

**Private writing, public selves**

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**Abstract:**

Situating itself within the field of feminist scholarship, this piece brings together a range of academic and professional literature, as well as the author's own experiences as a PGCE (Postgraduate certificate in Education) tutor in England, to consider how women teachers are using online life-writing for personal and professional self-expression, and the impact this has on their wellbeing. In an educational climate facing a recruitment and retention crisis, do social media platforms and online blogs allow women teachers to be chameleon-like and create a feminised world in cyberspace, or do they result in a culture of fabricated selves and low levels of personal and professional wellbeing?

**Keywords**

Life-writing; wellbeing; women; social media; teaching; selfhood; self-expression; narrative; identity.

*In a world gone digital, every day is now 1 January. 24/7 diary. The private curtain on confession has lifted and is now becoming its own electronic industry. In a megablink, we've gone from Dear Diary to Hello YouTube! (Johnson, 2011, p. 90)*

This quotation suggests that, in the journey of writing the self, we have moved from pen and paper, to the keyboard and screen, to touchscreen. However, life-writing is constantly adapting, depending on the change it is faced with at a certain historical juncture. Life-writing is now entering a new stage: the digital world, by which I mean the internet beyond keyboard and screen. It is life-writing's shift into the digital world that is particularly interesting here because it is the latest transformation in the writing of the self, but it is one that takes the self beyond the confines of the page and into the world of cyberspace, where it can be 'liked', 'poked', befriended or followed.

For the purposes of this article, I am interested in the impact this new form of life-writing (by which I mean social media platforms and online blogs) has on teacher wellbeing, particularly women teachers. Drawing on academic and professional literature, as well as my own experiences as an English PGCE tutor, my aim is to start a conversation around teacher wellbeing and how online life-writing can be beneficial to it. Documenting one's story online as a way of shaping our personal and professional selves, could lead to support in cyberspace and a strengthened teacher workforce which, in turn, could go some way towards keeping new and experienced women teachers in the profession.

Indeed, teacher recruitment and retention in England continue to be serious issues, highlighted in the DfE's latest strategy on these topics (February 2019). As McInerney states:

Britain has a severe teacher shortage. New recruits have been below target for five years in a row and applications for training courses are down a third again this year. Combine this with a quarter of new teachers leaving the job within three years, plus high drop-out rates among women in their thirties who make up much of the profession, and you can see the problem

(McInerney, 2018).

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These figures are supported in the latest School Teachers' Review Body paper: 'This year, most of our consultees told us that schools faced severe and on-going pressures in relation to teacher recruitment and retention. Several of the teacher unions characterised the overall situation as a crisis' (2017, p. 59). The use of 'crisis' indicates the gravitas of the situation and a call to arms. As well as increasing pay – 'Teachers [...] continue to be paid less on average than other graduate professions' (p. 58) – teacher workload needs to be addressed because this is the 'central factor' affecting retention (p. 59). This claim was developed in the NFER's (National Foundation for Educational Research) research 'Engaging Teachers' (Lynch et al., 2016): 'According to interviewees, a high workload is associated with two other negative outcomes – poor health or feeling undervalued – which leads to teachers wanting to leave' (p. 14). There is not the room in this article to offer a history of teacher recruitment and retention, but what we need to consider is how, in today's educational climate, we can look after teachers' health and, in turn, improve teacher retention and recruitment. Commenting on the recent changes to education, Fleischer asks the following question: 'how can we – English educators and teachers alike – all learn to be change agents in this new space?' (p. 179 in Goodwyn et al., 2014). Fleischer's question is important here because, although writing will not solve the workload crisis – actually, some might argue that it will add to teachers' workload – having a place for teachers to open up about their workload and confront/acknowledge what is being asked of them, might lead to change on a personal level and/or a national scale. If social media is the latest iteration of life-writing, then we need to consider it in more detail and explore how it can be used as a force for good in a profession that is struggling.

