Student Article

Irish Primary Teachers' use of Social Media in Visual Arts Education

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Amy Lawrence qualified as a primary school teacher from The Church of Ireland College of Education in 2013 and she currently teaches in South Dublin. Amy has had a life-long interest in art, and she enjoys making art in her spare time. Having chosen Visual Art as the topic for her undergraduate dissertation, as well as undergoing regular professional development in teaching Visual Art, Amy then decided to pursue postgraduate study in this area. She completed her Master of Education Studies (Visual Arts) in Marino Institute of Education in 2020. Amy noticed an increase of teacher and education accounts on social media in recent years and this was the starting point for the research project she completed for her master's degree.

KEYWORDS: Social Media, Visual Arts, Pinterest, Instagram, Art Education

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an integral part of modern life. In recent years, primary teachers' use of technology has evolved. There has been an increase in the number of teachers using social media to communicate with other professionals and search for lesson ideas and resources (Carpenter, Cassady & Monti, 2018; Huber & Bates, 2016; Schroeder, Curcio & Lundgren, 2019).

This article will provide an overview of a broader Master's dissertation study consisting of 20,000 words that examined the use of social media by Irish primary teachers. The study focused on how teachers' social media use affected their teaching of the Visual arts curriculum, by asking the research question, '*How are Irish primary teachers using social media to influence their visual arts education practice?*' There has been no previous research originating from Ireland that addresses this issue. This article will

discuss how primary teachers in Ireland use social media for professional reasons and which social media platforms are most widely used. This article will also discuss teachers' reasons for using social media in their teaching.

CONTEXT

In a 2005 Department of Education report, *'An Evaluation of Curriculum Implementation in Primary Schools,'* the implementation of the 1999 Visual Arts curriculum was reviewed. It was stated that that class sizes, inadequate classroom space and time limitations were the greatest challenges for Irish primary teachers. It was also noted that teachers spent more time teaching particular strands, such as drawing and paint and colour than they did the other strands. Inspectors noted in the report that there was some evidence of teachers over-relying on teacher-directed activities. (DES, 2005). Ní Bhroin (2012) also highlighted that many of those entering teacher training courses had little prior art experience, resulting in a low level of confidence teaching the subject. Barnes (2015) described how teachers, challenged by a myriad of issues, tended to teach art lessons that they hoped would produce an attractive display. He argued that this leads to teaching art that is overly product-orientated (2015, p.12).

Other international research mentions the various challenges teachers face whilst implementing art curricula; including time constraints, large class sizes, a lack of resources and pressures to teach for standardised tests (Hunter-Doniger, 2018; Irwin, 2018; Mishook & Kornhaber, 2006; Smilan & Marzilli Miraglia, 2009).

For many teachers, social media sites are a place to connect with other professionals and plan for lessons. Much of the existing research on teachers' use of social media has focused on teachers' use of Twitter (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014; Carpenter & Krutka, 2015; Carpenter & Morrison, 2018) Facebook (Ranieri, Manca & Fini, 2012), and Pinterest (Carpenter, Cassaday & Monti, 2018). One of the main ways Pinterest is used by teachers is to collect and save teaching ideas for future use (Huber & Bates, 2016; Shroeder, Curcio & Lundgren, 2019). A significantly large amount of content on Pinterest has been categorised under 'Education' (Mittal, Gupta, Dewan & Kumaraguru, 2013) and Pinterest was reported to be widely used by educators in existing research (Carpenter, Abrams & Dunphy, 2016; Gallagher, Swalwell & Bellows, 2019; Schroeder, Curcio & Lundgren, 2019).

Carpenter, Morrison, Craft and Lee (2019) studied teachers' use of Instagram. Despite Instagram's popularity with teachers, there is a dearth of research about their use of it. Research carried out by Carpenter et al. (2019) showed that many of their respondents used their account for both personal and professional use. Over 87% of respondents stated their main reason for

using Instagram professionally was to gather ideas shared by other teachers. In this piece of research, the most popular social media sites used by teachers in the current literature were explored in an Irish context. Pinterest and Instagram were two sites of particular significance. As the majority of content on these two sites are image-based, the visual nature of these two social media sites appealed to teachers preparing art lessons, given art's visual nature.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods approach was deemed most appropriate in this study, as both quantitative and qualitative data were required to effectively answer the research question. A short questionnaire informed the researcher's formation of the semi-structured interview questions by using the procedure for explanatory design as outlined by Creswell (2011, p. 84). The use of a questionnaire as part of a two-phase research design efficiently gathered quantitative data such as specific information pertaining to teachers' social media use. Information regarding the length of participants' teaching careers, their opinions about teaching visual art, their frequency of social media use and the names of specific platforms they used were also collected. This quantitative data was important for the stratification of user types in the study (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006; Silverman, 2013).

The participants' questionnaire answers were be explored further throughout the interview process, by using more specific questions to elicit richer data from the participants during semi- structured interviews (Creswell, 2011). In this study, six interviews were conducted face-to-face and two were conducted online via the Skype video call platform.

