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Blogging as public pedagogy: creating alternative educational futures

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Abstract:

In this paper I explore ‘blogging’, the use of a regularly updated website or web page, authored and curated by an individual or small group, written in a conversational style, as a form of public pedagogy. I analyse blogs as pre-figurative spaces where people go to learn with/in a public sphere, through collaboration with interested others. However, my intention is not to conceptualise blogging spaces as such, but rather – having framed them in a particular way - to explore the extent to which they globalise dissent. My argument is that the blogs I explore, understood as public pedagogic spaces, cultivate voices of educational dissent.

Positioning itself within the global research imagination, the paper draws extensively on data generated by two blogging communities with a combined international readership in excess of 40,000 people; one of the blogs is based in the UK, written by a group of adult educators. The other is based in Canada written by a group of adult literacy practitioners. While both blogs are authored, curated and carried by a named individual, as public pedagogic spaces they are implicated in the creation of a dialogic self: a self which is developed collaboratively with/in the interests of and through a public that coalesces around them.

The pedagogies associated with these spaces are argued as explicit and intentioned. The public that coalesces around them learns how to survive a global neoliberal policy nexus that is unsympathetic towards the ideals they pre-figuratively embody. In so doing, they call into being the creation of alternative educational understandings of themselves and each other in relation to policy, pedagogy and the purposes of education.

Introduction

Academics can help foster “prefigurative action” by embodying visions of transformation as if they are already achieved, thereby calling them into being.
(Graeber, 2002)

In this paper I frame and study educational blogging as a particular enactment of public pedagogy. That is I explore blogs as places where people go to learn, with/in the interests of and through collaboration with others. I draw on discourse oriented ethnographic data in the form of digital traces derived from two substantial educational blogs to explore how these public pedagogic spaces enable those who coalesce around them to understand themselves and each other, in relation to policy, pedagogy and the purposes of education.

Easy-to-use, freely available software systems provided by blogs mean that anyone with inclination and access to the required resources can present their ideas to others in a visually attractive way that invites interaction. These online spaces featuring text, image or sound based content tend to be idiosyncratic in their exclusive focus on the authored or curated interests of an individual or small group. The networked audiences they attract have one defining connection: joint readership of the blog. Halavais (2006) argues blogs represent a ‘third space’ (Soja 1996) situated elusively beyond the boundaries of formal institutions despite – in the examples I explore here – having clear institutional affiliations. The opportunity to blog, to self-publish is taken up worldwide, with tens of thousands of WordPress blogs added to the 70 million already in existence everyday¹. Given their pervasiveness, blogs scarcely require the formal introduction I have offered. None-the-less, *blog* refers to both an artifact and a practice. As an artifact, *a blog* (short for web log) is a frequently updated personal online space. As a practice, *to blog* is to publish a series of posts for others to read, comment upon, establish a hyperlinked connection to and from, or otherwise engage with. These online spaces - which may be positioned anywhere along a continuum from highly individualized through collaboratively written to fully networked - attract in excess of 400 million readers each month. So ubiquitous is the phenomenon of blogging and its social media associates that it is no longer possible to refer to online communication as if it were a distinct and separate form of being. The point I am making here is that digital communication in the form of blogs is a valuable mechanism for theorising an aspect of what it means to be human (Miller and Horst 2012). In this paper, I use blogs to explore an aspect of what it means to understand professional responsibilities in relation to policy, pedagogy and the purposes of education. The online nature of the data defines nothing more than a specific situational context (Barton and Lee, 2013, p.7). It does not imply anything fundamental about the nature of the data. The world is now thoroughly interpenetrated by networked media and continually linked with public online social relations (Reid, 2010).

The bloggers' public may at times be invisible; there is a public who observes, reads, engages with but leaves no trace of their presence. A more visible public is implied by the blogs' status as multi-authored – groups of or individual writers interact with those who comment, like and re-circulate blog posts. The public nature of the bloggers' text means it is radically open and permanently unfinished. Comments or traces of interaction can be left for as long as the post is available online. A further dimension to the fluidity of the blog is its multi-platformed nature within a wide nexus of social media. Micro-blogging, FaceBook, Linked-In, Pinterst, the virtual learning environments of educational institutions all provide mechanisms through which the blog can be made public, discussed, analyzed and redefined to fit situated purposes.

