ESSAY

A missed opportunity? Social media and pedagogy as teachers returned to school [version 1; peer review: awaiting peer review]

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Abstract

Social media and social networking sites have become popular across governments, enterprises, and non-profit making organisations. Nevertheless, education has evidenced conflicting views around the role that social media ought to play in pedagogy. This thesis examines whether or not social media can be incorporated into pedagogy successfully. The research aims are to examine the current relationship between social media and pedagogy, to identify factors that influence teacher engagement, and to determine whether or not social media can make an impact on student engagement and performance. The study is underpinned by Trowler's (2008) socio-cultural theory and the research is based on a mixed methods approach. I applied a phase of online quantitative surveys that were analysed using descriptive statistics and two subsequent phases of interviews that were analysed thematically. I adopted purposeful sampling to recruit 434 secondary teachers with QTS to participate in the study. The results show that there is little meaningful, transformative professional development in schools in respect of using social media for pedagogy (Kennedy 2005 and 2014). I argue that CPD in schools should focus on developing pedagogical strategies with technology as opposed to focusing on the technology in its own right. Furthermore, teachers' reflections indicated that the differences between the social media platforms are profound; thus, grouping them together can become problematic. In other words, YouTube's functionality is applied in an opposite way to Twitter's and with different audiences. Additionally, the study has uncovered a lack of thought towards applying technology in education policymaking, and this became problematic for schools during the U.K. lockdown. The study's major themes illuminate the challenges involved with successfully embedding technology in education, particularly social media.

Keywords
TEL, pedagogy, education, social media, research methods, reflection
Introduction
I was awarded a PhD in Education in June 2022 from Teesside University, UK. I studied between 2018 and 2022, which was an interesting period as significant parts of my data collection came in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. My thesis was titled ‘An exploration into the pedagogical benefits of using social media: can educators incorporate social media into pedagogy successfully?’. I recruited 434 secondary teachers to take part in the study. I applied a phase of online quantitative surveys that were analysed using descriptive statistics and two subsequent phases of interviews that were analysed thematically. My research was largely underpinned by Trowler’s (2008) socio-cultural theory. My thesis illuminated four major themes which included 1) a lack of transformative CPD taking place in school; 2) the term TEL is problematic; 3) there is a lack of pedagogical thought in policymaking, and 4) the necessity to distinguish the personal and the professional in social media.

Upon finishing the write-up of my PhD, I have been able to reflect on how my research processes were impacted by a nationwide shut down of schools in the United Kingdom. UNESCO (2020) estimated that 1.6 billion learners were affected by COVID-19 and the disruption to learning. I have previously reflected through the period of remote working via blogs and vlogs; however, as teachers and learners return to school, it is interesting to explore the impact this has had in the context of my study. Moreover, I am going to look at the impact COVID-19 has had on Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) in secondary schools and whether some of the traditional complications associated with TEL were addressed. I will further reflect on whether the pandemic has generally made it easier or more challenging to implement the changes I proposed in this thesis. During the pandemic, I argued that there were advantages to collecting data on education technology during the period of remote teaching and learning; however, reflecting on this post-lockdown period is critical to truly understand the current state of social media and TEL in secondary schools.

Postscript
Although it may always remain contentious when the pandemic actually began, for this purpose, most of my reference points will be from March 2020, in other words, the first U.K. lockdown. My PhD topic always aimed to explore the relationship between social media and pedagogy, and much of this interest stemmed from my professional work. The first lockdown began in the last few months of my second year, meaning I had well-established research objectives. Therefore, COVID-19 did not influence the creation of a research problem or how I determined my research questions.

Furthermore, I primarily worked off-campus due to my location, so the pandemic did not interfere with how I could engage with the literature. I remained able to access high-impact journals using Teesside University’s online library. This was also my preferred way of working, as I remained active in the field of educational software. Interestingly, the education agenda had shifted by the time I submitted my work, meaning that I had to revisit some of my earlier chapters to ensure that they remained relevant and update my references to show this, such as Guckian et al. (2021), Dennen et al. (2021), Martin et al. (2022), Lindly et al. (2022), and Otchie & Pedaste (2020).

Before COVID-19, my engagement with my director of studies was through a combination of face-to-face and online meetings, so this had to be adjusted for the pandemic to entirely online tutorials. Nevertheless, when the lockdown began, it was a busy time collecting data, so I spent less time writing my thesis and receiving feedback from my director of studies and increasingly more time scheduling and conducting the interviews.

In my thesis, I discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic meant I had to adapt my data collection, moving the interviews online, for example. However, I had never previously stated that I intended to do face-to-face interviews, and early discussions with my supervisor even mentioned a mixture of online and face-to-face interviews. In reality, it was unrealistic to travel across the country to interview teachers in different locations. In consequence, online interviews expanded my geographical reach. The pandemic did not necessarily result in exclusive online data collection, instead, it simply made it increasingly challenging. For example, I did interview a teacher face to face during the pandemic, although this was conducted in a neutral setting and not in the school. This was due to the teacher being part of my ‘bubble’. At the time, I was immersed in the data whereby I did not view this interview as remarkably different from the online ones, especially regarding the organization, timings, and key themes that emerged. This was due to the already established themes in phase 1 of the data collection.

Nevertheless, now that I have reflected on this experience, I argue that there are profound differences between being face to face with a participant, including non-verbal cues that relate to emotion and behaviour. This is highlighted in Cohen et al. (2018) as one of the advantages of conducting interviews in this way. The ideal scenario would have been to interview teachers in their classrooms where technology would be present that may stimulate thought in combination with some online interviews. It was not a limitation to conducting interviews online, yet the participants being at home rather than in their school environment was not ideal.

