

Blurring the boundaries

Technology and its impact on the teacher-student relationship



Over the last few years, the College has received a growing number of complaints about boundary violations related to online communication with students. As with other forms of interaction, when educators communicate with students online, it's always important to maintain a clear division between the personal and the professional.

Technology is just another tool that educators can use to communicate with students, whether it's sending out a text message about an upcoming test, answering questions on a Facebook page about an assignment or helping a student through email or instant messaging.

Many educators value the ability to text, email and communicate online with their students. After all, this is the connected world that students inhabit, and in using these tools, educators are able to extend their communication with students outside of the classroom.

However, problems can arise when educators intentionally or unintentionally fail to maintain the professional boundaries that define the student-teacher relationship. A bit of forethought can prevent this from happening – ensuring that your private information stays private and that you continue to respect the nature of the professional relationship between teacher and student.

Distinguishing between the professional and the private

In the winter 2007 issue of *TC*, we featured an article on Facebook. It was one of our most popular articles, resulting in a flurry of emails from educators about the value of accepting students as “friends” to their Facebook pages. For these educators, Facebook is an essential tool within the educational context, enabling them to provide links to educational resources, post homework assignments, monitor a discussion forum on topics related to the curriculum or answer specific questions.

Other readers, however, cautioned about the need to keep a clear eye on the distinction between the professional and the private when using Facebook. And given that Facebook only continues to grow in popularity, this advice is as important and timely as ever.

If your employer allows you to communicate with students through Facebook (keep in mind that some may have policies that prohibit this), set up a separate professional account and keep your communication with students focused solely on educational issues. Better yet, have your school set up a Facebook account for you so that there is absolutely no perceived ambiguity between your work as a professional and your personal life.

The technology-related boundary violation cases that come before the College are those where educators are unable to maintain an appropriate professional relationship, either by inadvertently allowing students to access personal information or photos or by communicating with students in a way that does not maintain the professional nature of the teacher-student relationship. This is more likely to occur when educators have one Facebook account that is used both to communicate with friends and family and also to communicate with students. This mixing of personal and professional courts danger.

While it is wise to set high privacy settings on your accounts, understand that anything posted on social networking sites becomes the property of the site and can be shared by any of your friends – and by their friends and their friends and so on.

What are you posting on Twitter, Flickr and other sites?

Many educators love Twitter, and are using it to create online learning communities where they share ideas with educators in BC and around the world. Others use Twitter because it's a fun and quick way to let people know what they're doing and to stay in touch with the daily details of friends' and colleagues' lives.

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As you're tweeting away, however, remember that everything you write is in the public domain. A quick search of tweeting educators uncovers many tweets that might be considered to be in the dubious category, such as complaints about students or frustration with a class. Although these tweets were obviously written with a particular audience of like-minded friends and fellow educators in mind, they can be read by anybody – from strangers to students and parents. These public online comments do not uphold the confidentiality or respect that define the professional expectations of a relationship between teacher and student. Remember, too, that responses to your tweets are also included in your twitter feed – responses that you have no control over and that you may not want the wider community reading.

It's the same for Flickr, YouTube and countless other sites. Are you comfortable knowing that anyone can click through the photos you've uploaded from your holiday? What about those videos you made with your friends?

As with other professions, educators are held to a higher standard than the general public—whether they're on or off the job. Last spring, for example, a district placed a principal on administrative leave for two months after a parent found a nude photo the principal had posted on a website intended solely for his friends and family.

In the Internet age, there are very few borders, and it is close to impossible to ensure that a website, photo or comment can ever be restricted to a narrow and defined audience. Ask yourself if you would want your postings to be headlined in a national newspaper or sent to your grandmother. Even if your employer and the College find no wrongdoing on your part, the media may not be so forgiving.



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Think twice before hitting “send”

We all recognize that online communication is very different from face-to-face communication. Without being able to rely on visual or verbal cues, people sometimes misinterpret our intended meaning in a message. Or we may find ourselves more likely to disclose personal information or make criticisms of others than we would when talking directly to someone. Because our inhibitions drop online, it's very important to monitor what we're writing.

Educators must always remember that what they post online is visible to the world. Whatever is written online should be of the highest professional quality and should maintain the Standards and reputation of the individual and the profession as a whole.

This means that if you're texting a student or sending an email, think twice about what you write. Keep the conversation focused on educational matters and send your messages during appropriate times of the day. Your personal life – and the student's personal life – need to stay personal and private.

Putting students' needs first

As professionals, we engage in reflective practice. In the context of technology and teaching, this means stepping back and asking some basic questions. First and foremost, do you want to use this tool within a professional context? Many educators see no need to put up Facebook pages to interact with students or to email or text students after hours, and these choices are certainly valid.

However, if you *do* want to use these tools as part of your professional practice, how can you use them appropriately? What are the risks? What are the benefits? What protocols need to be considered?

When communicating with students, educators must always remember that students are not and cannot be their friends. Good educators establish rapport with their students; they are genuine and approachable. However, they do not engage in behaviours or discussions that are the realm of children or teenagers. For example, it is not professional to talk with middle school students, whether in person or online, about who “got wasted” at the latest party, rumours about dating or whose parents are cool.

“Boundary violations often occur with the best of intentions,” says Marie Crowther, Registrar of the College. “Many cases that come to the College's attention result from educators genuinely believing in the importance of sharing extensive personal information with students. They see this as making them more approachable and better teachers. The question to ask is, are you sharing this information because it will help the student or because you have a need to be liked? Monitor your interactions to make sure that the students will see you as a professional and not as a contemporary. It all comes down to finding the balance between being friendly, but not a ‘friend.’” □



We want to hear from you!

We welcome your thoughts on how educators can use social networking sites and communication technology within an educational context that respects the professional boundaries inherent in the teacher-student relationship. Send an email to tc@bcct.ca.