However, the bloggers' public is not a public that equates to a literal everyone. It is a public restricted to those who constitute the blog's readership. A readership that selects only those with electricity, IT equipment, access to the internet, and the knowledge, skills and interest required to locate, read and make meaning of blogging. This is an exclusive 'everyone'. The lights that flicker on the WordPress world map - signifying the contemporaneous location of each blog post and comment - illustrate that the bloggers' 'everyone' includes primarily those in the global north. This public 'everyone' – depending on your positioning – may be viewed as either male, foreign, oppressive – or all three (Madianou and Miller 2011). This does not suggest the readership of the blogs I explore here replicates this bias. It is an overall comment on who constitutes the bloggers' public. My point is that the new political economy of the digital world is not distinctly different from the old political economy (Miller and Horst, 2012, p. 10) of the analog world. Filtered through and articulated by the local, the digital merely relocates the front line of systemic inequality. Contradictory effects and exclusions based on embodiment and disposition are not independently altered.

Alongside this highly restrictive notion of the bloggers' public, there is a more substantive, inclusive and preferred meaning. The bloggers' public pedagogy is a pedagogy that '(re)connects the educational and the political and locates both in the public sphere' (Biesta 2014, p. 16). These pedagogies embody a resistance to de-politicalised, privatised, and marketised forms of education. They instead enact a transformed pedagogy, a pedagogy premised on an interest in human togetherness.

The exponential growth in blogging has led to multiple, overlapping and competing conceptualizations of what these spaces are and what they do – citizen journalism, encyclopedists, videographer or diarist (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004; O'Donnell, 2006) are just a few possible framings. The international blogging directory, Technoratiⁱⁱ categorizes some 60% of registered bloggers as hobbyists who use the space for personal musing. This echoes the earlier claim by USA Today (Toppo, 2006, p. 15) that 'Most teacher blogs are little more than personal journals, written as reflections on a tough day, a difficult student or parent or, perchance, a thrilling lesson.' Toppo hints at an analysis of what blogs are and what they do, an analysis that suggests they have a powerful and pervasive educative potential. I am here suggesting that with blogging the act of writing in public, with its subsidiary knowledge-making processes of reflecting, organizing ideas, articulating a stance, interacting with others to define and

defend a position (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) has popular appeal. What ever the content or purpose, the physical act of reading, authoring, curating and coalescing around a blog constitutes a form of lifelong education - the mass uptake of the educative approach to life taking hold. The pervasiveness of blogging (reading, engaging with, authoring, curating or coalescing around an online space for whatever purpose) might represent an important dimension of a popular form of lifelong education.

This study aligns itself loosely with a discourse-oriented online ethnography (Barton and Lee 2013). I stop short or arguing here that the domain within which the research is conducted necessitates a distinct or emerging methodology. Instead, I draw on two educational blogs-*as-data* rather than blogs-*as-objects-of-analysis*. Both blogs are in a public domain and I have not interviewed any participants for this research. As such the data generated is in the form of digital traces. Its focus and content is not driven by researcher interests but defined by those involved in post-16 practice. The data has the feel of an extended, two year long discussion that has been overheard; it offers insight into what those with an interest in post-16 practice talk about when they talk amongst themselves. It allows me to explore how those working in lifelong education use public spaces to articulate their professional responsibilities in relation to policy, pedagogy and the purposes of education. My argument develops through weaving together three distinct but overlapping strands of thought.

Public pedagogy provides an epistemic frame around what I explore. It enables me to locate and name a specific blogging-genre that I view as aligned to but distinct from the more established practice of academic blogging. I suggest this specific form of intentioned pedagogic practice, is an educative space, conducted with/in and through the public. The framing is adaptive of Burawoy's knowledge typology (Burawoy, 2005). These blogs are accomplished with/in and through a public that extends beyond established education professionals for the generation of knowledge that serves reflexive rather than instrumental purposes. Viewed through the prism of participatory democracy (Stitzlein & Quinn, 2012) blogs provide a platform for globalizing dissent. They enable educators to publicize their professional knowledge while problematizing policy. They also provide valuable grounds for awareness raising with deliberative attempts to change public opinion. At times the blogs campaign to engender support or solidarity with others. As affinity spaces (Gee, 2005) they prefiguratively embody alternative educational practices. I focus on these features as the defining dimensions of public pedagogic practice.

