

SOCIAL MEDIA AND INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION

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Introduction

Looking back 20 or 30 years, who would have thought that the overhead projector would have become obsolete in the classroom. Or a few years earlier, that the pervasive smell of spirit-based duplication from the trusted Banda machine to print worksheets, would clear from the staff room. Times change and the tools for classroom learning and training the next generation of teachers have also moved on. We live in a world where digital media is commonplace in the classroom with the use of the internet, and virtual learning environments (VLEs) such as Moodle, Canvas and Blackboard are central to digital learning in universities. Similarly in our social lives, many people (including students, their mentors and teacher educators) use social media to keep in touch with each other, their families and the wider professional community. Is this evolution, or perhaps a revolution sped-up by Covid-19?

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in England has a large grounding in university-led teaching days and weeks but is mainly delivered through school-based placements: at least 24 weeks in the 10 months of a typical one-year postgraduate certificate of education (PGCE). Covid-19 has increased the need to use a range of digital tools to develop reflection, knowledge and skills through online taught content. Universities are making progress in how they develop the knowledge and skills necessary for teaching through digital learning. However, the social dimension of learning is still a challenge for universities. How do staff and students develop the ever-important professional relationships through the social use of technology? Is it possible to mix the professional and social use of digital learning platforms? Or should we just leave this up to students: student WhatsApp and Facebook groups spring up on courses whether or not these are organised by the University.

Our interest in this article is to speculate about the use of social media in the professional lives of trainee teachers. What are the boundaries in the use of technology by trainee teachers? Specifically in this article we look at the use of Instagram as a vehicle for professional learning from the complementary perspectives of the authors: a trainee teacher and a teacher educator. It considers our own personal perspectives informed by a review of the academic literature. Ultimately, we are interested in investigating the constructive use of social media in ITE, whilst recognizing some of the barriers and issues.

Bringing Instagram into focus

In a systematic review of research on social media and professional development, Bruguera et al (2019) found that 38% of the 44 articles in their sample focused exclusively on Twitter. The next most common social media platform was Facebook (18%) followed by Wikipedia (4%) and then YouTube, Pinterest and LinkedIn at 2% each (Bruguera et al, 2019). According to Statista, a leading provider of market and consumer data, Instagram has over 3 times more active users than Twitter (Statista, 2021). Excluding platforms that provide tools purely for private communication – such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp – Instagram is the third most popular social media platform after Facebook and YouTube at 1,221 million active users as of January 2021 (Statista, 2021). A cursory search, at the start of this project, on the British Education Index (BEI) through EBSCO turned up no articles with a

focus on Instagram but several with a focus on Twitter, Facebook or lesser-known platforms with blogging capabilities. Many of these articles do not reference Instagram at all. From the perspective of a trainee teacher, especially one who is part of the thriving international teaching community on Instagram, it is perplexing that such a popular and versatile social media platform appears to be neglected in research. Since work on this article began, the findings of a survey on how and why teachers use Instagram have been published by Carpenter et al (2020). We hope this is the first of many articles looking at how professionals in education can – and do – utilise the platform.

We have chosen to focus on Instagram because it is a multi-media platform with an array of tools that can be used for different purposes. The main feature is photo sharing – which leads to a permanent post on the user’s profile that can be viewed, interacted with and shared indefinitely. In 2017, this feature was upgraded so that multiple photos could be uploaded as one post. Another feature of the platform is ‘stories’: temporary photos and videos that disappear after 24 hours. The most recent update to stories improved accessibility by adding auto-generated captions to videos. Instagram also offers two types of video formats: a traditional video player called ‘IGTV’ that can host videos of up to 1 hour in length; shorter videos in the style of those posted on competitor TikTok are uploaded as ‘Reels’ and play on a continuous loop. As on many social media platforms, Instagram also offers a private messaging feature in the app. None of these tools are original: temporary ‘stories’ are directly comparable to Snapchat, ‘Reels’ are all but identical to TikTok and ‘IGTV’ feels similar to YouTube. However, the developers at Instagram have found success in incorporating the features users love about their competitors and are continually improving them.

