

Connecting with Students Online

Issues to consider when educators “friend” or follow students



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Many educators have embraced online educational platforms and student devices over the last decade, which continue to improve the learning experience inside the classroom and beyond.^{1,2} Much value would come from educators interacting online in a professional/educational manner with their students while establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries, considering the reality that most students in middle and high school are on various social media platforms.³ Indeed, such communication can improve these relationships by providing increased accessibility and a less intimidating environment (online, rather than face-to-face).⁴ Social media connections have also been shown to increase teacher credibility^{5,6} and foster positive student attitudes, engagement, trust, and confidence.^{2,7} One question that persists, however, is whether it is appropriate for teachers, counselors, and other administrators or school staff to connect with students through social media such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter.⁸ As such, there are important considerations to keep in mind for educators when it comes to connecting with their students online.

POTENTIAL PITFALLS

The most serious potential risk involves educators failing to maintain proper boundaries, or students misperceiving the online attention they receive as something more than educational and platonic. Of course, these concerns are also present in in-person communications between educators and students as well (both in and outside of school). That being said, we strongly believe that educators should refrain from “friending” or “following” students on social media accounts that they use for personal purposes (e.g., those that are connected with the educator’s adult friends and loved ones). Maintaining a clear distinction between their work and personal lives is crucial, particularly since educators are to consistently model attitudes and behaviors that reflect character, integrity, and maturity in their interactions with students, and some of the content they have on their personal profiles may undermine the image they should be projecting when viewed and interpreted by youth. Toward this end, schools should consider developing a clear policy that establishes agreed-upon standards for educator-run social media profiles for professional purposes, and educator/student interactions (public commenting, private messaging, etc.).

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. Geographical distance while online, coupled with feelings of loneliness and the desire to connect with someone through cyber communication, make inappropriate messages between educators and students a very real possibility. This possibility is especially problematic since there is little or no oversight by others to monitor the activity within another adult’s “personal” social media account.

Additionally, perceptions of fairness may come into play when educators connect with some – but not all – students on social media. If a student witnesses a high frequency of interaction between her teacher and another student, and then that other student receives a higher grade even though the quality of their work was very similar, it is reasonable to wonder if the teacher demonstrated favoritism. In addition, learning about the



personal lives of students from their personal profile pages on social media may also lead to biases towards some youth. It is up to each educator to remain as objective as possible and refrain from making value judgments about what they see students sharing, at least as it relates to subject matter teaching and learning. What is more, friending and following students may give an educator access to that student's parents' profiles (and perhaps give them access to yours). Do you really want to deal with receiving friend/follow requests from parents of students? You may, but just consider the related complications that may arise when you open yourself up to the entire community in this way. You may prefer interacting with parents through historically conventional ways, like phone calls and in-person meetings set up through appointments, rather than feel like you have to respond to countless social media messages 24/7/365.

There have been incidents where teachers have used technology to connect with students for the purpose of fostering improper relationships.⁸ The responsibility to maintain proper boundaries is always that of the adult. Apart from the devastating consequences that could result with the child, reputation of a school, and civil liability issues, 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 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. Not only that, but it seems that the potential for false claims of inappropriate behavior is more likely when online communications between educators and students are constantly taking place. A sentiment of kindness or personal encouragement to a student (or educator) may, given the right circumstances, be interpreted as flirting. Devoid of socioemotional and contextual cues to really understand what the other person is saying, misunderstandings and misperceptions may abound. It takes only one suspicion and formal action by a student's parents to call an educator, their career, and their character into question.

ADDED RESPONSIBILITY

Another issue of which to be aware is that educators who connect with students online often 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.⁹ For example, if there is discussion about a party on Saturday night which appears to include underage drinking, the educator has a duty to respond. Imagine the serious consequences that could come from an educator who does not take action if someone were 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 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. 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 educators 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 students online will do anything in their power to keep the knowledge of such activities from surfacing. Apart from state laws, some school districts (and private schools) are enacting policies that forbid educators from interacting with their students via social media. We must remember, though, that it is not necessarily the method of communication that needs to be prohibited but the nature and content of that communication. Prohibiting educators from interacting with their students online is akin to saying that they should not 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 particu-

larly 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 teachers 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 has asserted 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."¹⁰ We agree; schools should have their own policies that outline the



nature of student/educator interactions online, and all personnel should be aware of these policies. That said, though, 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 "snap," "gram," message, tweet, text, and post. If adults want to stay relevant in the way they communicate and connect relationally with youth, they are going to have to adopt some of these technologies in a prudent, professional way.¹¹⁻¹³ It can open up lines of communication that were previously unavailable.

We know of many educators who utilize social media 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. They connect with students through their school-based accounts to remind them of upcoming events, exams, and deadlines while also being able to provide more instantaneous feedback on their work. They build communities of practice online to facilitate easier collaborative opportunities and contributes meaningfully to student motivation and learning. Using public, professional accounts on social media (representing the role of the educator at school, rather than as a private citizen and community member) 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 educators from utilizing all available tools to connect with their students, encourage specific learning tasks, and promote the healthy development of youth focus should be placed on informing both students and staff about appropriate boundaries and keeping the discussion/interaction professional at all times.

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