I secondly introduce an illustrative empirical study of two blogging spaces and their associated pedagogies. Mindful of what Savage (2010) refers to as the 'fabulous haze' surrounding this term, in this section I outline how and why the concept is used in this study. That is, I explore how and why these blogs work as pedagogic sites. How, why and to what extent their emergent educational meanings are internalized, reconfigured or mobilized (Burdick, Sandlin and O'Malley 2014, p. 7). While the particular sites that form the substance of this study reference named individuals, their pedagogies are public – in that they are a mutual, dialogic and creative enactment – with/in the public interest and through collaboration with the public.

The final discussion works within the epistemic frame I have established. I draw on the data provided by two specific blogging spaces to consider how those interested in further, adult and community education in the UK and Canada understand their professional selves in specific relation to *policy, pedagogy and the purposes of education*.

Blogging as public pedagogy

Sandlin, O'Malley and Burdick's (2011) substantial curation of public pedagogy literature renders a concept that has been used in breathtaking and diffuse ways. Theorizing the educative force of media, popular culture and society, Giroux's public pedagogy depicts the mechanism through which neoliberalism and corporatism become 'all-encompassing cultural horizon for producing market identities, values and mega-corporate conglomerates, and for atomizing social practices.' These forces threaten public life by using 'the educational force of the culture to negate the basic conditions for critical agency'. In this dystopian narrative public pedagogy conceptualizes 'a powerful ensemble of ideological and institutional forces whose aim is to produce competitive, self-interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain' (Giroux, 2004, p. 497).

Their conceptual development also represents something of a critique of the field as it attempts to define, study and enact a form of public pedagogy that creates a foundation for robust empirical enquiry. They extract from the still growing body of literature at least one essential definitional trope. Public pedagogy refers to - spaces, sites, and languages of education and learning that exist outside of the walls of the institution of schools, colleges or universities (Sandlin, O'Malley, & Burdick, 2011, p. 1). The formal policy sanctioned establishments are displaced as the epicentre of educational activity. This does not imply that public spaces and discourses are innately pedagogical. It instead mobilizes discussions familiar to scholars steeped in the history of adult, community and popular education. A use associated with what Biesta (2014) identifies as the continental tradition of pedagogy, connected to a lineage that encompasses lifelong education. While rejecting schools, colleges and universities as the definitional centre of educational experience, Sandlin, O'Malley and Burdick (2011) maintain a degree of institutional grounding in at least some of the strands of public pedagogic thought they explore. They make reference to museums, zoos and libraries as examples of public pedagogic sites. It is difficult not to notice the similarity between these spaces and those frequently associated with further, adult and community education. Schüller and Watson's (2009) inquiry into the future for lifelong education identifies the workplace (on or off the job), the family, cultural or community settings, libraries, museums, theatres and galleries as places and spaces in which learning may be located. These spaces are implicated in the ubiquity of learning as individuals are constantly striving to adapt to the rapidly changing environment within which they find themselves. In this tradition, lifelong education is argued as connected to the self as a project; professional or personal identities rather than being coherently defined and stable are in a state of crisis, that is in constant need of reflexive re-construction.

This reflexive project of the self (Giddens, 1991) involving the perpetual re-construction of professional identities may be framed as a private, individualistic undertaking. However, Zhao and Biesta's (2012) critique of Giddens argues a moral dimension as central. The reflexive project of self requires a form of learning which emphasizes inter-subjective, relational and moral dimensions (Taylor, 1989). The self that is perpetually re-constructed through reflexive learning is a relational self, one that exists with/in and through other selves: a 'dialogic self'. While blogging, the physical process of writing, is a solitary activity, it is one that takes place with/in and through the public. As such it requires interaction with real or imagined others, implying an intersubjectivity that allows for the emergence and sustenance of like-minded individuals who coalesce around spaces of affinity, interest and identification. They provide an extensive mechanism for the facilitation of a dialogic self. While there are multiple blogging genres, in its current manifestation the blog should not be viewed as a journal written in public. My suggestion is that the act of writing is performative, it is an act 'a writing act' implicated in the construction, presentation or performance of self (Clark & Ivancic, 1997). The collaborative nature of blogging implies this presentation is an inter-subjective, dialogic self.

Public pedagogic blogging: Inter-subjective, collaborative and mutual.

A significant body of research exists reporting of the uses of blogging for pedagogic purposes (Kirkup, 2010; Lea & Jones, 2011; Mewburn & Thomson, 2013). The pedagogies implied by these studies are institutionally bound with a clear curriculum and institutional location. The blogs I explore here are not an extension of what might – in other circumstances be – a physical classroom space. They are individual but also collaborative, associated with the institutions identifiably akin to lifelong education. In selecting two specific blogs from the hundreds and thousands of possible choices I provide discourse-oriented ethnographic insight into how those who coalesce around the particular spaces identified come to understand themselves and each other, in relation to policy, pedagogy and the purposes of education.