During their review, Bruguera et al (2019) identified that common reasons for education professionals to engage in social media were (1) an interest in sharing professional practices and resources; and (2) building a professional network (Bruguera et al, 2019). The first informs professional activities, planning, classroom ideas and pedagogical subject knowledge. The second develops a sense of community which can help to build the teacher’s profile in education (the ‘teacher influencer’) and their professional contacts (the ‘teacher networker’), both potentially increasing employability. A review carried out around the same time by Iredale et al (2020) found similar themes: for example, social media was a useful tool for sharing teaching resources. Most studies in their review indicated that using social media professionally helped trainee teachers to develop a stronger sense of identity and provided them with a community of supportive peers (Iredale et al, 2020). Interestingly, Iredale et al suggest that trainee-initiated use of social media often works well as it creates a sense of ownership that is absent in closed groups organised by training providers (Iredale et al, 2020). ‘Closed loop’ networks can be subject to ‘group think’ and merely re-circulate ideas within the network, whereas ‘open networks’ are more extensive and can be a fertile place for debate, innovation and creativity. We believe that Instagram has the potential to be a useful professional tool for trainee teachers due to the familiarity of the platform and versatility of its features. ITE providers could incorporate social media into their curricula and support trainee teachers to use platforms like Instagram safely and professionally. This would mean that trainees have a wealth of resources at their fingertips and easy access to an international network of peers.

Building a sense of community online

The social aspect of teacher training was an area significantly impacted by Covid-19. Across England, an entire cohort experienced taught content partially or entirely online with little to no opportunity to meet and interact face-to-face. Social media platforms, such as Instagram, offered an opportunity to regain some of the sense of community that was lost.

That social media use is linked to the idea of community is not a novel idea. Both Bruguera et al (2019) and Iredale et al (2020) noted that a high number of studies looking at professional use of social media either implicitly or explicitly used the Community of Practice (CoP) model. CoP as a concept was first proposed by Lave and Wenger and describes groups of people who have a shared passion or concern about something they do and learn to do it better through regular interactions (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). This learning is not always intentional but is founded on the social-constructivist idea that we learn in a social context. What is a 'social context', of course, is debatable. Understanding context as both physical and facilitated by technology is important. After all, no one would question that the mobile phone is important in maintaining social contact. A smartphone in itself, of course, can facilitate WhatsApp, Facebook and many other social media platforms.

Instagram enables people across the globe to form communities with each other based on a shared interest or profession without geographical location as a limiting factor. Users are creative in how they communicate with each other – choosing the tool that best fits the purpose. Video – either short 'Reels' or longer clips on 'IGTV' – lend themselves to continuous development. Those who want to share a brief example of how they plan their timetable can create a 'Reel' set to music of their choice. Longer videos about wellbeing or pedagogy can be uploaded to 'IGTV'. Photos are useful as a snapshot of the things that it wouldn't be appropriate to film: classroom displays, resources and continuous provision. The sense of community is fostered through built-in feedback features such as likes and comments. Teachers and trainees can voice their opinions on important issues or show support at the click of a button. This leads to the discovery of more likeminded professionals for them to follow, interact with and learn from. The private messaging feature creates a safe space away from the public eye for professional relationships to deepen and even for smaller communities to form.

In 2016, Instagram introduced a new feature: 'Instagram Live'. These are live videos that can last up to an hour and be uploaded permanently to 'IGTV' after they have ended. This feature goes a long way to fostering a sense of community as it provides the opportunity to create a sense of 'eventness'. Communities can look forward to a virtual event hosted by one or more users during which they can follow along with a discussion in real time and contribute through the live comments section. In the teaching community, these are often used to host Q&A sessions about ITE or interviewing for your first job. They are also used as semi-regular social events to reflect on how the term went and to share ideas about future topics.

