What Every Teacher Needs to Know About Social Media

E-safety Support

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Social media – interacting with other people online to exchange comments, ideas and innovations – is becoming an increasingly prevalent part of everyone's social life. But should it extend to the teaching workplace, and when boundaries between professional and personal blur, how should we determine what is and is not acceptable?

Social media can be a useful educational tool.

Social networking can be useful as a tool for collaborative planning, sharing resources, providing news and updates to pupils and parents, helping with homework and project assignments, promoting school and class achievement, recording and archiving lesson content for revision and keeping up to date with the latest pedagogy. The format also appeals to students and is easy to access for parents and teachers. But for each instance of innovative and inspiring use, there's no excuse for forgetting what is professional and what is personal when it comes to communication – whether in style, content or context.

For example, a conscientious teacher will want to keep parents and pupils informed and offer guidance, help and resources. But there's a time, place and method involved in achieving this. You might meet a parent in the pub on a weekend, but launching into a conversation about their child's coursework in this setting might not be appropriate. Similarly shopping in the supermarket after school isn't the right time to approach a pupil to suggest their homework is late. Social media is no different – despite existing in the ether, it needs to be treated no differently to real life.

Interaction is the key – outside of school, teachers don't normally have any need to initiate contact with students or parents. Publishing information, providing resources and help is fine – there's no contact initiated by the teacher. Sending unsolicited messages however, could be misconstrued and lead to situations which could be damaging for both the teacher and the school.

To put social media in context, it is always worth considering the outcome first. If a teacher considers what they are trying to achieve by posting an update or sending a tweet, then they can also consider whether social media is the most effective and appropriate method. If social media is simply the most convenient method, then perhaps a slower, but safer and more transparently professional method is required. If on the other hand every safeguard has been put in place, scenarios considered and a policy framework set up to safeguard against misuse, then post away – within that framework.

To make the most of social media, schools need to set up official accounts either in the name of the school or in the name of staff, but always transparently associated with the school – defining and delimiting the usage as professional and entirely school-related. That way there's no difference between a school-attributed social media account and a school email, telephone or letterhead. Using a communication platform which is popular with the pupils is not the same as using the communication platform in the same way as the pupils. Boundaries and professional practice need to be considered at all times. For example, in real life a school might display posters for a school event on an official youth centre notice-board, but a teacher wouldn't go up to the children at the skate-park to tell them in person. Twitter and Facebook are no different.

Inappropriate use of social media, particularly by young teachers, is increasingly being seen as a precursor for perhaps more serious transgressions of behaviour. Whether fair or not, there is evidence to sway line managers. Of the GTCE disciplinary cases heard in 2011 which dealt with inappropriate relationships

SOCIAL MEDIA STATS

- Facebook has over 1.2 billion users and continues to grow by millions per day.
- Twitter has over 270 million active users, a figure which shows no sign of diminishing. However, specifically professional and educational social networking sites are also growing:
- LinkedIn has over 310 million users, overtaking Twitter and with far more safeguards.
- Edmodo has almost 40 million users – by far the largest educational social networking tool.
- ePals has over 11 million users, and increases by over 1.5 million users per year – offering a completely safe and moderated teacher/pupil email pen pal scheme

The point is – safe and safer options are out there. Why risk using personal Twitter or Facebook accounts for professional reasons?

between teachers and pupils, one in ten were begun via social networking websites. Furthermore, 43 cases that year alone involved unprofessional conduct with Twitter and Facebook being cited as evidence. Put simply, using a personal social networking profile for professional contact with pupil or parents is a risk – regardless of how professional the motive might be.

Safe usage

Anyone under contract and working in education needs to ensure, both for the school's safety and their own, that activity on social networking sites: does not bring the school into disrepute, does not bring the teacher into disrepute, does not expose the school to legal liability, reflects 'safer internet' practices, minimises risks associated with the personal use of social media by professionals and reflects the school's standard of behaviour and staff code of conduct.

There are steps teachers can take to safeguard themselves from false allegations of misconduct. Both Twitter and Facebook keep logs of every instance of online activity – every post, message, interaction, like, friend, comment etc. If there's anything inappropriate, it will have been recorded and logged. But as well as clearly demonstrating what a user has done, the logs will clearly indicate and prove what hasn't been done online.

