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Should students 'friend' teachers online?

Schools struggle to develop rules for social media interaction



Physics teacher Peter Kupfer in his classroom at Lake Zurich High School. (Andrew A. Nelles, Chicago Tribune / August 2, 2010)

By Lolly Bovean and Kristen Mack, Tribune reporters
August 10, 2010

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Peter Kupfer has made it difficult for his physics students to claim they didn't know about a homework assignment.

Not only does Kupfer outline the assignment during class at Lake Zurich High School, he also Tweets a daily reminder to his followers on **Twitter**. On **Facebook**, he posts a status update and occasionally provides extra details on his fan page.

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"I, personally, am not worried about sharing (online) space with students," he said. "The kids can talk to me, and I find it a useful avenue to communicate."

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But as teachers like Kupfer increasingly are connecting with their students online, school districts are working to define appropriate ways for teachers and students to communicate outside the classroom.

It's a murky area with a variety of questions: Should teachers use a Facebook fan page to contact students? Should they allow students to "friend" them on their personal profiles or post pictures on their walls? Should they notify parents that they are using social networking sites to communicate?

The Illinois school code requires that districts develop policies for social networking and teach students how to safely use chat rooms, e-mail and instant messaging. Some districts have responded with vague policies open for interpretation. Others have banned all use of social media between teachers and students.

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In Community High School District 128 in Libertyville, the school board approved a set of "expectations" for social networking between teachers, coaches and students, which are now incorporated into employee policies.

It deems district-provided e-mail and school-based Web sites acceptable forms of communication. However, it warns that text messages are highly personal, can quickly get "off topic" and be easily misinterpreted by a parent.

"What you want to avoid is a parent seeing a coach's cell phone number on their daughter's phone and being surprised," said Mick Torres, the district's technology director.

While District 128 has specific rules, Lake Zurich Community Unit School District 95 has a broad policy. In the district's general personnel standards, faculty members are instructed to maintain a professional relationship with students and keep a safe and healthy environment.

"We're trying to put information out there that is associated with the classroom and student learning," district Superintendent Mike Egan said. "We encourage that kind of use, while discouraging any personal conversations or information sharing."

At Lincoln-Way Community High School District 210 in New Lenox, administrators banned all forms of social media on school grounds — for teachers and students. That way, learning is focused in the classroom, and there are fewer chances of misbehaving or misunderstandings, said Sharon Michalak, the assistant superintendent for curriculum instruction and staff development.

So Kupfer's teaching style of posting homework assignments on Twitter and Facebook wouldn't fly in Lincoln-Way — where only school-based sites are sanctioned.

"With the advancement of technology and social networking, it's not appropriate in the school atmosphere," Michalak said. "Any information would have been communicated in the classroom. If teachers are going to use technology, it's through a Web page developed here at school that the students have access to look up."

In the absence of official policies, students have largely created their own rules of online engagement.

Anita Wota, 17, spends hours updating her status and checking up on her friends on Facebook, she said. But she didn't "friend" her teachers until she graduated from Chicago Academy High School last spring.

"It's not as awkward because they're not my teachers anymore," she said.

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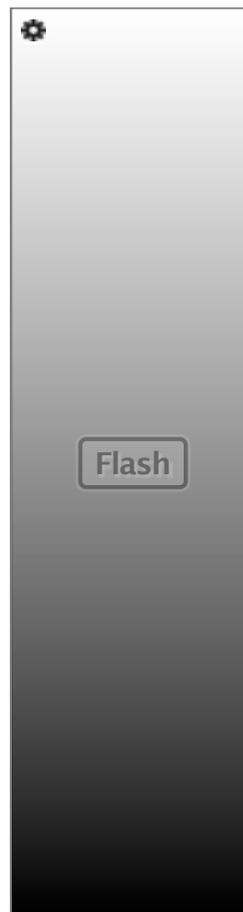


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Meanwhile, Ramsey Newton Jr., 16, refuses to engage in social media. It causes too much drama — even when teachers and school administrators are involved, he said.

"I'm just not into it," said Newton, who is entering his sophomore year at South Shore High School. "Teachers gossip too. They might get too much access or get to know too much. It can start a big fiasco.

"I don't want my name in it, and I don't want to end up on anyone's status (update)."

That's not the case for Kupfer. While he reaches out to his students online, he's careful about how he does it: He doesn't follow students on Twitter. And although he accepts friend requests, he doesn't initiate them.

Kupfer said he views social networking sites as an opportunity to teach his students about both physics and online behavior.

"I'm careful not to post anything that is not appropriate," he said. "I remember my students will see this. My mom and grandma are on there. too, so I have to be extra careful."

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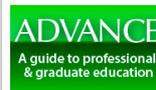
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DanielaMoravec at 3:56 PM August 10, 2010

Mr. Kupfer sounds like a teacher who loves what he does and is trying to do everything he can to help his students succeed. That said....It sets a very dangerous precedent when teachers allow this kind of access to themselves. As a teacher you should make yourself available to your students whenever possible; however, there comes a time when we ALL need to turn off and take a break. Twitter and Facebook accounts with students does not allow for this. Also, I am in agreement with those that say this is an unsafe practice. There are trustworthy teachers & students and there are those who are not. All it takes is for the wrong person to use this kind of social networking for the wrong reasons. And for those parents, who think they can monitor everything on Facebook, consider this: Many kids get 2 Facebook accounts, one for Mom & Dad and one for friends and they block the friend page so you can't find it.

School districts spend a lot of money on software that allows for teachers and students to communicate electronically, in a safe and monitored environment. Maybe it is best to use this software instead.

hicster at 2:22 PM August 10, 2010

the students get used to this and expect it in the real world. I dont dont think I would "friend" my bosses. so what will be next? myspace, tweet, facebook. Anytime you have to spend hours to update something it is pointless.

Just wait till you cant get internet access - its comical.

brady.robin16 at 2:11 PM August 10, 2010

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