The blogs analysed were selected because while they have a directly named individual authorship – a very personal dimension that justifies their construction as the reflexive project of the dialogic self, both also have a loose institutional connection. The author has a personal, professional and networked connection to both blogging spaces but what is significant about their selection is that they are indexed by the online search engine, Google under the phrase 'adult education blogs', listed within the first 10 items returned. They fall within the remit of institutionally connected lifelong educative practice rather than individualist diary keeping in public. This in part contributes towards the idea that they have a firm public pedagogic status. It was on this basis that they were selected for analysis.

Intersubjectivity, collaboration, mutuality and lifelong education are writ large into these blogs. In one instance – *Kate's Blog*, this is inscribed in its connection to adult literacy – a curricular area. In the other,

Ann's Blog – in its association with an established international adult educational organisation: the *Workers' Educational Association*ⁱⁱⁱ.

Kate's Blog is explicit in its pedagogic intent. The blog is defined as for teachers of adult literacy, numeracy and basic education, about teaching and adult learning. Kate is direct and personable in how she introduces herself and her purpose. On a home page header listed at the top of the blog, Kate states:

I've been working in adult literacy and numeracy for more than twenty-five years, most of that time at a University in Canada. Although I am no longer in the classroom, my goal is to share everything I know about teaching before I retire.

Kate's Blog, Home Page

What follows is a portrait of Kate in which she seems to be gazing – not back at her audience but at what might be an imagined future beyond the picture's frame. The text below the image offers a detailed written portrait. Kate narrates her discomfort that as a teacher she chose a traditional female profession, failing to make use of the many other less gendered occupational choices that the recent wave of feminism had now made possible. She resolves this dilemma by an appeal to an essential self: 'to the core of my being, I was a teacher' (*Kate's Blog, Home Page*). But this blog is not simply about chronicling in public the private life of an individual. The biography narrates more than a person. In *Kate's Blog* the professional is also the political. The bloggers' life experience, written in public with others who coalesce around the space, once examined, interpreted and analyzed, re-constructs what a feminist knows about teaching adult literacy.

But how does a feminist teach? Not in the way I had been taught to teach, surely, but how? The educational system had failed the students who appeared in my upgrading classes; I couldn't offer them more of the same! Women came back to school because they wanted better lives for themselves and their children, yet as women they were operating under the usual conditions for women: heavy responsibilities for home and children; and violence and the threat of violence from family members and from strangers.

Kate's Blog, Home Page

Ann's Blog is somewhat more formal. Her blog address carries her name but her blog title refers to her position as Director of Education of the *Workers' Educational Association*. The organizational logo and a strap line defining lifelong learning as a learning approach to life feature prominently on the blog's header and side bar – reappearing with every blog page viewed. On her welcome page, Ann introduces herself as 'an adult education enthusiast and campaigner' (*Kate's Blog, Home Page*) and makes reference to her professional role with the *Workers' Educational Association*.

Ann suggests that her blog may be viewed as,

‘Continuous Professional Development (CPD) with a cup of tea’ and I learn a lot by using the WordPress ‘Reader’ feature to get updates from interesting bloggers. I appreciate comments, suggestions or signposts to other relevant blogs and resources.

Ann’s Blog, Welcome Page

The blogging space is established as one of the social media platforms she uses to exchange ideas about teaching, learning and assessment. She also offers the reader guidance on how to navigate the blog. While *Kate’s Blog* establishes its terms of reference as a pedagogic one, drawing on personal experience as her epistemic material, Ann’s suggests a collaborative approach to mutually supportive professional development with the aim of accomplishing an organizationally defined vision to which she is personally committed. She is creating

“A better world, equal, democratic and just; through adult education the Workers’ Educational Association challenges and inspires individuals, communities and society.”

Ann’s Blog, Welcome Page

The anatomy of a blog: a pedagogy with/in and through the public.

Customized templates provided by WordPress mean the blog is both standardized and individual. The blogger has a number of choices about how to design and present their space within the confines of the template, while certain defining features are always present albeit arranged according to preference.

