matters as an online resource for teaching and learning, and provide a valuable contribution to the literature on blogging as a means of developing informal professional communities and dialogue in education.

Please indicate the project type (delete as appropriate):   A Research

Institute for Academic Development

Conversations, community and collegiality: Exploring the effect of blogging on teaching and learning practice.

Background

The University of Edinburgh is strongly committed to the promotion and dissemination of excellence in relation to teaching. This project examines if, and how, sharing of excellent practice about teaching and learning is facilitated by the growth and development of the Teaching Matters blog (hereafter Teaching Matters). Our particular interest is in the kinds of (online and offline) conversations that are sparked by the posts, and in the ways in which these contribute to the shaping of excellent teaching practices within the Schools and Colleges. Given the University's commitment in *Strategy 2030* that, 'Our teaching will match the excellence of our research', it is timely to carry out research into Teaching Matters to ascertain if, and how, it opens up opportunities for, and prompts, staff to participate in conversations, community building and collegiality around teaching and learning.

Teaching Matters was founded by former Senior Vice-Principal, Charlie Jeffrey, who stated the blog aimed to give 'really committed people', who do not feel their voices are heard enough, a platform 'to talk about things they're passionate about'. Over the past four years, Teaching Matters has become a major channel though which to showcase the many exciting initiatives around learning and teaching within the University, as well as a way to spark precisely the kinds of conversations that lead to changes in individual's practices. These changes bring with them the opportunity to shape the nature of teaching within both Schools and Colleges, and create a community of practice around teaching and learning, which is perhaps more informal than structured learning and teaching initiatives and governance (Hardy *et al,* 2014).

A blog (originally called 'web log') is a regularly updated website, featuring short articles written in an informal and conversational style, usually with hyperlinks to further sources of information and/or case studies. Teaching Matters is technically a multi-authored blog (Dunleavy, 2014), in which a central editorial team commissions and collates posts from many different authors. The posts are professionally edited, with a common format and well-defined style, and are regularly promoted on social media (Twitter and Instagram). It is often assumed that blogs promote dialogue. Yet, while blogs may be conversational in tone and style, they often remain a monologic form of communication (Wegerif, 2013). Only 9% of Teaching Matters posts have stimulated a written, online comment. Looking at this figure in isolation, we may assume that Teaching Matters falters in generating further conversations about learning and teaching across the University.

We are aware, however, that conversations are happening across, and outside of, the University that are prompted by publishing and reading Teaching Matters. As such, Teaching Matters is indeed providing the 'spark' for conversations that are contributing to the formation of a micro-culture around teaching and learning (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2015). For example, the associated Twitter account (@UoE_teaching) shows an international engagement with the posts, with tweeters regularly liking, retweeting or commenting on posts that are shared. We also know that one author was asked to speak at a QAA event after the organiser read his Teaching Matters post, and that other blog sites have embedded Teaching Matters posts within their pages. The problem is that these interactions avoid capture by the range of analytics and reader statistics available to us regarding the global reach of Teaching Matters. We know little, for example, about *what kinds of*

conversations are sparked amongst Teaching Matters readers and writers, about *how these conversations travel* around different networks, or about *the impact these conversations are having* within the University.

To start investigating how and why University staff and students were engaging with Teaching Matters blog, a project team in the IAD led by the Principal Applicant completed a preliminary round of data collection in summer 2019. Teaching Matters' readers and contributors were invited to complete an online questionnaire. This asked about reading habits, motivations to engage with the blog, and to describe any conversations that were sparked by either reading or writing a post. 39 readers and 102 contributors completed the questionnaire. A semi-structured interview with Charlie Jeffery was also completed.

The project team also wanted to explore what 'impact' looks like. We often expect 'impact' to consist of substantial changes in practice, but a preliminary reading of the questionnaire results shows much more subtle and nuanced effects, which still could be defined as 'having impact'. For example, respondents expressed an awareness of different ways of thinking and doing, reading blog posts was an act of supporting colleagues, and they stimulated informal chats, which led to changes in practice not necessarily related to the post's content. Yet the disappointing completion rate of reader questionnaires failed to capture the reach and nuances of this sort of impact.

