

“How I Spent My Summer Vacation”

An ETP on Blogging by Diane Main

One of the things I really enjoyed while blogging this summer was making a top ten list when I was feeling silly. It’s a challenge I offer my students sometimes as a writing option. I decided that there was so much I gained from the blog experience this summer that I would rather present all of my ideas instead of just focusing on one.

Top Ten Things I Got Out of Doing a Blog for my ETP:

10. The blog has been a great chance for me to practice writing. Being a busy teacher and parent, I don’t get much chance to write just for the sake of writing. But I think I am a good writer . . . just out of practice. Since I am moving up into 6th grade math and language arts, instead of teaching all subjects to 5th graders, I think it is important that I spend more time writing.

9. I felt less isolated. I spent much of the summer in an office where my officemate was on vacation. I didn’t mind, because I need solitude and relative quiet to get work done well. But being able to connect to the blog group helped me feel less alone. I am very much an extravert who thrives on and gets energy from being around other people and interacting with them. So, I guess I had the best of both worlds in that I could participate at my own pace, and then return to work after I got my dose of camaraderie.

8. The blog group of IISME veteran fellows ended up being like a club, especially after mid-summer, and it was fun to “socialize” regularly, even though it was not face to face. Too often, my socializing with other teachers only includes those at my school, and it’s not often enough due to the demands of my family life. Teachers are a wonderfully diverse group of people, and our microcosm reflected that. We had a variety of ages, backgrounds, races, teaching expertise and fields, and personalities. Such a group is strong because of its differences, and I think we offered each other plenty of good insights and feedback.

7. Instead of just comparing *my* summer fellowship and *my* teaching experiences, I got to hear a diverse group of others go through the same process. How was working at NUMMI like and different from teaching adult English learners? How was working at Palm like and different from teaching high school Bible classes? How was working in high tech like and different from any number of teaching settings? This was especially helpful to me as I returned to the same sponsor company and department that I worked in during my only other fellowship thus far. Experience is the best teacher, but I think *other* people’s experiences are even better teachers, and they don’t leave scars.

6. For some time now, I have been considering jumping ship . . . leaving the city life to move to a small town. I grew up just outside New York City, but at least I knew a lot of people in my town. Now I live in a much nicer place, but it still has that big-city feeling in many ways. I don’t even know my neighbors. With the veteran blog group, I felt as though I knew what was going on in the lives of people “around” me. It wasn’t just what each person did at work

that day. We shared about our families, our childhoods, our weekends, our commutes, and more, all without a couch and overpaid therapist.

5. I learned about lots of cool stuff on the web, thanks to Lara and others who posted links. Lara posted a link of the day, including one for the site to a publisher whose book my students will be using. I added that link to my links page, and from it found another link or two for my website. The links ranged from technical and educational to interesting and just plain quirky. Bruce gave us some great insight to some open-source tools anyone can use. Others shared about field trip ideas and professional development opportunities. And it's all right there to go back and read if we need it. There was also some discussion of recommended books to read and the many benefits of joining RAFT.

4. Blogging every day gave me something to look forward to. Let's face it; there were times when the mundane tasks I was doing to save my colleagues time were eating into my brain. Whenever I needed a break, I could go to the blog and post to vent my frustration, or I could read what others had to say. It was a welcome break, and I went back to my tasks refreshed and ready to tackle the job.

3. Arlene Scallon taught me the correct way to sit at work. She posted some research on ergonomics on July 1st, and it really helped. I had been having a lot of on-and-off back pain near the end of the school year, and boy was I sitting incorrectly at work until Arlene set me straight. Every day, I still think about that advice when I am sitting at my desk in my office. I have very poor habits when it comes to sitting and posture, and I have found myself making a concerted effort to fix this. I am also noticing that I am thinking about it when I watch TV, sit at my home computer, and sit in the stands at soccer games.

2. My favorite entries in my personal journal this summer have been the ones where I just wrote creatively, usually in an effort to elicit laughter from myself and others. The blog has been a creative outlet, not just to blow off steam or take a break from work, but to have fun commenting on life the way I see it. You see, I tend to have a rather "unique" way of looking at things, and my head is almost always "full" of all kinds of random thoughts. I frequently laugh and I am sure people around me wonder what brings it on. My first foray into this arena in this summer's blog was when I wrote about the squirrel cannibalism I witnessed at IBM. (Several other IBM IISME fellows have since witnessed this, so I am **not** crazy!) I then wrote a Top Ten list of things to do to look busy at work. I don't know who enjoyed these more, the people reading them or me writing them. I laughed the entire time I was typing them, and I still laugh when I go back and read them again. So, this blog has been a true creative outlet for me. My husband is still skeptical that I should be getting paid for this.

1. The main purpose of the blog project was self-reflection. Good teachers (well, any good workers, parents, students . . . humans, really) look back on what they have done or learned and think about how things went, and how they might have gone differently. That is not to say that it's healthy to dwell on the past or have regrets. Rather, it means that if you don't learn from the past, you are doomed to repeat it. All clichés aside, I did learn something about myself that I think I already knew but was not truly aware of. I learned that in order to

do my best work, I need to know how my efforts fit into the “big picture.” (Which, I admit, is also a cliché.)

I spent my summer doing little jobs that don't require too much product knowledge, but that take a long time to complete. All were things that absolutely needed to be done, but that had to be shifted to a lower priority by people whose advanced knowledge and skills were necessary elsewhere. Enter *me*. I am clever enough to pick up on a task fairly quickly, and since I am being paid to do these things, I just do what I am told. So the experts could get on with what they needed to do, secure in the knowledge that the stuff they really did not want to do was getting done by someone else.

But then I noticed something. What exactly **was** it that I was doing? Why did it need to be done? Was this a part of something bigger, and did my different tasks relate to each other somehow? I guess having a clever person around isn't always all that helpful after all, since we tend to come up with annoying questions when we are bored. Several of my colleagues were great, and really helpful, though, explaining to me how what I was doing fit into the larger scheme of what our products do and what part of the process I was involved with. And then when I began to make connections between various tasks I had been doing, they patiently helped me understand how it all fit together.

So, I learned that when I am given something to work on, I will do a better job when I am able to truly invest myself in it. As a people person, I need to care about the work I am doing, and I need to know that it serves a greater purpose. If I take some time in the early stages of a task to understand the “big picture,” then it doesn't really matter all that much to me if the task is mundane or repetitive.

When I do family history research, I can spend hours skimming through microfiche or scanned images, looking for “that one” clue. I can spend days transcribing records about people who have been dead for hundreds of years. I can do these things because these are people that have meaning to me. Usually, they are my ancestors and their families, but I have also done research for others, and the families are not my own. But I know what each person's role was in the families, and finding new people fleshes out the family tree even more. All the names and dates and places have meaning. These are real people, even though they are gone. It's kind of the same thing with the work I have done at my fellowship. This is a product, and when I can picture people using it, and can imagine what they might be thinking when they look something up in the documentation, it all comes alive for me, and I see how important my tiny piece of the puzzle has been.

In conclusion, at the beginning of the summer I did not know what the blogging project would evolve into. I was nervous at the prospect of writing a final paper when I could not imagine what the content could possibly be. I found that I was not alone. And really, I suppose that is the essence of the blog ETP option. IISME fellowships can be isolating for people accustomed to working with large groups of people all the time. But the blog provided a way of taking the journey with new friends. Each blogger got something different out of the experiment, and we may have taken different paths, but we all arrived at our destinations together.