Each blog post is titled and dated. Written in chronological order, posts are listed with the most recent blog appearing first. They are multi-modal, with posts presented as any combination of images, video or podcasts alongside text. Text based posts are usually between 500 to 1000 words in length. The blogs challenge linguists’ previously settled notion of text, writing and communication (Barton & Lee, 2013). Blog posts are perpetually open and always incomplete. Once published, they are always available to be edited, commented upon and re-contextualised. They can therefore be read in multiple ways.

Digital technologies are noted for their capacity to compress or miniaturize time. The blog enables the directional flow of time to be redefined through how posts are chronologised. The most recently written post appears first. It can however be categorized – grouped through a series of hyperlinks - allowing each post to be contextualized in different ways. Each post can be read alongside several other, distinct posts. The only stable chronology is one of recency. There are several chronologising alternatives. The posts may be read in summary along side a series other recently written posts, or read

as a discrete page. The blog allows time, the reverse chronology of how ideas are written, developed and contextualised to move in at least ten different directions.

The blogger has the option of deleting, editing and displaying as final posts which have been perpetually re-written across any timescale. Each post features readers' comments – which become part of the blogs content - directly beneath it. Comments may appear within a few hours of the blog being posted, but may also be left months later. Each comment implies a different re-contextualized reading as the image of the reader and a link to their own online space is now been incorporated into the blog's space. The blog is authored by the blog's owner, but written through a process of collaboration. Readers have other ways of leaving the trace of their presence and invite new directions for the blog. Each comment also embeds a hyperlink that will lead to the commentator's own online space. Those who do not wish to directly comment, signal their presence through a clicking a 'like' icon – leaving their image and a hyperlink. Other icons signal that the blog has been forwarded through a series of other social networks, such as FaceBook, Linked-In or Pinterest. The meaning of any single blog posts is therefore derived from the affinities that coalesce around it. The blog then is a community. A named author curates the space but the public have a perpetual disembodied presence (Hook, 2005) as traces of public engagement – comments, likes or hyperlinks – are integral to where and how the blog is read and therefore understood.

Between the time when Kate started her blog in May 2012 and the start of this research in February 2014, she published 79 blog posts. This makes Kate a prolific blogger with something close to a blog post written and published every week for the 21 months the blog has been live. In conducting this research, I was able to identify 600 distinct hyperlinked traces left by other readers, with 450 comments left beneath different posts. During this time her blog was visited over 32,000 times with an international readership including Brazil, Jamaica, Turkey and Philippines – though – Canada, Europe and America provide the substantial majority of her readers (Nonesuch 2014). Over the same period of time, 21 months from May 2012 to February 2014 Ann published 84 blog posts. Her readership profile is similar to Kate's. Her 14, 000 readers are predominately from the global north but includes readers from East Africa and Australasia (Walker, 2014). I was able to identify 1500 readers who left a digital trace of their presence, while 350 chose to directly contribute towards the written content. In order to read and meaningfully reference these 160 different blog posts, and their accompanying comments, hyperlinks and intertextual references I have selected for this analysis 20 most popular posts from each blog, analyzing them thematically using NVivo. I have identified the most collaboratively written posts through enumerating the traces left by readers on the site. Those posts that had the most comments, likes, and other traces of hyperlinked engagement were selected for analysis. My analysis assumes a multi-authored entity including comments, exchanges and re-contextualisations.

A ministry to survival.

Having argued educational blogging as a specific enactment of public pedagogy implicated in the reflexive construction of a dialogic self, I want in this final section to introduce a detailed exploration of two *blogging-spaces-as-data* to illustrate their public pedagogic status. This is an intentioned pedagogy, an intersubjective pedagogy accomplished with/in and through the public. I explore the ways in which the blogs and those who coalesce around them come to *understand themselves and each other, in relation to policy, pedagogy and the purposes of education*.

Published in 2005, *'A ministry of Enthusiasm'* is a collection of essays that celebrate 100 years of the *Workers' Educational Association*. Grounded in scholarship, criticism and insight, the text might well have been entitled – a ministry to survival (Knox, 2005, p. 179). The essays do not pose but none the less answer the question, how is it a set of ideals – so manifestly at odds with the neoliberal values of global educational policy which reduces education to an extended apprenticeship as preparation for the labour market - has managed to survive the twentieth century. This question resonates deeply with the curiosity that drives this paper.

Both blogs make a distinct contribution towards a 'gift economy'. As prolific educational bloggers the spaces they curate are a labour of love. Their intentioned act of pedagogy – through the mechanism of 'the public' is more than a technical process of transmitting information. Both bloggers have clearly articulated educational theories and values; they appeal to and justify their approach by reference to evidence (Alexander, 2008, p. 47). The pedagogies they embody are collaborative and open, negotiated with a public, gifted to a public who participate in its construction.

