

Practicing Caution: Guidelines for Electronic Communications

The opportunities to use social media and electronic communication for pedagogical purposes continue to expand on an almost daily basis. Social media offers teachers exciting new ways to engage with students, parents and the wider school community. While embracing these new opportunities makes pedagogical sense, expectations on us professionally dictate that we do so with proper safeguards in place and a vigilant eye to maintaining the standards of our profession.

When considering using social media to communicate with students, parents, or others in the school community, it is important to remember that the technology does not change the role of teachers and their professional obligations. The principles that have traditionally governed how teachers communicate with the school community have not changed: professionalism, accountability, and boundaries continue to apply. Always remember that material posted online, whether via e-mail, Facebook, blogging, twitter, or other media, is never truly erased. If you would not utter a phrase or raise a particular topic in your classroom or in the presence of your principal or a parent, then do not communicate it by electronic means. When using social media, exercise caution and restraint and remain aware.

While there is a range of uses of social media and electronic communication in school environments, at least three scenarios have pitfalls that demand teachers exercise caution: teachers communicating with individual students, parents, or the wider school community, through Facebook or other social media; teachers being careless about their personal use of social networking sites or what is posted about them; teachers failing to recognize social networking websites as an arena for potential cyber-bullying.

Social Networks and E-mail as a means of communicating with the school community

Social media and electronic communication have the potential to provide innovative and exciting options for teaching. They also have the potential to blur professional boundaries and expose teachers to a number of risks. ETFO continues to support the use of electronic communication and social media as a teaching tool but cautions that its use must be consistent with the highest standards of professional conduct.

The use of e-mail, for better or worse, tends to promote a casual conversation style that can blur the boundaries between student and teacher. It is also often perceived with suspicion by parents and administrators. ETFO recommends against individual e-mail communications with students. E-mails to an entire class, in relation to specific scholastic projects may be appropriate in certain situations; however, teachers should use their professional e-mail address exclusively and always maintain a professional tone and structure throughout the communication.

For communications with parents, ETFO recommends face-to-face meetings or telephone conversations with parents to discuss any issues that students may be facing. If e-mail is used, teachers should only use their school email accounts during regular business hours. Sending e-mails late at night can give rise to unrealistic expectations on the part of parents who may get the impression that teachers are available at any time of day.

Social media sites clearly have the potential to provide a number of exciting and innovative ways for teachers to interact with their classes and the wider school community. They can be used to encourage group discussions, to facilitate collaborative projects, and provide peer-to-peer support. Social media sites also provide opportunities for teachers to communicate with groups of parents and students in an effective and efficient manner.

In contrast, communicating with individuals through social networking sites tends to promote an even more casual style than e-mail and does not meet the standards of professionalism expected of teachers. ETFO recommends that a teacher who wants to use a social network for a school related project should ensure that any communication that occurs over the site is accessible to all those who have access to the page – including school administration and parents. Transparency will go a long way towards ensuring that professional standards are maintained and inappropriate conduct is minimized.

While ETFO supports the use of social networking sites as a teaching tool, ETFO cautions that it is rife with serious consequences if used inappropriately. ETFO strongly recommends that teachers who want to use social media, in the classroom consult with their school administrator before doing so, create an account to be used exclusively for pedagogical purposes and ensure that the account is unconnected to their personal information.

Careless or inappropriate personal use of social networking sites

In addition to the problems that may be caused by communicating through social networking sites, teachers can get into trouble if they are careless in how they use these sites personally. While ETFO strongly promotes the protection of a teacher's private life, teachers must nonetheless be very cautious both in respect to what they post and what is posted about them.

Teachers should manage their privacy settings so that only those whom they personally approve have access to their page. Teachers should similarly request that their friends not post photos or other material that could reflect badly on them.

Teachers should also be alert to students posting material about them online. ETFO strongly recommends that teachers carry out Google searches on themselves on a regular basis to ensure that there is no harmful material being posted about them. There has been an increase in incidents of teachers having unfounded allegations against them posted online. In one instance, a student set up a Facebook account in a teacher's name and posted offensive comments using that account. Should such material be found, it should immediately be reported to both the teacher's principal and ETFO.

Teachers should never invite students or parents to be their friends on their personal Facebook page, or similar site and never accept an offer of friendship from a student or a parent on Facebook. Doing so blurs the boundaries between teacher and student and can lead to discipline by the school board and/or the College of Teachers.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying falls within the definition of bullying mandated by the Ministry of Education. ETFO does not support teachers going online to supervise their students' Facebook pages. However, teachers need to be aware that the possibility for cyberbullying is very real and should be ready to report any incidents they come across to their administrators.

Tips

Given the potentially serious consequences of misusing e-mail and social networking sites here are some tips to consider:

- if you use social media as a teaching tool ensure that the proper safeguards are in place, including providing access to school administrators and parents;
- avoid communicating with individual parents or students through e-mail or social networking sites;
- never use your personal account to friend students or parents;
- if you communicate electronically, only do so from your board e-mail account and maintain the highest standards of professionalism;
- be vigilant in monitoring what is posted about yourself online.

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Can be reached at 416-962-3836
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See also ETFO's website –
Advice for Members



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