Additionally, when interpreting the results, some challenging aspects were mainly due to participants having their cameras off for some of the interviews. However, on balance, I argued that ensuring the participants were comfortable in their home environment was significant for gaining rich and detailed insights. Despite having more time to reflect on this aspect of the interviews, my position has not altered.

Whilst this study was focused on social media, it was a broader contribution to the TEL literature. COVID-19 presented schools with opportunities whereby they were experimenting and trialling new technology that was not necessarily social media, but nevertheless had overlapping themes. Now that some
time has passed, one of the primary outcomes was significant challenges for leadership teams within schools. **Harris (2020)** argues that COVID-19 illuminated an underlying leadership crisis in schools. School leaders generally avoided making decisions during the pandemic, which is viewed as being negative. Moreover, whether it is by design or default, school leaders have historically focused their leadership energies on ‘engaging others in the collaborative, shared and collective work that is both vital and urgent’ (Harris, 2020).

**Harris (2020)** argues that because of this leadership style, school leaders often filter out the noise to focus more on distributed leadership practices or to get the job done. Interestingly, school leaders have been highlighted in this way as it relates to what some teachers said about their leaders. Whilst it is difficult to criticize school leaders and their role and responsibility during a pandemic, the general idea or value of just trying to finish the job is relevant in TEL. Teachers described that school leaders tend to focus on the ‘wow factor of technology’, such as the cost implications of iPads. There is little thinking about how teachers will teach with new technology. My findings remain relevant in terms of a need to enhance professional development in a more transformative way of working. However, the current analysis of school leaders is perhaps more critical of some school practices.

During this period, secondary schools were using technology in a novel way whereby live lessons were conducted online. **Remtulla (2020)** argues that teachers successfully conducted live lessons for 15 minutes, yet there were challenges when they began to differentiate or provide individual feedback. The fact that teachers were not in the same physical space as the pupils made communication challenging. Nevertheless, **Remtulla (2020)** suggests that this may result from technology not allowing for this type of interaction. This is again interesting as during my interviews, teachers mentioned that enabling instant feedback was the biggest challenge facing technology in education. These new COVID-19 findings support the work in this thesis that highlights specific features and functionalities teachers require. Some schools that subscribed to Google’s education package were much more successful at providing feedback to the individual, and this perhaps indicates that the challenges were a result of the technology.

Interestingly, some post-COVID-19 scholars, such as **Harvey (2020)**, argue that technology merely attempts to minimize disruption, and the educational outcomes were ‘disastrous’. This is concerning as it is an example of using technology to substitute the classroom experience, in other words remote learning, which consists of many challenges such as lack of staff training, limitations of the technology, accessibility for all children as with equipment and broadband. My thesis never argued that technology should replace face-to-face teaching; rather, technology, particularly social media, can be used in transformative ways. Social media may enhance the classroom debate outside the traditional four walls but not replace it. The digital divide in the U.K. is too great to make such an argument. **Coleman (2021)** concludes that remote learning further illuminated the inequalities with access to education. Some schools and institutions had adequate digital infrastructure to cope with the additional challenges presented by the pandemic, whereas others did not, and this directly impacted access to learning in disadvantages areas. The digital divide has various dimensions: as well as access to devices and the internet, digital skills are essential, as are external factors such as parental support, teacher skills and learning environments. This is representative of challenges in society rather than criticisms of technology. Education has long sought to minimize societal divisions, and technology can be used as a tool to promote inclusion, as is evident with **Weible’s (2018)** access and assistive technologies.

Thus, I believe that due to the unexpected pandemic, issues with remote learning, and educational outcomes being lower than before COVID-19, a section of educators will remain sceptical about the role of social media in education. This is despite some well-publicized uses of technology, such as teaching students at a distance using tools that enable synchronous and asynchronous communication with the whole class, groups and individual children or young people; access to learning materials; and interactive and collaborative activities (Starkey *et al.*, 2021).

I argue that HE is often increasingly accepting of new technology, and it may be worthwhile to explore the post-covid-19 path to understand the future of social media and technology for secondary schools. Many universities have now adapted hybrid working models, and subscriptions to software such as **Canvas, Microsoft Teams and Google Classroom** have remained high to ensure the continuation of digital accessibility and live communication.

Some of the literature that has been published during and after COVID-19 have explored the impact technology has had on the classroom. It is interesting to think about how some of the new publications further contribute to the recommendations I proposed in my thesis. Firstly, I argued that grouping all technology under an umbrella term is unhelpful as there are profound differences between a tool such as an Apple iPad compared with using social media for teaching and learning. However, some of the scholars have identified that this blurring may have significantly worsened during the pandemic (Coleman, 2021; Dennen *et al.*, 2021; Martin *et al.*, 2022), making my recommendations difficult to embed. Advocating the benefits of social media now must contend with the shortfalls of remote working.

However, I also identified failures by policymakers and school leaders on approaches to professional development and school policy. In my thesis, I proposed that school policy should be made by those with expertise in pedagogy (INGLEBY *et al.*, 2019), in addition to CPD being transformative and away from instructional uses of technology. Thus, in this postscript, it is pleasing to see that the role of school leaders is being thoroughly examined as evidenced in the work of **Harris (2020)**. Identifying underlying issues with school leadership may
present further opportunities for professional development to be focused on solid pedagogical strategies rather than the technology itself. Subsequently, school leaders evolving from the ‘getting the job done’ (Harris, 2020) style of leadership may allow pedagogy to be considered during policy making in technology. Thus, I argue that my themes around CPD and policy in social media are somewhat closer to being realised than before the pandemic.

Data availability
No data associated with this article.

References

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