This prompted a pilot trial of an innovative case study method to trace reader's awareness of published posts and to explore if reading a post had influenced their practice in any way. The method, 'Twitter Tracing', is based on the concept that you can use Twitter to trace digital 'lines of flight' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988) to explore the professional learning of those engaging with the social media platform (Wilson, 2016). Recent literature shows how Twitter can be used as 'an informal learning space' in academic development (McPherson, Budge and Lemon, 2015). To this end, the team identified a Teaching Matters post that had stimulated high levels of interest on Twitter. Each tweeter was messaged and asked to respond to a series of questions about why they engaged with the blog post and if and how it impacted their teaching practice. 14 tweeters completed the short questionnaire. The author of the blog post also answered a series of questions to help trace both the online and offline impact they experienced from the publication of their blog post. A preliminary analysis of the findings found this method to be extremely useful in regards to adding further nuance and depth to the original data. However, in order to make conclusive statements the data needs to be fully analysed and the method extended to other posts.

The PTAS project
The IAD project team has given permission for the data already gathered to be used as the basis for this PTAS project. First, the quantitative and qualitative data from the questionnaires, interview with Teaching Matters creator, and the Twitter Trace pilot need to be fully analysed. The PTAS project team would then aim to extend the research project aims as detailed below:

Research Project Aims
1. To analyse the questionnaire data to map the motivation of staff and students at The University of Edinburgh to read and contribute to Teaching Matters.

2. To gain greater insights into how teaching and learning conversations generated by a blog post travel, and how.

3. To examine what these conversations and interactions look like, and how they can be evidenced as having 'impact'.

4. To investigate how Teaching Matters can be used as a resource to further support the informal sharing of excellent practices and community building.

Methodology

A postgraduate researcher will conduct one focus group, 15 semi-structured interviews, and two further Twitter Trace case studies.

Selection criteria for interviews: At the end of the online questionnaire in the preliminary data collection round, readers and contributors were asked to self-identify if they were happy to be contacted for a follow-up interview. 41 respondents (36 contributors, five readers) provided email addresses, and will need to be contacted for this next phase. We will interview 15 of these respondents, which will represent a proportional split between readers and contributors. Where possible these interviews will be conducted in-person. However, it may be necessary to conduct them via Skype.

Selection criteria for focus group: The team will make use of existing networks within the University to hold a focus group with participants of the *Experienced Teachers Network* all of whom are Senior Fellows of the Higher Education Academy. A date in February 2020 has already been identified.

Two further Twitter Trace case studies: To identify high level of engagement (via comments, likes and retweets) on two Teaching Matters posts promoted on Twitter. Engaged tweeters will be contacted and invited to complete short engagement questionnaire. A set of questions will be sent to the authors of the posts.

Involvement of Students: Teaching Matters actively involves students as authors, therefore a number of respondents were UG and PG student contributors. We will contact and invite two of these students to act as a critical friend to the interview questions and to sense-check preliminary data analysis.

Timetable

The work will fall into four independent but linked phases, running from January to July 2020:

1. (Jan to Feb): Recruit a postgraduate researcher. Commence literature review. Analyse questionnaire data that has already been gathered from the completed phase of the project. Recruit and liaise with students identified as potential critical friends. Conduct focus group with *Experienced Teacher Network.*

2. (March to April): Sample interviewees and conduct interviews. Transcription.

3. (May to June) Identify Twitter Trace case studies. Undertake engagement questionnaires with both writers and (re-)tweeters. Present initial findings at conferences (see below).

4. (June to July) Analyse data collected from focus groups, interviews and engagement questionnaires. Prepare dissemination materials. Identify best practice. Begin write up. Run ENGAGE and knowledge exchange workshops.

Dissemination and Impact

To ensure the greatest impact our research will be disseminated in the following ways: (1) presentation of papers at the Learning and Teaching Conference 2020 (The University of Edinburgh) and QAA Enhancement Themes 2020 conference; (2) submission of articles to *Studies*

in Higher Education Journal and *Journal for Academic Development*; (3) an *LSE Impact Blog* post; (4) a spotlight feature for the University's Teaching Matters website; (5) a workshop for the ENGAGE network; and (6) a knowledge exchange workshop for staff at the University.

