

Connecting with Students Online

Issues to consider when educators “friend” students



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Many educators have embraced technology and are constantly using it in new ways to encourage and improve learning, inside the classroom and beyond. One question that persists, however, is whether it is appropriate for educators to connect with students through social media sites like Facebook? We think many would agree that a lot of value could come from teachers interacting online in a professional/educational manner with their students. Assuming both teachers and students establish and maintain appropriate boundaries, these interactions could be very beneficial. For example, teachers could model appropriate online behaviors and show their students how to apply the technological resources at their fingertips for educational advantage. Nevertheless, there are important considerations to keep in mind for educators wanting to connect with their students online.

Potential Pitfalls

The most serious potential risk is educators failing to maintain proper boundaries, or students misperceiving the online attention they were receiving as something more than educational and platonic. Of course, these concerns are also present in off-line communications between teachers and students as well (both in and outside of school). But that being said, educators should definitely refrain from “friending” students on social networking profiles they use for personal purposes (e.g., connected with the educator’s adult friends and loved ones). Clearly separating their work and personal lives is crucial. Toward this end, schools should consider developing a clear policy that establishes the professional standard for educator online presence and online student-educator interactions.

There is no shortage of examples where teachers either crossed the line, or were perceived to have done so, and were disciplined as a result. Ian Defeo, a substitute teacher in Cape May, NJ ran into trouble in 2007 after giving one of his students a sticker with his band’s logo which also had the web address to the band’s MySpace page.¹ The student then visited the teacher’s MySpace page

which hosted his band’s music videos. Some of the music included explicit lyrics and one video had a brief shot of a woman exposing herself. The school deemed this content inappropriate and fired him, confirming that school employees can be disciplined for off-duty conduct if the school district can show that the conduct may have had an adverse impact on the school.

Another concern raised is that online communication environments can make it too easy to move from discussing school assignments to asking more “personal” (even if innocent) questions, sharing private world views or engaging in candid self-disclosure. Anonymity and geographical distance while online, coupled with feelings of loneliness and the desire to connect with someone when individuals interact through cyber communication, make inappropriate messages between educators and students a very real possibility.



Though extremely rare, there have also been cases where teachers have used technology to connect with students for the purpose of fostering improper relationships. Apart from the devastating consequences on the reputation of a school district, as well as civil liability, educators who abuse these technologies may lose their job and/or teaching license, and be subject to criminal prosecution. Fortunately, these technologies may actually make it easier to catch, and subsequently punish, “bad apple” educators for

their improper behaviors since there is almost always a trail of evidence. That is not necessarily true for face-to-face incidents of sexual impropriety. It also means that educators need to protect themselves from false claims by refraining from posting something that could be misinterpreted as problematic by the student or a third-party.

Added Responsibility

Another issue to be aware of is that educators who connect with students online have an obligation to intervene if they see inappropriate content or evidence of a violation of school policy or the law on a student's profile. If there is discussion about a party on Saturday night which appears to include underage drinking, the teacher has a duty to respond. Imagine the serious consequences that could come from a teacher who doesn't take action if someone were to be seriously injured or killed as a result of behaviors at that party. By choosing to interact with students online, educators, or any adult for that matter, must now respond to any illicit behavior or information that may put students in harm's way. Some educators we have spoken to acknowledge and accept this responsibility and welcome any opportunity to encourage teens to be safe and responsible. It is better to learn about the party and do something about it, they say, than to hear about a tragic accident that occurred after the fact. This is simply an issue to wrestle with as you form your decisions and policies.

Legislative and Policy Considerations

Over the last few years, some states have waded into this discussion by proposing or passing laws that restrict educators from communicating with students online. For example, Louisiana enacted a state law requiring all school districts to formulate and implement policies which require documentation of every electronic communication between teachers and students made through a non-school-issued device, such as a personal email account or a cell phone.² Similarly, the Missouri legislature proposed a law in 2011 (that the governor ultimately rejected) that would have altogether prohibited teachers from communicating with current or former students online.³

Laws like these likely do little to prevent the types of behavior they are designed to stop. They will have a trivial deterrent effect, and will be largely unenforceable. Problematic electronic communications between teachers and students will most often occur on personal accounts and devices which cannot be proactively policed or monitored. Plus, any teacher who is willing to cross the line with stu-

dents online is also unlikely to report such activities to their supervisors.