Professional development through social media

Continuous professional development is a cornerstone of the teaching profession and Instagram is an ever-expanding tool that can be used to support that development. ITE courses are currently designed to support trainees to develop their professional practice through more traditional means, such as: attending lectures and seminars delivered by experts; reading academic literature and textbooks; undertaking professional placements; engaging in scaffolded reflections and evaluations; and writing academic essays. Some ITE providers have adapted aspects of their curriculum to include use of digital technologies. For example, trainee teachers at the University of Warwick are required to create and maintain an e-portfolio that contains reflections on their progress against the Teacher's Standards. Trainees are encouraged to personalise their portfolios and embrace the versatility of an online platform. Whilst this goes some way to utilising digital technology, we feel that social media has more to offer.

Traditional academic outputs like those outlined above provide trainees with only a small fraction of the professional interaction that social media offers. Rather than posting a reflection to a VLE that only their ITE provider has access to, a trainee could reflect on aspects of their practice in the description of a photograph or by uploading a video to Instagram. Not only does this develop their reflective skills but it enables them to start a dialogue with a wider range of professionals. Expanding the network of professionals that a trainee interacts with has the potential to support their development from a social-constructivist perspective because it increases the number of social interactions through which they can learn.

Understandably, some ITE providers may be concerned that writing for academic purposes on social media might result in a lower-standard of writing. However, as highlighted by Iredale et al (2020), some studies have found that the public nature of writing reflections on social media leads to a higher standard of academic writing. There is also evidence to suggest that trainees might put more consideration into the writing due to the authentic context of the post (Bravo & Young, 2011 in Iredale et al, 2020). It should be noted that these studies used 'closed-loop' VLEs such as Wiki and more research is needed before these findings are generalisable to public platforms like Instagram.

Creating and sharing resources is one of the most common reasons cited in research for professional use of social media (Bruguera et al, 2019; Iredale et al, 2020). Research indicates that social media is a sustainable tool for professional lifelong learning because of how easy it is to create and disseminate content (Bruguera et al, 2019). Professionals who use social media for development are, therefore, simultaneously a creator and a consumer of online content. The asynchronous nature of social media posts can be very attractive to busy teachers and trainee teachers. You don't need to read or engage with the social media posts at the same time they are published. Useful professional development through social media could therefore avoid the need for teachers and trainees to spend time away from their pupils. However, this could be seen to disadvantage the teacher and draw them into greater work outside the normal working day. Is this continuing professional development on the 'cheap'? Though it is beyond the scope of this article to explore this question in sufficient detail, an approach whereby the logistics – the 'when', 'how often' and 'how long for' – of how teachers engage in professional development on social media are left to the discretion of the individual teacher would go some way to alleviate this concern.

In the context of teaching, the incorporation of social media into ITE courses would provide a whole new teaching and learning experience for all involved. It has the potential to change the traditional teacher-learner dynamic. There would be more opportunities for trainee teachers and teacher educators to engage in co-creation with both taking on the mantle of creator and consumer in tandem. Social media, such as Instagram, would be the medium through which this collaboration takes place and their contributions would form part of a wider dialogue within the professional community. Take for instance, the classic interaction between trainee teacher and mentor in classroom observations. Traditionally this involves observation with a written feedback sheet followed by a discussion to jointly reflect on the trainee's lesson. Is there any reason why this could not be supplemented with agreed content from the trainee's professional Instagram account – such as a photo of relevant resources with a reflective description – which may provide further evidence of forethought and planning: social media to stimulate dialogic professional reflection.

Managing risk and ethical concerns

The concepts of identity and space are useful vehicles to examine the ways in which teachers and trainee teachers interact. Alongside this we can also introduce Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological systems theory. Teachers, trainee teachers and teacher educators have a multiplicity of professional and personal identities. Professionally, we may be class teachers, employees, students, managers, curriculum leads, former Teaching Assistants or researchers. Personally, we may be friends, parents, carers or with additional needs as learners ourselves. The spaces we occupy may be physical, digital, personal and professional; and public and private. Bronfenbrenner (1992) identifies microsystems (local and immediate spaces like the family and classroom), mesosystems (where micro-systems come together for instance in a parents' evening), exosystems (activities outside the teacher or trainee's immediate setting that can have an impact on their development, for instance by way of mentor training for senior mentors in school which impact on a trainee's experience in the classroom) and macrosystems (overarching values and beliefs in education such as tendencies towards a knowledge 'rich' approach to the curriculum such as the statutory national curriculum). We all exist and operate in different spaces with different identities. Social media provides another space and identity for the trainee teacher and teacher educator to occupy.