Indeed, online life-writing gives women teachers the opportunity to be chameleon-like; to 'make themselves through the act of writing' (Martin and Goodman, 2004, p. 6). According to Heehs (2013), 'By creating a profile and uploading text and pictures, users define who they are or rather create an online identity that they offer to others as themselves' (p. 235). Social networking, therefore, allows a person to be a version of themselves that they want others to see – a 'simulacrum' (ibid), according to Heehs – which results in 'a blurring of the line between the user's "actual" identity and his or her online persona, together with an undermining of traditional ideas about responsibility and privacy' (ibid). Some of these ideas will be picked up on later, but the reference to creating an 'online persona' (ibid), that in some way replaces 'the user's "actual" identity' (ibid), is interesting because it supports Johnson's (2011) views from the beginning of this piece about the digital world allowing users to have, essentially, a celebrity status where we are voyeurs to each other's private lives. Despite some potential barriers around this idea (such as the suggested absence of privacy), this digital space, where the public and private spheres of society are blurred, enables women teachers to get their voices heard; they can create a feminised world in cyberspace where multiple selves are written into existence, and where multiple selves are acknowledged and listened to.

Before moving on, it is important to define some key terms. Throughout the article I refer to the 'self' and, by this, I mean the self as a construct, made from the various identities (i.e. gender and nationality) that we choose to identify with (Weedon, 2004). Heehs (2013) offers a useful summary: 'the self is not a substance but a construct, not an entity existing in its own right but the product of corporeal and social operations that will cease when its physical support dissolves' (p. 227). Writing about the self develops it in some way and, when this personal writing is shared with others, the self is subjected to 'social operations' (Heehs, p. 227) that change it. As Eakin (2008) recognises, 'in social settings of any kind, it is our narrative identities that define us' (p. 30). To bring the two ideas together, this article looks at the self as it is constructed according to the 'narrative identities' (ibid) that it chooses to write and share. This links to the idea of subjectivity, which implies self-invention. For Martin and Goodman (2004):

A recognition of the practices of self-invention is captured by the term subjectivity, to imply the constructed quality of memory and experience. It includes the struggle and contest over

identity; the process of identification and an unstable shifting subject constructed through dominant conceptions and resistance to those conceptions (p. 11).

Thus, we can ‘self-invent’ within the ‘narrative identities’ (Eakin, p. 30) that we write and share and, to draw on Virginia Woolf’s thoughts about diary writing, to ‘knit’ (1919) together a different cloak that defines us at a particular moment in time.

I am aware that I am discussing women teachers collectively, but I understand that there are individual differences between women. I am also aware that not every woman teacher writes. As Benstock (1988) notes: ‘Women’s writings are as individual as women themselves, and they often resist easy classifications’ (p. 4). Therefore, I am not trying to pigeonhole women teachers, but rather to initiate a debate around women’s online life-writing and wellbeing and how this form of self-expression can be used to support those in the profession.

Another term that needs to be defined is wellbeing. There are many definitions of wellbeing (see White and Blackmore’s *Cultures of Wellbeing* (2016) for an overview), however, for the purposes of this piece, I am going to use the World Health Organisation’s definition (2014), who describe it ‘as a state of well-being in which the individual realizes [*sic*] his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community’ (WHO, 2018, online). This definition ties together professional and personal wellbeing – and, in turn, the public and private spheres of society – and is therefore not limiting in its approach. Although I have offered this definition, I understand that wellbeing means something different to each person which, undoubtedly, will be reflected in their personal writing; however, I believe this definition encapsulates some of the main components of wellbeing, which enables ‘the individual [to realise] his or her own abilities’ (ibid).

