

MANAGING STUDENT/TEACHER ONLINE RELATIONSHIPS

by Phoebe Uy

If you're a teacher on Facebook, chances are you've received at least a friend request or two from your students, prompting you to make a difficult decision between "Confirm" and "Ignore." Some schools have cut out the guesswork for teachers by introducing a "no friending" policy that applies to everything web. For many teachers, emails, Wikis and blogs are to remain strictly professional, and personal social sites like Twitter and Facebook are off limits to students.

Some schools advise against online relationships with students altogether as a way of minimizing the risk of teacher misconduct after school hours. Many teachers, however, are arguing that such a restriction is retrogressive, limiting teachers to the confines of the classroom walls.

"Outside the classroom, in terms of connecting with students, there are some exciting possibilities," said Melissa Pierson, an associate professor who teaches instructional technology at the University of Houston. "Such sites can help humanize teachers, and facilitate online learning."

Ollie Bray, a national adviser for emerging technologies at Learning and Teaching Scotland is another big supporter of social media for enhancing education. He argues that, "social media such as blogs, Wikis and podcasts give students a sense of audience and encourage collaboration—which produces better output and increased student pride."

Some social media buffs go as far as dubbing it "the greatest educational tool ever invented."

While school administrators continue to debate the issue, students may soon find themselves frozen out of future learning and technological developments. Sure, technology bans provide a quick fix for liability woes, but the most constructive solution is placing the onus on the user, not the medium.

Here are the top five guidelines for using social media sites to connect with students, courtesy of Kiwi Commons.

1. Accept friendship requests from students, but never initiate them.

If it's for a non-educational purpose, searching out your students online and requesting friendship or starting conversations through texts or emails are big no-no's, and may border on invasive. To keep in touch with graduating students or to connect with current

ones for school-related topics, I would suggest extending an invitation to your class as a whole to add you as a friend.

Teachers should also be careful when accepting friend invites from students. Some prefer to hold off an acceptance until after the student graduates, while others are comfortable accepting requests so as long they connect using a professional account. If you're not comfortable communicating with your students on social platforms, politely decline the invite and offer an alternative class-based online network where they can contact you, or your school email address.

2. Use professional accounts and educational platforms to connect with your students.

Some teachers will never connect with students via Facebook, Twitter or a personal email account, worrying that the sites lend themselves to casual correspondence of a social nature. One solution for this is to set up a class or teacher account on these platforms, with your username the same as what your students address you in the classroom. This enables teachers to manage their personal and professional personas separately, keep their private lives private, and maintain their professional persona in online interactions.

A dedicated group page to a school program or class allows students to connect with each other and is more conducive to collaborative group discussions where students can act as a mediator or leader. Many teachers set up Facebook groups or a class web page on the school website for instance, where students share field trip pictures and are able to ask homework or lesson-related questions.

Online educational resources like HotChalk (a free service) and Edmodo provide a great way for students and teachers to connect. Both platforms provide online learning environments that enable teachers to create online classrooms, post messages to students and manage assignments, grades and quizzes.

3. Use your privacy settings to protect your personal information and private life.

Whether your students are in your online network or not, it is important to adjust the security and privacy settings of all your accounts. However, it's important to note that any pictures or posts shared by you or someone in your network can still be circulated outside of the group(s) you authorize in your settings. For that

reason, a routine clean-up should also be done of all your posts and photos within your networks and online profiles. Teachers' gauging question should be: Is this something I'd want my students, my students' parents and the principal of my school to see?

Though it's ill-advised, for teachers who would like to use their personal accounts to communicate with students, privacy settings should be set to "only friends" as a minimum protective measure.

On Facebook, teachers should first create a friends list reserved exclusively for students. From there, they can allow or disallow students from seeing personal information including status updates, basic information, photos and videos of you and your wall.

4. Notify parents first before engaging in an online relationship with a student.

Before you accept a student's friend request on the Internet or get students participating on your class group page, it's important to get parent permission first. Some teachers prefer to send a standard notice home to parents that details what social media platform they will be using to connect with their students, as well as the purpose of their online communications. And to get them involved and updated, teachers can also make group pages for the class open to parents.

5. Monitor what your students post.

Teachers are often wary of the added responsibility of adding students to their online networks. Most often, teachers are unsure of their place in calling students out on obscene or inappropriate behaviour they witness online. As educators however, teachers are expected to be role-models and guardians both online and offline, in-school and off campus. In the instance that teachers come across self-jeopardizing, privacy-compromising or abusive pictures or comments online, they should either openly or privately message the student, and/or discuss in person the ramifications of this online activity. On Facebook, teachers can also report any inappropriate content or online harassment by clicking on their "Panic" button.

Phoebe Uy is a staff writer for KiwiCommons.com, a free Internet safety resource for educators and parents. Kiwi Commons is proud to be the content partner of Crime Stoppers Canada, the York Catholic District School Board, KiwiSeminars.com and the Empowered Student Partnership program.