Any of these systems and spaces can operate in physical spaces (the classroom and university lecture room) and digital spaces (national government websites such as www.gov.uk/df). Social media in ITE therefore could exist in the local microsystem of a trainee, for instance in the form of an Instagram account to share photos of classroom displays with their friends on the course. A teacher educator might be part of a wider macrosystem such as the Russell Group network of teacher educators who are influencing the future of national policy through consultations on the future of training in universities. It is interesting to understand how the distance between the local (microsystem) and national and international (macrosystems) has been diminished due to social media, and the digital transformation more generally. A trainee teacher with a large number of followers can publish a post on Instagram which might be read by 10,000 other teachers who follow them. The post might engender a personal and emotional response in the trainee: to motivate them, to develop a sense of belonging, familiarity and even friendship.

Our observations, opinions and judgements – both the positive and the negative – are private so long as we keep them to ourselves. We might even expect a similar level of privacy should we share them informally with a close friend. Is it unreasonable to assume the same level of privacy can be retained online? Basic privacy settings are available on the majority of social media platforms, including Instagram, seemingly ensuring that only certain people can view the content we post online. However, a quick screenshot of a questionable comment or image can render the private quite public. Additionally, it is becoming increasingly normalised to live life publicly with little to no barrier between private and public lives. For teacher educators, perceptions of potentially disastrous consequences can create a barrier to the use of social media. For example:

- Images of school and university can impact institutional reputation;
- Comments about schools, teachers and mentors can undermine or build on the working partnership between universities and schools;
- Images, comments or even the location of a vulnerable child, teacher or student can diminish the safety of those individuals, where they are identifiable in text and pictures;
- Online discussion groups can be very productive but, when they become the battleground for ideology, students, teachers and teacher educators can quickly find themselves unable to calm a situation which ever quickly gets out of hand. Published content can continue to circulate even when the original post is removed.

Although the aim of this article is to explore trainees' professional use of social media, we feel it is pertinent to consider how their personal use of the platforms can impact their professional lives. High standards of professional conduct are factored into the Standards required of teachers recommended for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) in England:

'Teachers [must] uphold public trust in the profession and maintain high standards of ethics and behaviour, within and outside school'

DfE (2011).

In the above reference, 'within and outside' school is very important. It is for this reason that Chester et al (2013) identify a number of particular ethical challenges in relation to student conduct including that of teachers and health practitioners. Believing that online and traditional spaces and audiences function in the same way is potentially very dangerous. It can result in quite intimate information intended to remain private, becoming public in an online space. Chester et al (2013) identified the following examples of unprofessional content posted online as text or images: use of drugs, alcohol, sexually suggestive, provocative content and demeaning comments about other students, staff and universities. Only a minority of students in this research recognized the damage that this could have on their professional life.

For instance, take the following scenario: five years ago, before they became a teacher, a trainee posts photos and videos of a drunken night out via their Instagram account. On starting their first job, a parent searches for the teacher's name online and discovers the content. There is nothing illegal or criminal about the teacher's Instagram material, nor the search made by the parent. How much does the teacher have a right to privacy in this situation? What could have been done differently? To avoid any potential embarrassment, they could have made use of stricter privacy settings and made their account inaccessible to the general public. However, as mentioned previously, this does not protect them from any reposts or screenshots taken by others – well-meaning or not. Chester et al (2013) suggest that once made all information potentially becomes public. After all it is not uncommon for employers to research candidates' online history before short-listing and appointment. It may be worth treating any image, comment or search that is made online as being public, even when you think it is private. This would mean only posting content that you would be happy to be made public. Should people be penalised for online posts made in their personal life, including before they reached the age of 18? What are the boundaries on Instagram between professional life and the opportunity for safe spaces in which students can socialize? We would suggest that concepts such as privacy, freedom, responsibility and public/private are entirely problematic concepts. The more we debate these topic the greater will be our understanding.

