

Social Networking for Teachers: To Facebook or Not to Facebook

Betty Bayer, Associate Director of Education, SDACC, Oshawa ON

Facebook has been around since 2004, but it wasn't until last year that I gave in to peer pressure and opened an account. Others (including my husband) still adamantly refuse. Now, months later, in the very enjoyable process of getting "reconnected" with old classmates and students, some of my initial wariness has returned regarding possible dangers, especially for teachers. Some of that wariness has been fuelled by recent headlines and articles.



Some experts advise, and some school boards stipulate, that teachers should NOT "friend" students under any circumstances. After all, "the best way to prevent a problem arising from a social networking site is to simply not have one" (American Federation of Teachers). At a recent conference I attended, a middle school teacher said that she painstakingly searches Facebook for all her students for the past five years and individually blocks them from even finding her name on Facebook. She reasoned that even choosing to ignore or refusing their friend requests may jeopardize her reputation since some may be hurt or insulted by such a refusal. While many may view this as extreme, schools and/or boards that prohibit teacher-student connections on Facebook should, at the very least, publish clear guidelines that are communicated in writing to teachers, students, and parents.

Then there's the other extreme . . . the teacher who blogs that "almost all of my 'friends' are students. I share their photos of their artwork, links to videos I want them to view (tutorials, documentaries, animations) and make recommendations about websites and even TV programs they might be interested in" (Johnson, "The Blue Skunk Blog"). Such teachers believe that social networking sites have educational value. "I can show a clip during school," he says, "and half the class is asleep. I post the same video to Facebook and 5 minutes later I have 10 comments all telling me how cool it is" (Johnson, "The Blue Skunk Blog"). And he's right; our students are growing up in a digital age where social interfacing is their norm. "Ignoring the educational potential of social networking technology is a serious mistake because it matches how students like to learn, and it prepares them for life outside of school" (Johnson, "Connections").

So, as Adventist teachers representing a worldwide Adventist school system, what should we do? In the absence of an NAD or SDACC policy establishing guidelines for teachers (and pastors and other denominational employees) on the use of Facebook and other social networking sites, each individual must establish his/her own guidelines for involvement. Choosing not to "friend" students, at least not until after they have graduated from your school, seems to be the safest course of action for the following reasons:

- "While a teacher can use some networking sites, such as Twitter, to extend a classroom discussion or offer quick homework assistance in 140 characters or less, networks like Facebook and MySpace easily blur the student-teacher relationship because of the personal information made available on profiles." (Lucas)
- "As educators, we have a professional image to uphold and how we conduct ourselves online impacts this image." (Johnson, "Blue Skunk Blog")
- "A teacher needs to be a role model, mentor, and advice giver – not a 'friend.'" (Lucas)
- "Teachers are role models. As such, they are often held to a higher degree of personal standards." (Streich)
- "Keeping all student-teacher communication strictly professional protects all parties from charges of inappropriate discourse." (Streich)

If you do choose to include students as “friends” on social networking sites such as Facebook, here are a few tips to get you started as you formulate your own guidelines:

- Create at least 2 profiles, a personal profile and a teacher profile. You may wish to consider a 3rd . . . a professional profile . . . since such sites are often searched by prospective employers and professional organizations.
- Create different “friend” lists and set different permissions for each list. Ensure that your privacy settings limit the access of those on your student list. Remember, however, that keeping everything private doesn't insure that a "friend" won't copy and paste your private stuff elsewhere.
- Do not say or do any thing that you would not say or do in the classroom with parents, your school principal, and your board chair present.
- Never forget that on a social networking site, once you post something, it may be available forever, even if you choose to remove it from your page. “Post only what you want the world to see.” (Johnson, Blue Skunk Blog)
- Remember that others may post pictures of you without your consent. Some of these pictures may be taken at social and/or family gatherings and, posted out of context, may give impressions that are not factual. Consider, for example, if you are with friends or family who have lifestyles contrary to Adventist and/or school standards.
- Don't initiate friend requests to students; if they “friend” you, communicate that fact to their parents so they are aware.
- Never post student work or pictures with students in them without permission from the student (if 18 or older) or his/her parents (for under 18).

If you are an administrator, I would encourage you to have an open discussion on this issue with your staff at your next staff meeting. Together you can develop guidelines that will help to protect the reputations of staff, students, and the school. “Proactive, published policies may go a long way in preventing avoidable staff confrontations and possible litigation. Seminars covering such issues should be a part of on-going professional development as well as mandatory for new-teacher orientation sessions.” (Streich)

For further information on Facebook guidelines for teachers, see “A Teacher’s Guide to Using Facebook,” written and published by Bernadette Rego, a graduate student in education. This guide may be viewed online and downloaded (with attribution and for non-commercial purposes) as an Adobe PDF file at.

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/16957158/Teachers-Guide-to-Using-Facebook-Read-Fullscreen>

Resources:

- American Federation of Teachers. “Classroom Tips: Appropriate Uses of Modern Technology.” Washington, D.C.: AFT. Item no. 39-00901.
<http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/teachers/CT-Technology.pdf>
- Hayden, Kellie. “Teachers & Social Networking Sites: Teachers Might Want to Re-think Participating in Facebook or MySpace.” May 18, 2008.
http://middlehighschool.suite101.com/article.cfm/teachers_social_networking_sites

- Johnson, Doug. “Connections for Learning: Schools and the Educational Use of Social Networking.” Fountain Hills, AZ: Saywire, January 2009.
<https://saywire.com/downloads/Saywire-White-Paper.pdf>
- Johnson, Doug. The Blue Skunk Blog, August 20, 2009.
<http://doug-johnson.squarespace.com/blue-skunk-blog/2009/8/20/networking-guidelines-revised.html>
- Lucas, Cheri. “Should Students and Teachers Be Online ‘Friends’?” Education.com, 2006-2009.
http://www.education.com/magazine/article/Students_Teachers_Social_Networking/
- Streich, Michael. “Social Networking Sites and Teacher Integrity: Rethinking the Relationship Between Teacher and Student.” November 26, 2008.
http://school-staff-issues.suite101.com/article.cfm/social_networking_sites_and_teacher_integrity