The final terms that need to be defined are public and private. I am proposing that there is a split between the public and private spheres of society, based on socially constructed ideas which change, depending on time and space. According to Coleman (1997), ‘Modern western culture has attempted to order itself around a gendered division into private and public spheres, privileging the voices of the public male and, in turn, silencing, or at best limiting to the private, the female voice’ (p. 1). The history of this divide cannot be interrogated fully here, however, what is important – and will be returned to throughout the article – is how women teachers use their private writing and, in turn, their writing about the private (i.e. domestic life), to enter the public domain, either online or offline, and the impact this has on their wellbeing. Bunkers and Huff (1996) suggest that diaries can blur the distinction between the public and private spheres of society because ‘they challenge us to question the boundaries between the public and the private; and they encourage us to assess the social, political and personal repercussions of segmenting our lives, our texts, our culture, and our academic disciplines’ (p. 2). Thus, diaries – in whatever format – offer a ‘doorway’ (Johnson, p. 90) between the public and private spheres of society, which permit us to enter, and question, both worlds. This is the perfect place, therefore, for women teachers to make their voices heard and to be, as Fleischer advocates, ‘change agents’ (p. 179 in Goodwyn et al., 2014).

### **Potential benefits of online life-writing as a tool for wellbeing**

The French professor and essayist specialising in autobiography, Phillipe Lejeune, focuses on diary writing and advocates that, ‘On the internet, the diary can finally breathe, stretch out on a chaise longue, and relax [...] [because] it turns time into space without shrinking it’ (2009, p. 316). For Lejeune, a digital diary allows a person to ‘endless[ly]’ (ibid) accumulate the self. He implicitly suggests that a diary kept in book format restrains the self because there is not enough room for it to ‘breathe’ and develop whereas, online, our ‘selves’ can keep multiplying. Smith and Watson concur, stating that, ‘the archiving of selves and lives, made possible by the awesome storage capacity of computers and

their myriad interfaces, may provide a comforting repository of our past selves and past lives in the midst of a future as yet unimaginable' (2010, p. 191).

In relation to our PGCE programme, this accumulation of the self occurs in the electronic journal or blog we ask student teachers to write weekly, in order to trace their PGCE journey. Yet, to return to Smith and Watson's quote, this task is not just about 'the archiving of selves and lives' (ibid): it is about writing the self – or selves – for the present and future. Indeed, it is a way for student teachers to become reflective practitioners and to consider the type of teacher they want to be, as well as reflecting on their wellbeing generally and to communicate with others. Student teachers actively involved in the process are very positive about the impact it has had, both personally and professionally, and I would encourage other institutions to promote online life-writing as a wellbeing tool. Moreover, some student teachers have enjoyed the process so much that they continue to write their reflective blog into their NQT (Newly Qualified Teacher) year and beyond.

Alvizo (2015) supports the view that online life-writing enables women teachers to move beyond the archival of the self or selves. For Alvizo, the digital world gives women a space for their voices to be heard – a platform for selves to be shared. Although focusing on the benefits of technology in relation to feminist studies in religion, her research is applicable here. She suggests that:

there is a host of social media opportunities immediately available through which people can share their voices. While there is no guarantee that someone will be listening on the other end, the microphone is there for the taking, and opportunities to add one's voice to the millions of others in the World Wide Web abound (p. 165).

Again, this online space erases the public/private divide, which allows feminists 'to bring about change and inflict a rupture in the dominant modes of relating' (Alvizo, p. 167). The 'microphone' (Alvizo, p. 165) of online writing allows, in this case women teachers, to disturb the peace and challenge the status quo, which can bring about change in the current educational climate where so many women (and men) are leaving the teaching profession. Surely many selves are stronger than one? As already mentioned, in my experience, online life-writing gives student teachers a 'microphone' they are keen to pick up. This year has seen a significant rise in the number of social media platforms being used by student teachers to share their development. Instagram and Twitter are now 'microphone[s]' (ibid) to not only document the individual's experience, but 'to add one's voice to the millions of others' (ibid). It is encouraging to see teachers entering the profession using these platforms because it suggests that they really see the value in collaborative practice and the impact it can have on their personal and professional growth and wellbeing.