All teachers will have undertaken training in General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Under GDPR it is important to recognize that if anyone is identifiable in an image then the image becomes part of that person's data. Broadly, permission to include/use an image with an identifiable person must be obtained before using or sharing it (Trussell, 2019). There is a degree of controversy over GDPR and copyright in images: <https://ipo.blog.gov.uk/2019/06/11/copyright-and-gdpr-for-photographers/>

Teachers should never use their own personal devices for school purposes. Likewise sharing images of children in a public space outside school agreed social media, should not take place. Taking images with school equipment of children's learning experiences for the purposes of assessment and record keeping in school, can be seen as being part of the normal use of that data. However, if images taken in school were taken and used without permission, it would not be acceptable. Whilst this isn't the place to discuss the principles of safeguarding children and vulnerable adults; suffice to say that schools are rightly incredibly sensitive that any images or information about their students is shared

in any way other than that which is stipulated in the school's GDPR and safeguarding policies and procedures. For this reason, anyone engaging with Instagram and other social media platforms in school settings should always check with senior staff to ensure that they are complying with local and national guidance.

Whilst safeguarding and GDPR are very important considerations, there are still ways that social media tools like Instagram can be used professionally and ethically. For instance, schools and university departments very often have their own Instagram accounts. Asking to post a comment, video or image on the institutional account can be a useful way to build social media profiles for learning within the school or university, whilst ensuring that permission is given.

Ethics is about doing good and not doing harm. So if social media has the capacity to do good, and we can avoid the harmful and negative aspects, we have an ethical duty to utilise platforms like Instagram as learning tools. There is no shortage of schools that use social media to bolster their relationship with parents, carers and the local community. If schools are able to harness the good in social media then trainees and teacher educators can too. The following are examples of ways that schools positively use social media:

- Share information about events and opportunities in school for instance as a message board;
- Share recordings of useful information for pupils and parents;
- Provide open feedback to model classroom practice (for instance, writing and maths) for any children or parents to access;
- Record details pictorially, and as a video, for a class project;
- Market the school as a safe and effective learning environment for pupils and parents, especially at transition points in a child's schooling.

Below we offer some guidance in respect of trainee teachers' professional use of Instagram. Our suggestions must always be read in conjunction with the law and an organisations own advice in respect of the use of social media.

- Educate yourself in e-professionalism and online/computer literacy for your own benefit and as part of the school curriculum;
- Use Instagram in line with institutional and school policies on social media;
- Be actively mindful of GDPR legislation as it relates to issues of confidentiality, integrity and the availability of data on Instagram (see ICO reference);
- Don't post media, comments or private messages in a personal and professional capacity which could break the law or in any way harm others or yourself;
- Aspire to use Instagram in a considerate, ethically-motivated way to make a positive contribution to the world;
- Recognise that no posts are truly private and manage the risk of sharing posts with wider audiences by setting stricter more limited privacy settings;
- Have separate personal and professional accounts and keep the content separate;
- Choose @ usernames for your accounts that don't include your name (especially your surname).

The above list is not meant to be exhaustive but should help you to manage risk. Teachers and trainees should always engage with policy and procedure first and clarify any misunderstandings before using Instagram. The same could be said about students in universities. Risk is everywhere, no less so in teacher education. We should not be afraid of risk. A balanced view of risk mean that we should not shy away from the use of technology and social media as a result of fear, anxiety or paranoia. An ethical approach is the only way forward when using social media in education.

Utilising Instagram as a trainee or teacher educator

Carpenter et al (2020) studied a group of 841 educators who frequently employed Instagram for sourcing teacher materials, curriculum planning and to develop discussion of problematic school approaches. Whilst on the surface it can appear that the majority of teachers using Instagram professionally are primarily looking for outfit inspiration and ‘teacher aesthetics’, this was not a major finding in their research. Similarly, there was little evidence of engagement with so called ‘Teachpreneurs’ (selling educational products and services). How posts on Instagram are made is clearly important:

‘Over half of the participants indicated they included hashtags in posts in order to increase content visibility and to be witty, humorous, or ironic’

Carpenter et al (2020).