Participant	Gender	Years teaching	Class level currently teaching	Profile on any social media?
Participant A	Female	1-4 years	4th class	Yes
Participant B	Male	5-9 years	5th & 6th class	Yes
Participant C	Female	5-9 years	6th class	Yes
Participant D	Female	10-15 years	6th class	Yes
Participant E	Female	5-9 years	6th class	Yes
Participant F	Female	20+ years	3rd class	Yes
Participant G	Female	5-9 years	3rd class	Yes
Participant H	Male	1-4 years	5th class	Yes

Table 1: Summary details of participants

Purposive sampling (Creswell & Plano Clarke, 2011; Denscombe, 2017) was employed by the researcher to recruit participants. The researcher interviewed eight primary teachers who are currently teaching in a variety of mainstream classroom settings, as teachers who currently teach in a special education setting do not teach visual arts as part of their teaching role. Therefore, those currently in mainstream positions were interviewed in order to gain a richer insight into their past and current visual arts teaching practice and thus having a direct experience of the phenomena being researched (Creswell & Plano Clarke, 2011).

Due to the limited timeframe of this piece of research, it was beyond the remit of the study to carry out a larger study that would be representative of wider group of primary teachers. Consequently, while it provides an insight into a small amount of teachers' experiences, it may not be possible to generalise the findings to a larger group of teachers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

During the study, thematic data analysis was carried out on the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and three main themes emerged along with subsequent subthemes. For the purpose of this article, two of the main themes that emerged will be briefly discussed: how teachers use social media and their motivations for using it. This article will also discuss some implications of these findings in the conclusion.

HOW TEACHERS USE SOCIAL MEDIA FOR VISUAL ARTS EDUCATION

While every participant (n=8) reported daily use of some form of social media, they all reported having used social media to view educational content as well. In this study, 'Pinterest' and 'Instagram' were discussed most often by the participants. Instagram was reported to be the most frequently used social media site by participants; this reflects a study by Carpenter et al. (2019) that found over 70% of teachers in the study used it daily. Three participants also indicated that they followed teacher pages on Facebook and joined teacher Facebook groups. However, throughout the research process, just two participants referenced a general use of Twitter, with both categorising their use as infrequent compared to their use of Instagram or Pinterest.

It seems that the visual nature of these two platforms appealed to the participants while searching for visual content and art lesson ideas. Participant F stated that, "*I would use Pinterest quite a bit and hugely for art ideas […] I really would say 95% if I'm using social media for schoolwork, it will be for art.*" The participants' behaviour on social media reflects a study by Carpenter, Cassaday and Monti (2018) which asserted that Pinterest's visual nature appeals to teachers looking for lesson and teaching ideas.

Six participants explained their specific approaches to storing the ideas they found on social media, using it as a reference tool for future planning. These methods consisted of using features on platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest to save Instagram images into folders, or 'pin' content onto specifically created 'pinboards,' as well as taking screenshots of ideas to store in a folder on their phone. Participant A described a combination of ways that they save lesson ideas: "*On Instagram I have my own bookmark for school. On Pinterest, a pinboard. If I come across things on Facebook, I do save them, but mostly I screenshot them.*" Many of the participants categorised the content saved by subject, theme or special occasion and some participants categorised art lesson ideas under specific strand units. Participant G described how her thematic use of saved folders on Instagram are then used for her long-term planning for art and stated that, "*I have them split into like fabric and fibre, clay [...] when it comes around to that topic next year for planning [...] then I suppose you'd have a catalogue to pick from.*" Several participants mentioned how they keep similar folders on their social media accounts to peruse when drawing up long term art plans, or in the short term if they are quickly looking for an art lesson idea. Social media has become embedded in these participants' teaching and planning processes. This finding aligns with similar studies by Schroeder, Curcio and Lundgren (2019) and Chapman, Wright and Pascoe (2018), which also found that teachers used Pinterest to store ideas which could be revisited for future planning.

Once the participants have carried out a search and have subsequently stored art lesson ideas for future planning, several participants described how they use images from social media directly as examples, or stimuli for the children at the beginning of an art lesson. Participant C described teaching an art lesson found on social media: "*I didn't teach them how to do it. I literally showed them the picture.*" Participant F also acknowledged how they used images from social media as a starting point for lessons, "*I'll probably look it up, see it, think, 'yep, that's going to work.' I literally put Pinterest up on the whiteboard, show the children this is what the aim is and work through it with them.*"

In terms of criticality of such lesson ideas, most participants were concerned with the level of difficulty of the lesson, or how long the lesson would take to complete as well as the availability of art materials, as opposed to the origins of the lesson or the accuracy of its content.

TEACHERS' MOTIVATIONS TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA FOR VISUAL ARTS EDUCATION

The participants cited various reasons for using social media for teaching purposes, such as looking for inspiration and teaching resources or classroom décor ideas. Participant H explained that they used social media for a variety of reasons, including for classroom organisation ideas

and to find art ideas, and stated, *"even if it's like how to organise things in the classroom, sometimes I see what other teachers are doing and putting up, [...] especially in art."* Participant E expressed how social media provided her with inspiration and stated that, *"I think I have so many more great lesson ideas that I don't think I'd have if I didn't follow these accounts [...]I think it inspires you."*

While there is much research regarding the use of social media as online communities of practice (Hur & Brush, 2009; Krutka, Carpenter & Trust, 2017; Prestridge, Tondeur & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2019; Wenger 2005; Whelihan, 2015), the data that emerged from this study did not introduce this concept in any significant way. Five of the participants did not cite communication with other teachers as a reason for using social media in their teaching. One participant mentioned joining a Facebook teacher group but did not state this was the primary reason for using social media as a teacher.