Education as a public good.

Given the explicit purpose of *Kate's blog* is a pedagogic one: it is intentioned on passing on what a feminist knows about teaching adult literacy, it is remarkable that only three of her blog posts are directly concerned with classroom technique (KN13; KN15; KN16)^{iv}.

In a pedagogic style that mimics the griot, *Kate's blog* presents the reader with a series of reflective vignettes each of which illustrate an aspect of being a feminist teacher. The being that feminist teacher incorporates is one with several explicitly stated and embodied commitments. If *Kate's blog* is premised on teaching as transmission – passing on what she knows about teaching, what she knows is not as concerned with the mechanics of reading, writing and spelling as one might have imagined.

The analysis is based on 40 discrete blog posts, 20 from each blog. Included in the designate 'blog post' – is an authored text along with the illustrations, comments and hyperlinks that accompany it. Each posts was summarized and then categorized in terms of its overall purpose. A writ large pedagogy, one

that defines the entire blog space, is re-inscribed in each post as a micro-pedagogy. What started as 16 possible categorizations for the 40 posts was successively re-grouped more broadly into three. There were posts that addressed policy, others that revolved around bodies moving through the space of the classroom, pedagogy and others that discussed the overall purpose of education. The analysis is framed in terms of how these public pedagogic spaces engender the survival of ideals that embody a resistance to neoliberal definitions of global educational policy. My suggestion is that as public pedagogic spaces they work from within and therefore enact a set of beliefs that pre-figuratively create education is a public good.

“If political struggles are won and lost in the space between people’s everyday lives and the material production and distribution of values and power, in the space where people in groups are articulated, both ideologically and affectively, to social identities, cultural practices, and political projects, then it is here that pedagogy must operate”
(Giroux & McLaren, 1994, p. 19)

Both bloggers are deeply concerned with everyday lives - their own and their students - and link these experiences into what and how they write. The broadest analytical category – featuring six sub-categories – was pedagogy. ‘Everyday life,’ was one of its included sub-categories. Posts listed here were drawn from both *Ann’s blog (AW)* and *Kate’s blog (KN)*. These posts recount learning as something that happens outside the classroom – a day trip to a supermarket to develop language skills (AW14) giving rise to the day-to-day implications of equality:

Equality of understanding is a fairness issue and it’s good to see learning that is so relevant to people’s day-to-day lives, especially when personal and family budgets are tight for so many people.

AW14

And is then extended to explore the therapeutic benefits of students writing in public (KN7);

Giving students a blog provides an instant audience, and a shift in identity for the blogger. A blogger looks at life with a writer’s eye and awareness of the audience; a blog gives its author a chance to examine, name and reflect on events, and may offer vindication and healing if the blogger is courageous enough to tell the truth.

KN7

celebrating student biographies (KN8); the experience of working within *Workers’ Educational Association’s* organizational structure (AW7), and an account of how family learning changes lives (AW17).

Promoting – social, democratic and liberatory purposes

Yet both blogs are an implicit defense of the notion of education as a public good, as something that rightly belongs in the public sphere and is premised upon the fulfillment of particular purposes. There is a distinct category of posts that at first seemed to be celebratory, self-referenced and promotional. Seven of Ann's blog posts (none of Kate's) formed this category. These posts were premised on promoting the profile of the *Workers' Educational Association* (WEA). They celebrate the WEA securing and distributing Skills, Community Learning and European funds (AW4; AW9); in other posts the WEA's work in support of 'digital activism' (AW11) was highlighted. At points during these posts Ann seems to ventriloquize the language of quality as retention rates. The achievement of qualifications and militarized targets are called upon as evidence of the organization's prowess (AW1). The discourse of education as commodity is echoed. But the conceptualisation of the blog as a public pedagogic space - with/in and through the public as part of a gift economy - allows another interpretation. The nature of what is celebrated in these posts, the 'strength of weak ties' (AW6), pre-figures the blog as a shared space, an affinity space. What is promoted then is not the WEA's achievements as such, but rather the substance of what the WEA has achieved (AW11;AW4). For example, one post in this category outlines the WEA's historical roots in 'promoting democracy, fairness and social justice' AW15. This leads to a discussion about the role of social media and its capacity to generate instant affinities enabling likeminded others to 'reconnect, rethink and revive social movements or develop new ones' AW15. What is promoted and celebrated here is an educational ideal rather than a particular organization as a marketable entity. In this category other posts look outwards and beyond the WEA to point in the direction of those who share a belief in the social, democratic and liberatory purposes of education (AW13). Ann enumerates these benefits as including social media, particularly micro-blogging as: 'democratic with no hierarchies' with the capacity to 'create alliances between people and organisations', AW13. In defense of a communicative medium often dismissed as trivial, Ann's blog instead asserts that