Instagram is often used by trainee teachers to gain useful professional insight and resources. It also offers opportunities to interact with new and experienced teachers both publicly, through the in-built commenting feature, and privately via direct messaging. Carpenter et al (2020) suggested that this did not always lead to the development of critical judgment as Instagram posts could often develop communities lead by a sense of ‘homophily’: gravitating to material posted and created by like-minded individuals. For this reason, it is not surprising that the building of a sense of belonging and community were seen as being important in teachers’ use of Instagram. The following are some of the main benefits relevant for trainee teachers:

- Development of subject knowledge;
- Enhancement of the ability to teach;
- Building confidence as a professional;
- Building contacts and professional networks;
- Combatting personal and professional isolation;
- Receiving affirmation and developing motivation;
- Giving and receiving ideas for teaching;
- Exploring Instagram as a medium by which learners themselves can learn;

Some trainees can develop Instagram as an affinity space by which their own personal journey to becoming a teacher is documented via the content they post. Such stories of transformation can be very engaging for some trainees and not for others.

The teaching community is not immune to the entrepreneurial aspects of Instagram – as is evident in the promotion of branded teaching resources on the platform. For instance, some teachers and trainees link the American web-site <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com> to their profiles and content. It’s quite likely that UK universities would not want to recommend that their students either engage with or indeed make a career from making money through Instagram. It is however a matter of choice and something that is likely to take place. Issues of quality are likely to be important in the absence of a rigorous peer review process. In Iredale et al (2020), several studies are highlighted (e.g. Goktalay, 2015; Bravo & Young, 2011; Reich, Levinson, & Johnston, 2011) that suggest trainees are more effective in critically assessing resources when given instructor guidance. Does the responsibility fall to teacher educators and ITE providers to ensure that trainees are equipped to make accurate judgements about the resources available to them?

As discussed previously in this article, the potential for Instagram to be a professional tool in education is not limited to its use by trainee teachers. Teacher educators can make very productive use of Instagram. The following ideas are designed as examples and are not intended to be prescriptive:

- **Dissemination of research and scholarly activities:** through Instagram potentially reaches a far wider education audience than simply publishing through peer-reviewed journals;
- **Instagram projects/case studies:** trainee-created multi-media content published as a pre-session activity or post-placement reflection. The comment feature can be used to stimulate professional discussion amongst trainees.
- **Story-boarding:** different steps in a lesson in an Instagram story can replicate the steps in a micro-teaching activity which is filmed and shared by students;
- **Promoting alternative and inclusive pedagogies:** by using images on Instagram created by teacher educators or trainees provide opportunities for those with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia to engage with learning through visual literacy;
- **Collaborative opportunities with partner schools:** virtual placements for trainee teachers could use Instagram as a vehicle to develop literacy through an author or thematic study on Instagram;
- **Engagement with Instagram as additional evidence of professional development:** trainees could embed or share their Instagram content on a VLE such as Mahara to aid in professional reflection and stimulate discussion with a mentor;
- **Subject workshops on Instagram:** for example, students create folded books on a traditional story theme for World Book Day and then share them on Instagram;
- **Course marketing:** if trainee teachers engage with Instagram in their personal use of social media, universities will miss the boat if they do not engage with potential students in ways which they already use. Instagram could therefore be a significant tool in digital marketing for ITE courses.

Conclusion

Instagram is a tool with a lot of potential but it will never replace face-to-face teaching. The way that teacher education has been delivered during the pandemic will no doubt shape how it evolves in the next 10 years. Whilst learning platforms such as Moodle, Blackboard Collaborate and Teams have been the focus for many, existing social media tools such as Instagram offer a personalised, multi-media approach to improve the trainee teacher learning experience in both university and school-based placements. Ethics and e-professionalism are clearly very important in the use of Instagram. However, there are clear benefits for trainees, teachers and teacher educators. Bringing Instagram into ITE is an important opportunity at a time of significant transition in the sector, particularly in England. It is therefore important that we face the challenge fearlessly, focused on the benefits of moving with Instagram into the 21st Century.

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