In relation to Twitter, this platform offers a public arena to share good practice and to raise awareness about important topics in education. There are thousands of organisations, educationalists and classroom practitioners that one can follow on Twitter. However, although Johnson suggests that 'Tweets shatter the perfectionism that has prevented so many from keeping diaries,' and that, 'All those "shoulds" have vanished: write only when having profound thoughts, no word misspelled' (p. 93), this may not be the case when it comes to wellbeing. Teachers in England must follow the Teachers' Standards, 'the minimum requirements for teachers' practice and conduct' (Department for Education, 2011a) which, probably, affects the type of writing being shared. There is not the space here to explore this argument in depth, however, in Part 2 of the Teachers' Standards, it states: 'Teachers must have an understanding of, and always act within, the statutory frameworks which set out their professional duties and responsibilities' (Department for Education, 2011b). The use of the adverb 'always' implies that one is 'always' working. In the online world, emotions need to be filtered because the professional mask of teaching cannot slip, which restricts the potential 'selves' that can be displayed. When discussing seeking help from their Senior Leadership Team, one participant in the

NFER report on teacher retention stated: *'In teaching, it is culturally unacceptable to show a chink of weakness that you are even considering leaving the profession'* (p. 15, italics in text). Consequently, the 'microphone' (Alvizo, p. 165) – to return to Alvizo for a moment – must be picked up with caution.

One way to manage this potential tension is to use multiple mediums to document one's personal and professional journey. It is important to note that the student teachers who do use Twitter also use an online blog to develop their personal and professional self in more detail, which suggests that they are aware of audience and purpose. Blogs can offer women teachers an opportunity to be uncensored in the digital world. For Johnson, 'Bloggers have assumed the mantle of traditional diary keeping – the daily entry – reinventing it in the process. The blogger's currency is self-expression; liberated by sharing' (p. 95).

Indeed, Duckworth et al. experienced real benefits in 'sharing' (ibid) their writing when they established an online 'community of practice' (2016, p. 904); one that might not have been so easy to create in the offline world. This was 'a caring community of practice that felt safe and non-threatening and engendered a sense of support' (ibid). One of the benefits of the digital world is that it enables 'communit[ies] of practice' (ibid) to be established amongst women, which promotes positive wellbeing. Unlike the very public platform of Twitter, these shared spaces are created amongst specific women where professional and personal trust have already been established. This is very much echoed on our PGCE programme. As well as sharing it with their University Tutor, the student teachers are encouraged to share their blogs with two or three peers and to act as 'critical friends', reading and commenting on posts. This 'community of practice' (ibid) offers another channel for student teachers to communicate and support each other. Student teachers have also shared their blogs and journals with family and friends, which has given those close to the student teacher a wonderful insight into the teaching profession and how to support their loved one.

The idea of creating closed 'communit[ies] of practice' (ibid) alongside the very public arenas of Twitter and Instagram, where personal and professional selves can be shared, might be a way of maintaining positive wellbeing in cyberspace. Although Burke and Kraut (2016) suggest that online communication on media sites like Facebook can improve wellbeing, the support needs to be targeted communication from a strong tie, tailored to the individual. 'Likes' or blanket messages do not have a positive impact on wellbeing because they come from 'weak' ties that do not have a personal attachment (p. 266). For Burke and Kraut, the online world encourages us to be 'self-enhancing' (p. 269), rather than honest when writing, because the audience boundaries are much more fluid. Essentially, we do not always know who will 'see' us, so the narrative identity we choose to present is defined by this social setting (to return to Eakins' ideas, p.30). We 'self-invent' (Martin and Goodman, p. 11) to be 'liked' on social media and to experience that feeling of popularity which, in turn, improves our wellbeing but, in the offline world, the self we view in the mirror can be very different to the one presented on screen. Therefore, in order to avoid the rollercoaster of emotions that comes from writing on social media, we need to encourage targeted communication. In this way, the distance between our fabricated self and our 'authentic' self (Duckworth et al., 2016, 906, quoting Patrick-Webber, 2012) will be lessened, which will have a positive impact on our wellbeing.