Several participants cited perceived ease of use of social media as a reason for using social media platforms for teaching. Four participants mentioned how they were less likely to refer to published resources such as art books for teachers due to the efficiency of an online search tool. Participant B stated that *"if I was to spend twenty minutes looking through a book that you can't search for anything in... sometimes it's time consuming. Whereas I can put in something quite specific, like three words in a search."* On the other hand, Participant C explained that they would prefer to use a book over an online source, and stated, *"I just feel with social media, there is always a competitive angle. Whereas that book is specifically created for teachers [...] why wouldn't I use it?"*

Many of the respondents did agree that they were artistic, but some commented that they rarely came up with art lesson ideas of their own. In the questionnaire, two participants felt they disagreed with the statement 'I am good at coming up with art lesson ideas,' while three participants neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. This attitude towards teaching art was a motivation for using social media; seven participants spoke of how they now use social media for most of their art lesson planning, in conjunction with existing school plans. Participant F identified themselves as creative, but explained how it was a challenge to come up with new lesson ideas: *"I love art. It's probably my favourite subject to teach. I am quite creative, I think [...] but I have no imagination. So, I go onto Pinterest."* Participant E stated that they now used art ideas exclusively from social media and cited their confidence in their own ability as a factor in that practice: *"now, 100% of my ideas are coming from online [...] I don't know if I've ever created my own art lesson [...] it's just not something I probably feel confident doing."*

Another participant questioned their over-reliance on social media in their art planning. Participant B stated that *"sometimes, I rely a little more than I should on the likes of social media for ideas […] maybe I am better at coming up with ideas than I realise."* Specific strands of the Visual arts curriculum were also another challenge faced by participants who felt their own skillset was not adequate in those strand areas. Fabric and Fibre was the most commonly mentioned strand by participants. Participant E explained that, *"I find it really hard to find ideas for fabric and fibre, like, I've often found myself typing in, like 'fabric art' or something like that into Pinterest."*

Throughout the interviews, participants often mentioned how having an art display at the end of a lesson was an objective in their art lesson preparation. For Participant G, art lessons could be chosen based on what the end result will look like and said that, *"I think a lot of it is to do with, 'will I be able to display this in a class, will the parents like it, will it look good on the school website?'"* Despite participants' own reported pressures to produce attractive art displays, participants were also cognisant of the importance of the process of art making in quality visual arts education. Participant D asserted that, *"it's more of a process, so if you don't end up with a pretty display at the end that maybe they actually learned more from the process."*

However, despite participants expressing a pressure to create attractive display, some participants were aware of the fact that much of the content on social media is curated. Participant E stated that, *"we see all these amazing lessons on Instagram, which I feel like are probably, like, just one a week or one a day in the actual classroom."* Participant C argued that other teachers on social media would only share successful lessons online: *"on social media, you're not going to write, this didn't work […] they're not reflecting if they are showing a snapshot of something. Realistically, it's going to look nice in the picture."*

CONCLUSION

This study has shed a light on an aspect of Irish primary education that had not been previously studied. Similar to a study by Ní Bhroin (2012), Irish primary teachers in this study mentioned their own perceived lack of confidence teaching and creating art lessons. As a result, teachers used social media platforms to inform teaching plans and prepare for art lessons as well to find inspiration from other teachers. While there was some evidence that participants were cognisant of the importance of emphasising the process of art making over the product, many still felt pressurised to produce 'display worthy art,' by choosing lessons sourced on social media that would produce attractive results. Further support in art education for teachers during

their initial teacher training could improve teachers' lack of confidence teaching the subject. Regarding in-service training, support for teachers navigating these social media platforms and their use for lesson planning could also be beneficial.

In terms of criticality, the participants did not indicate that they would research the source of the lesson idea or whether they would check the accuracy of resources. It would be worthwhile to further explore how teachers implement, critique and assess teaching ideas and resources found online, similar to the framework outlined by Gallagher, Swalwell, and Bellows (2019). Chapman, Wright and Pascoe (2018) argued that teachers' engagement with content on social media could become more critical, while Carpenter and Harvey (2019) suggested criticality of online content could be a component in teacher training.

There are potential opportunities for Irish primary teachers and pre-service teachers to explore their own social media use to promote the provision of quality visual arts education. Teachers can use these social media platforms to their advantage, by using discernment and a critical lens when preparing for visual arts lessons. This will ensure pupils are provided with a visual arts education that allows for inclusion, expression, meaning-making, risk-taking and individuality.
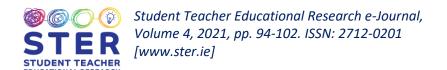
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