- Twitter allows you to download your archive history here:
  http://blog.twitter.com/2012/12/your-twitter-archive.html

- And Facebook allows you to download your archive history here:
  http://www.facebook.com/help/131112897028467/

It is also worth bearing in mind that many social networking sites actively monitor communications involving users under the age of 16 for child protection purposes. While a general message sent via an official school account might be clearly and obviously appropriate, a specific message sent from a personal account to a child might not be obviously appropriate even if well-intentioned. Facebook in particular flags up contact between adults and children where there isn't any common ground in terms of 'friends' or 'friends of friends'. It's highly likely using a personal account would create a red flag – and quite rightly so. http://news.cnet.com/8301-1023_3-57471570-93/facebook-scans-chats-and-posts-for-criminal-activity/. If a pupil sends you a message and you think it is inappropriate to respond, respond to it in real life, not via the internet.

Teachers need to take steps to avoid becoming victims of online abuse

Around the world, education boards and legislatures are recognising that teachers with social networking profiles are vulnerable to online abuse. Several states in the United States have signed into law harassment statutes to prevent cyberbullying by pupils. At the same time however, school boards and local lawmakers are seeking to limit and safeguard teachers by reducing the possibility of false allegations. In Missouri, for example legislation was introduced, and later repealed, banning use of teachers' personal profiles to contact children or parents – with teacher safeguarding being given as the principal driving rationale.

Female teachers are a particular target, according to the Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association, which has detailed how bad behaviour has spread from the classroom to abusive behaviour on the internet. Once on the web, some schools don't always feel able to deal with the issue – leaving a vacuum in responsibility and authority. http://www.computerworlduk.com/news/public-sector/3418231/teachers-targeted-by-pupils-using-social-media-says-ssta-chief/

It is not inconceivable that either legislation or underpinned guidance will emerge in the UK with regard to teachers' use of social networking. With this in mind, it is likely that if a teacher is the victim of online abuse by pupils or parents linked to a personal networking site – rightly or wrongly – whether a teacher has adhered to GTC, TA, LA or school social media guidelines is likely to be taken into account.

WHAT TO DO…

What to do if you are contacted via your personal social media account:

- If a pupil sends you a message and you think it is inappropriate to respond, respond to it in real life, not via the internet.
- Consider creating a standard cut and paste response – for example, "I'm sorry I cannot reply to your message using my personal email/Facebook/Twitter – I will reply via official school email/letter or in person at school."
- Do consider blocking pupils and parents who you think might be abusive, even pre-emptively, but don't use personal data held by the school under the Data Protection Act (for example email addresses) to track them down online.

Not adhering to such guidelines may well weaken the teacher's position. The following links may help to clarify the situation:

- The GTCE code of conduct (now TA)
  http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8257/

- DCSF (now DfE) guidelines on how to minimise the cyberbullying of staff:
  http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100413151441/publications.teachernet.gov.uk/eorderingdownload/cyberbullying-staff.pdf

- The GTCW code of conduct:
  http://www.gtcw.org.uk/gtcw/images/stories/downloads/professional_standards/GTCW_Professional_Code.pdf

- The GTCS guide to teachers' use of social media:
  http://www.gtcs.org.uk/web/FILES/FormUploads/ecomms-social-media-guidance-pd.pdf

Some common sense rules

Follow your GTC guidelines regarding the use of social networking. Then check your school's policy, and check your LA's policy. If you cannot find specific guidelines or policies, ask senior management. If there is no policy or guidance for your school, ask for a statement to this effect to be put in writing. If you are accused of misconduct, claiming that you were unaware of guidance will not be a defence.

If your school or LA does not have specific guidelines, create your own framework for how you use social networking for professional purposes – and stick to it.

- Be professional on the internet - including Facebook, Twitter and any other social media networks.

- Don't post anything inappropriate, including comments or photos which might embarrass yourself or the school.

- Avoid interacting with, initiating contact with or "friending" current pupils using your personal profile.