Apart from state laws, some school districts are enacting policies that forbid teachers from interacting with their students via social networking websites. For example, a policy recently adopted by the Elmbrook School District (Brookfield, WI) bans all communication between students and staff on social networking web sites and instant messaging applications.⁴ What's interesting about this district's approach is that according to reports, the original version of the proposed policy would have "banned district staff from using text messaging, instant messaging and social networking altogether, even personally while off the clock."⁵

To be blunt, we believe this type of policy is ridiculous and unrealistic. It's not the method of communication that needs to be prohibited but the nature and content of that communication. Prohibiting teachers from interacting with their students online is akin to saying that they shouldn't be allowed to talk to students they see in the mall or elsewhere in the community. Are they just supposed to ignore them? Why stifle the development of a positive relationship between a teacher and a student? We think this is particularly true for older students, as the teacher begins to transform into more of a mentor than a superior. What happens when the students graduate? Can they communicate with alums? What if their own children are in that educator's school?

Terri Miller, the president of the group Stop Educator Sexual Abuse, Misconduct, and Exploitation argued in Education Week back in 2009 that "policymakers should not enact reactionary legislation regarding contact between teachers and students. What they really need to focus on is training in proper boundaries."² We agree, and do encourage school districts to have their own policies that outline the nature of student/teacher interactions online. But, they need to be practical and should emphasize the concerns highlighted in this report. It is important for all stakeholders—staff, students, and parents—to understand and work to minimize the risks. While the vast majority of teachers and students would undoubtedly use these environments for positive and productive purposes, a slippery slope effect could take place—requiring continued vigilance by all parties.

Recommendations

Adults need to recognize that this is the way youth communicate these days. They don't pick up the phone and

call. They don't really even use email very much. They text and they message using Facebook. They increasingly Tweet. If adults want to talk to kids, they are going to have to adopt some of these technologies in a prudent, professional way. It can open up lines of communication that were previously unavailable.

Powerful things can happen when people can come to understand each other on even slightly deeper levels afforded by the kind of frequent, candid, humanizing communication that happens in social media. Empathy emerges. Think about what can happen when people feel empathy toward one another: compassion, civility, encouragement, empowerment, engagement, etc. Disinhibition – that condition of online experience that allows for cyberbullying, harassment, hate, etc. by dehumanizing people – tends to be disempowered. And students go from being passive consumers to citizens and (class and school) community members – collaborators in each other's and owners of their own learning experiences.⁶

Anne Collier, Co-director of Net Family News

We know of many teachers who utilize social networking sites in a positive way to interact with their students. They create invite-only groups to constructively comment on peers' photos, videos, or other digital creations. They create websites for historical and literary figures and encourage students to post relevant and compelling status updates as if they were that person. And they connect with students through Facebook and Twitter to remind them of upcoming events, exams, and deadlines. Creating Facebook Fan Pages (as opposed to personal profile pages), allows teachers or support staff to post information for students to view (class updates, interesting videos, changes in schedules, etc.), without opening up broader access to the content of the student's or adult's personal profiles.

As mentioned earlier, interacting via technology allows for personal thoughts, emotional content, and private feelings to be shared more readily than in person. It also allows for one-on-one conversation outside of the purview of others, removing accountability and perhaps increasing notions of undetectability. The vast majority of educators will not abuse this—but some will. Despite this possibility, we shouldn't punish all of those with good intentions and

proven beneficial results simply because of the inappropriate actions of a select few. Instead of prohibiting good teachers from utilizing all available tools to educate their students and promote their healthy development, focus should be placed on informing both students and staff about appropriate boundaries and keeping the discussion/interaction professional. To reinforce the boundaries, schools must strongly discipline teachers who engage in inappropriate behaviors, no matter where they occur.

Conclusion

Teachers and other school staff must continually exercise extreme care when communicating online with students. It is in the best interest of schools to develop a policy that encourages practices that minimize the likelihood of inappropriate online interactions between staff and students. With this in mind, many teachers may still feel that interacting with students online just isn't for them. Either way, it should be their choice. But everyone needs to remain aware of the relevant issues so that informed decisions can be made.

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