There is much to be said for 'the strength of weak ties' and social media and technology has the potential to share such benefits with those experiencing exclusion as additional tools and networks to support their learning. I feel our job as an organisation is to enable access and provide skills to use these learning tools in a confident and critical way which support learning and wider equality outcomes for all.

AW15

Inscribed in each of these blog posts is a celebration of the difference that education, institutional support and public money can make to the lives of individuals. At a time when global education policy only values private economic goods (Biesta, 2012) these promotional blogs deploy strategies that might be associated with corporatism to promote the public good that education is / ought to be.

Supporting moral and political agency

Arguably, what the blog enables is the forging of a mutual solidarity with ‘resisting others’ through critical elaboration and the creation of a participatory spaces of solidarity and affinity. The spaces created are both inclusive and anti-hierarchical (Routledge, 2009). When politics is directly referenced, it is with considered criticism that seems to work from a principle of education as a mechanism through which the public is able to claim moral and political agency. It enacts a public pedagogy that makes authority politically and morally accountable. These blogs embody a committed civic, political and moral public pedagogic practice. There were six posts that seemed to make direct reference to policy. All of them were drawn from *Ann’s Blog*. These posts call policy to account and when necessary call upon the affinities created by the blog to action. Ann discusses a newly written parliamentary paper of the value of family learning (AW1); in another she highlights a recent parliamentary debate, providing links to the written text of MPs’ debate about adult literacy and numeracy (AW5). In other posts Ann comments on policy surrounding adult education by illustrating the wider benefits of learning – on health, on the role of carers and on how individuals are able to manage a life crisis. One post references the Coalition government’s policy of electing police commissioners. This change in policy is linked to a discussion about the lives and experiences of adults with disabilities and Ann’s concern about the extent to which they had increasingly become the object of hate crime (AW16). Two posts are openly critical of policy; they are muted, analytical rather than polemical in tone (AW12; AW20). Only one post in this group of blogs is explicit in its reference to a named politician whose cultivated buffoonery is frequently reported in the press (AW3). This alumnus from the UK’s most prestigious public school articulated the belief that those who living with poverty, low pay and other forms of social exclusion were there deservedly based on their low IQ and subsequent positioning in the ‘cornflakes package of life’ (AW3). *Ann’s Blog* does not involve itself in the vitriol or controversy that such declarations invite. Instead Ann assumes the stance of a public pedagogue. In careful and considered terms she traces the lines of this argument and offers information that might enable her reader to make an informed choice about their credibility. She introduces, quotes directly from and hyperlinks valuable references about the social impact of inequality and neatly surmises an overall argument:

It’s too easy to treat the complexities of inequality and social mobility with lazy predictability [but the] ‘why, who, what and how’ questions about education are especially relevant to the debates about educational options for 11-year-olds and children’s subsequent development.

AW3

This would seem to be an example of public pedagogy that enhances the moral and political agency of those who coalesce around the space.

Voicing an unwillingness to speak

Kate's blog offers little direct insight into the policy environment in which she works. The per-formative nature of what is required and the responsive fabrications are hinted at in a post which outlines how she works against organizational demands to create an educative space for her students. In this post (KN19) a student is both allowed and disallowed to refuse participation in classroom activities. Kate has few classroom rules. One rule requires students to articulate their preference for withdrawing by saying 'I pass': voicing their unwillingness to speak. In withdrawing from classroom activities, they are instead invited to make banners. It is not clear what these are or what they look like. They suggest a student who withdraws from sight is encouraged to produce her own forms of visibility: brightly coloured banners created over the course of a semester. These blog posts are concerned primarily with affect, the emotional life of students, professionals and those who coalesce around the blog. The one occasion when – after some time – this student speaks – her words are powerful. Not because her voice is heard for the first time (she says the words 'I pass' each week) but because what she says offers enormous insight into her situated, troubled experience in a way that resonates. These posts suggest pedagogy as a political and moral practice in which knowledge, skills, and social relations expand the possibilities of what it means for those who coalesce around them to be citizens (Giroux 2010 p191). Kate outlines in brief the strategies she uses to keep college administrators happy accepting that once other trade offs – unionization, reputation, all experience as a learning resource, taking on additional work - had expired 'not telling them the details about students' was probable option that would always be a strategy in reserve.