Our findings will directly impact the University by helping to understand how better to support conversations, community building and collegiality around teaching and learning. We will be able to better identify the types of physical, intellectual and temporal spaces that can stimulate and encourage dialogue and debates on teaching and learning, which will support the University's commitment to ensuring that 'our teaching will match the excellence of our research'. Through using qualitative and innovative methods, we will open a debate about what constitutes impact in the use of blogs around learning and teaching. In addition, by selecting diverse channels for dissemination, we expect our research to contribute to the enhancement of Teaching Matters as an on-going resource to promote teaching and learning within and beyond the University. Finally, our findings will add to the literature on blogging, developing informal professional communities, and dialogue in education.

Equality and diversity

The project speaks to the University's commitment to supporting equality and diversity in two ways: (1) through inclusion of students on the project team (postgraduate researcher, critical friends); and, (2) by problematizing what we mean by evidence and impact. The kinds of conversations and communities that we are trying to identify may have particular resonance for staff who feel marginalised or silenced in formal conversation and structures around learning and teaching.

References

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Hardy, J., Hancock, S., Johnson, O, Galloway, R., Wallace, M., Draper, S., & Bates, S. (2014). Fostering learning improvements in Physics, Project final report (April 2014). http://www-archive.ph.ed.ac.uk/flip/project-outputs.

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Wegerif, R. (2013). *Dialogic: Education for the internet age*. London: Routledge.

Wilson, A. (2016). Image-sharing in Twitter-based professional conversations. Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Networked Learning 2016. Available at: http://www.networkedlearningconference.org.uk/abstracts/pdf/P38.pdf

PTAS Budget and Justification

Hiring a Postgraduate Researcher on Grade UE06 (spinal point 24)
This is based on working 2 days a week, over 7 months.
400 hours @ £15.52 p/h. + 30% employments costs**. Total= £8,100**
The researcher will be tasked with:

- Conducting the literature review, guided by the project team.
- Leading the analysis of the previous and new data.
- Assisting with the design of the interview and focus group questions/themes
- Recruiting interview participants
- Leading the interviews
- Leading the analysis of the raw data, with support from the project team.
- Co-authoring one or more publications.

Transcription
15 individual interviews = £1080 (99p per minute plus VAT)
1 focus group = £112 (£1.55 per minute plus VAT)
Total = £1,192

Dissemination of findings during lunchtime knowledge exchange event
Catering for 50 attendees (lunch and coffee)
Lunch (£7.50 per person) = £375
Coffee and biscuit (£2.05 per person) = £102.50
Total = £477.55

Overall total = £9769.50

Applicants' background

Jenny Scoles

Jenny Scoles is an Academic Developer and has been the editor of Teaching Matters for the last two years. She has a specific interest in including students as contributors and readers of the blog, as well as strategically aligning Teaching Matters with learning and teaching initiatives across the University. She has extensive qualitative research experience in education and enjoys developing innovative methods that can make visible how learning and knowing emerge in practice. She actively disseminates her work at conferences, in publications and at workshops.

Hazel Christie

Hazel Christie is a qualitative researcher. She has extensive experience in the design, analysis and dissemination of a wide range of educational research projects most recently including work on blogging as an assessment strategy and the impact of formal training on teachers' agency. She also has a strong track record in disseminating research in a variety ways including journal articles, blogs, podcasts and conference presentations.

Nina Morris

Nina Morris is a Senior Lecturer in Human Geography in the School of GeoSciences with a keen interest in experiential learning and innovative assessment, in particular, blogging as a form of assessment. Her University of Edinburgh Principal's Teaching Award Scheme funded research, with Hazel Christie, on assessed blogs has been recognised by the Higher Education Academy as being of high pedagogic value and included in their 2017 Transforming Assessment in Higher Education case study series. Nina was College of Science and Engineering representative on the Academic Blogging Project Board 2018-2019. She is also a HEA Senior Fellow, Leadership Foundation Aurora programme Role Model, and Edinburgh Teaching Award Mentor (Levels 2 and 3).

Karen Howie

Karen Howie is the Technology Enhanced Learning Team Manager in Information Services and part of the team which manages the Academic Blogging Service (including blogs.ed.ac.uk). She has twenty years of experience in supporting staff and students in the use of technology in learning and teaching. She has experience of data analysis and visualisation having been involved in several research projects in the areas of learning technology and digital humanities.