WIRED FOR SUCCESS? A STUDY OF STUDENT TEACHER ONLINE PRE-COURSE PARTICIPATION.

Kathy Wright  
Higher Education Academy, York, UK

The potential contribution of social media to learning on pre-service initial teacher education (ITE) programmes is still underdeveloped and is consequently under-researched.

This paper reports on a mixed method study of the online pre-course activity of two successive cohorts of intending secondary student teachers which used a case study approach to investigate the following research questions:

1. Why did some students contribute more actively than others?
2. What did high participation reveal about contributors and did their online activity provide indicators of high achievement once on programme?

The research was undertaken in the context of secondary ITE programmes within a post 1992 university in an urban setting. The online activity of the two cohorts, each of 250 intending student teachers, was studied (2009-2011) and was informed by literature from the fields of online learning in higher education and of teacher effectiveness.

The study used both quantitative and qualitative data from workspace activity, participant surveys and interviews. The reasons for different levels of participation did not appear in this study to be dependent on the ICT skills of the participants or on their prior experience of using Web 2.0 tools (such as social networking).

The low participation levels appeared to be partly determined by participant attributes (risk adversity, anxiety). The most active contributors displayed skillful communication, empathy, commitment to collaboration as well as persistence and resilience in the face of difficulties, characteristics which are in line with the findings on the attributes of the most effective teachers (Hay McBer 2000, Day et al 2006). The records of the most active students online were matched with final on course achievement data. This indicated a correlation between high activity and high levels of achievement in the practical school experience ITE components, suggesting that analysis of online activity can provide teacher educators with rich data which could be used to target interventions which may support student teachers to become more effective practitioners in the practicum elements of their programmes.