- Keep all school-related conversations focused on school, teaching and learning.

- Remember, there is potential for anything you post online to be copied and distributed. Bear this in mind every time you post.

- Check – are you able to delete the content once you have posted it? How long will the material stay online? Consider your digital footprint.

- Always ensure you own the rights to your content. Posting someone else's copyrighted material will appear very unprofessional if a complaint is made.

- If you intend to use social media as part of your teaching, ensure parents and other teachers are clearly briefed on how this will work. Seek and obtain written permissions if required.

When things go wrong – case studies

Facebook case study

Sometimes, despite a teacher using social media completely appropriately, things can go wrong. In one case, a teacher was friends with various parents known to them prior to accepting a position with the school. After a disagreement regarding a pupil's education, one parent decided to copy every conversation, photograph and contact from the teacher's Facebook profile onto a website which defamed both the school and the teacher. There was nothing remotely inappropriate on the Facebook profile, but the actions of the parent nevertheless caused great distress to the teacher due to the breach in privacy and the unpleasant manner in which the material was being presented. Although police were involved, since the website was based in another country it proved very difficult to remove the content.

How can this scenario be prevented? Regardless of prior friendships or how well you think you might know someone, if there's a professional link it is always worth limiting online contact by using privacy settings. If it's someone you know socially, perhaps the real-life social contact is enough? Does it need to extend to online contact with the risks this might entail? Think carefully when setting up your privacy settings – do you even want pupils or parents to be able to find you on a search? If you consider your private life to be private – ensure your privacy settings match that decision.

http://www.facebook.com/help/privacy

Twitter case study

Since Google's search engine algorithm tweaks, Twitter's profile has been raised in search results – especially for 'name' searches. Therefore, your Twitter account is almost certainly going to appear in page one search results for your name. More worryingly though, someone else's Twitter account, if it features your name - for example in a tweet or a reply - is also likely to appear in search results for your name. And that's a situation most of us have no control over.

This is one scenario which is becoming increasingly common. A perfectly respectable tweet by a school or by a teacher on their personal Twitter account can become hijacked by someone replying to the tweet or retweeting it.

For example, a school might tweet: "Production of Hamlet tonight in the Mail Hall – 7pm start." Someone might reply: "I hate *** school. It's **** **** especially Mr ****." There's little the school can do to prevent this happening. Google will see the original tweet, and the reply, and may well feature the reply or part of it in the search result text. To remove any possibility of this happening, the school would need to delete the original tweet before Google picks it up – normally within 24 hours. This requires someone to keep a very vigilant eye on the school's Twitter account. Blocking the user would prevent any future replies – but the damage has been done by that point. 'Protecting' the account, so that only approved 'followers' could see the content would solve this issue, but dramatically reduce the audience for the school's tweets.

http://support.twitter.com/articles/14016-about-public-and-protected-tweets#

SOME COMMON SENSE TIPS

- Don't rely on privacy settings to work – test them by creating another profile seeing how much of your personal profile is visible to the public, to your 'friends' and to 'friends of friends.'

- Check your the privacy is working on a regular basis. Facebook in particular has a habit of changing its privacy policy without widespread publicity.

- Google name-check yourself at least once a month. Does your social networking activity appear in search results?

- Be transparent. Always assume, if you are using social media for professional purposes, that everyone can see everything. Behave as you would in school – you wouldn't be in a classroom alone with a child with the door closed, so don't send 1-1 messages.

- Facebook and Twitter have the facility for you to download an archive of all your online activity. Use this, and download your archives regularly to prove what you have and have not done.

Conclusion

Social media is here to stay. Whether the compelling blend of instant communication, advertising, highly focused news and internet word-of-mouth is always going to be ideal for education isn't yet clear. After all, this is a medium emerging from a heady mist of fast growth, lack of regulation and diverse and colourful usage. There certainly is scope to appeal to students and parents, and also clear benefits are seen when social networking is used as a delivery method for school and teaching based information. But there's also a risk of getting sucked into a culture of 'post now and think later' which could prove the downfall of any individual teacher. An appropriate professional approach and having clear guidelines is the key to creating a responsible social media climate for teachers.