Kate is explicit in her critique of the environment she works within. In one post – listed within a category referred to as pedagogy: the dialogic self - Kate bemoans losing her 'joy' (KN14). She makes use of her workplaces recent offer of counseling to see a therapist to ask them to help her 'locate her joy'. The post does not seem intentioned on ridiculing the debilitating impact of chronic sadness or depression. But is instead an ironic narrative that critiques managerial workplace that have seemingly succumb to neoliberal pressures to market themselves in ways that negate the lived experiences of their employees. The therapist is unable to comprehend what Kate is saying and so she explains: the organization's mission statements declares joy to be something that it promotes. There is an apparent mismatch between rhetoric and reality in the everyday life of employees.

[The workplace therapist] looked at me like I was crazy. I knew then that he wasn't going to be any help, because he was used to people who wanted job satisfaction, but he thought it was really "too much" to ask for joy.

KN14

Respect, resistance and reality

I have argued that blogging provides a valuable example of public pedagogy. Despite the fabulous haze that surrounds this concept, I have suggested that it is useful in helping to understand what a blog is and what it does. The use I have made of this concept is consistent with a notion of lifelong education that has roots in social pedagogy and adult education. However, the point of the paper is not to conceptualize blogging but rather to draw on blogs-as-data (rather than blogs-as-objects of analysis) to explore the extent to which they engender dissenting voices. Given that blogs pivot around writing in public, the public pedagogic blog is implicated in the creation of a dialogic self: a self that is developed collaboratively with/in and through a public domain.

Within this broad conceptual framework, I have explored two spaces, both of which exemplify in distinct ways the public pedagogic status of the educational blog. These blogs, written by a named individual, closely associated with an organization or curricula area, made public by those who coalesce around them are analyzed here as collaborative spaces. I explore what these pedagogies do – that is – how their pedagogic status is achieved and maintained in part arguing that what they learn is how to survive global neoliberal educational policy that is unsympathetic towards the ideals they pre-figuratively embody.

I suggest one final point of analysis. These blogs are argued as intentioned in their pedagogy and implicated in the pre-figurative creation of alternative understandings of *themselves and each other, in relation to policy, pedagogy and the purposes of education*. This stance is illustrated effectively by a series of blog posts categorized within the pedagogic group as ‘the dialogic self’. The alternative understanding created is neatly thematised in Kate’s re-framing of the three Rs. Kate reminds those who read her blog of shared commitments to respecting students and themselves. She promotes a pedagogy in which students are incorporated into ‘the teaching team’. Resistance is re-framed as feedback that needs to be read and understood. Kate develops a pedagogy based on solidarity. Her own experiences as a student are used to help her understand how to develop a mutually respectful pedagogic space. Along side the two Rs of respect and resistance, Kate – suggests a final R, reality. The reality evoked here is one that seems to occupy a space between people’s everyday lives and the material production and distribution of values and power. Such are the basics that Kate’s blog appeals to. The work of this public pedagogy is successful when it is able to

listen to what is really going on. Speak the unspoken thoughts and feelings. Do(es) reading and writing that is real, in the real world. Find an audience for the voice; find information in response to questions; say yes to every chance to move the literacy work into the community, and bring the community into the class.

(KN3).

This is a space the public pedagogue defines and occupies to create the possibility of alternative educational futures.

ⁱ <http://en.wordpress.com/stats/>; accessed 26th April 2014, WordPress is one of several freely available blog hosting sites available

ⁱⁱ www.techmorati.com: accessed 3rd June 2014

ⁱⁱⁱ Both blogs have been analyzed with the approval of the University of Hull ethics committee and the kind permission of the bloggers themselves. The blogs are in the public domain and may be located here: <http://katenonesuch.com/about-kate-nonesuch/> and here: <http://annwalkerwea.wordpress.com>

^{iv} I have analysed the 20 most popular posts from each blogging space. (The 'most popular posts' is based on my counting of discernable traces left by readers of their presence in terms of likes, comments or re-postings through other social networks). My reference then relates these particular blog posts, counted and coded. The popularity of these posts might change as a radically open and unfinished text means that other traces might have appeared since conducting this research and certainly other blog posts will have been written after February 2014.

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