This view is supported in my work with PGCE student teachers. When the student teachers create closed groups online (which myself and my colleague are not a part of) to share their personal and professional experiences, their wellbeing is improved because there is a support system in place to listen to them at any time and in any place. Student teachers target this communication even further by having a professional page for sharing resources which, in turn, helps with workload, and a personal page for disclosing thoughts and feelings. Although the immediacy of social media platforms can, potentially, get a little out of hand (see Blabst and Diefenbach's 2017 study into the impact WhatsApp

has on wellbeing in relation to 'read receipts' and 'last seen' notifications), the feeling that you are not alone can be incredibly comforting.

However, it could be argued that, in a profession governed by the Teachers' Standards, any type of online life-writing needs to be edited (even when written anonymously) because of who might see it. As Duckworth et al. (2016) emphasise, 'the use of email, websites and blogs for communication and collaboration, means that an individual's thoughts, ideas and concerns are maintained for posterity' (p. 906), which, in turn, results in us creating a 'narrative identit[y]' (Eakin, 2008, p.30) that is further away from our 'authentic' self (Duckworth et al., p. 906, quoting Patrick-Webber, 2012) because it is defined by our 'social setting' (Eakin, 2008, p. 30). Indeed, Smith and Watson suggest that online life-writing in the digital world has resulted in a self that is owned by others. Social media is a conversation, and this can lead to an individual 'editing or modifying [their discourse] in an intersubjective process [that] make[s] the subject inescapably collective and collaborative' (p. 247).

Yet, should we view a 'collective and collaborative' (ibid) self negatively? Writing is a process and online social media platforms enable the self – or selves – to be written in snippets over time. One of the positive aspects of online life-writing is that it can be done practically anywhere and at any time; we no longer have to wait until the end of the day to reflect and process our thoughts and feelings. Indeed, student teachers have commented positively on this. The conciseness of a Twitter post, for example, means that one can keep in contact much more regularly and seek the support of others. Surely in our current educational climate where we need to do everything we can to retain our many wonderful teachers, this new form of life-writing can only be viewed optimistically?

To offer a different perspective, online life-writing does not need to be the only form of writing taking place. Wellbeing is a multifaceted concept and, consequently, we need different forms of writing to accommodate, and promote, it. Perhaps the screen has not replaced the pen; it is just there alongside it. A more private form of writing in a notebook that is not shared with others, for example, might be the outlet new and experienced women teachers need to escape the red tape of the profession but, the support of cyberspace might provide a much-needed feeling of camaraderie. This is an area to return to in later research.

### **Conclusion and what this means for women teachers**

The purpose of this piece was to start a conversation around women teachers' online life-writing, and its relationship to wellbeing and personal and professional self-expression, by drawing on a variety of sources to pose some questions for future research. In terms of life-writing, the digital world has provided women teachers with the opportunity to self-invent like never before and it is interesting to predict where this might lead. In Heehs' opinion, 'some of us have grabbed whatever tool came to hand and used it to express – and create – our selves. The history of this self-expression is far from over' (p. 237). Self-expression can occur in very different ways, depending on the self one wants to express. We can make our 'mark' with both a pen and a keyboard/touchscreen. As we tell our learners in the classroom, it is all about purpose and audience: why are we writing and who are we writing for? Rather than a single self, what makes an 'authentic' (Duckworth et al., p. 906, quoting Patrick-Webber, 2012) self is being able to wear different 'narrative identities' (Eakin, p. 30), and using these to question, for the purposes of this article, what it means to be a woman teacher. If, as Heehs suggests, we have 'evolving selves' (p. 236), then these selves need to evolve in different settings, with different audiences. We need to embrace the different forms of life-writing on offer and use them as a wellbeing tool for personal and professional self-expression so that 'the individual realizes [sic] his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community' (WHO, 2018, online). By doing this, positive teacher wellbeing becomes the much-needed next chapter in the story of teaching.

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