Have You Googled Your Teacher Lately?

Teachers’ Use of Social Networking Sites

Common sense doesn’t necessarily prevail when teachers plunge into the world of social networking sites. Disastrous consequences can ensue, and the authors urge educators to consider the potential outcomes before they post.

BY HEATHER L. CARTER, TERESA S. FOULGER, AND ANN DUTTON EWBNK

YEARS AGO, when e-mail rapidly became the norm for communication in schools, blasting “nasty-grams” was soon discovered to be a no-no. As teachers grew more familiar with digital communication tools, they figured out quickly what was appropriate use of e-mail — and more important, what was not.

You have probably seen a variation of this story in your own workplace. One day, an e-mail sent from a superintendent to a principal was forwarded to all the teachers on campus. The superintendent was horrified that her private communication with the principal had been broadcast to people in a way that she felt was inappropriate and even unprofessional. But there are no “take backs” in electronic communication. And when someone forwards an e-mail to two friends, and each of them forwards it to two more friends, digital communication can easily go “viral.”

A more recent version of this story happened last year in a teacher preparation course. The “get to know your classmates” assignment was simple: post a photo of yourself and three of your favorite websites that you envision using as a future teacher. Many of the students in this class posted their personal MySpace.com pages. One student’s site, though, was particularly shocking. It showed a bloody hand with a 10-inch machete stuck in it, blood dripping down the page, and a quote stating, “Force the hand that writes.” The shock did not stop there. The “personal icon” for this future teacher was a wrist with a dotted line and the words “cut here.”

This student chose to submit his personal website as part of this assignment, and the images were unforgettable. The instructor wondered how parents would respond if this person were their child’s teacher.

The instructor realized that a conversation with the entire class might be in order. She made a general announcement about the assignment, describing how students transitioning into teaching should consider managing their online lives with an eye to their future careers. The next day, the student with the blood-soaked profile page had set it to “private” (meaning only users that he deemed his “friends” could view the link). However, from that point forward, even his successes in class

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could not erase the lasting effects of the bloody My-
Space page.

Changing or omitting the “get to know your class-
mates” assignment would avoid this possibility in future
semesters. But doing so would deny the instructor an
opportunity to have an important conversation with her
students, and it would deny the students an opportu-
nity to learn some essential lessons about self-restraint
set to private, then only “friends” can view the entire
page. Some sites also use “favorite” features that limit
those who can access information and offer other types
of privacy controls to prevent the public from viewing
the profile.

There are many social networking sites online. While
MySpace is the most popular, with over 200 million ac-
counts, Facebook and YouTube are other well-known
examples. Yahoo, Google, and Microsoft have all de-
dsigned systems to capture this burgeoning market. Wiki-
pedia lists 110 active social networking systems. Social
networking sites are so popular that MySpace.com is
currently the sixth-most-visited website on the Inter-
et.

As the “millennial generation” (defined as those born
between 1982 and 2002) increasingly enters the teach-
ing profession and as social networking technologies
become more popular, more and more teachers are be-
coming users of the sites. It should be noted that young
adults are not the only ones using social networking
sites: roughly 40% of MySpace users are 35 and older.

What happens when the online world of the teacher reveals
more than professional information? What happens when a
website provides a glimpse into a teacher’s life after school?

and the importance of reputation to their future roles.

This story is just one example of the personal in-
formation we have seen future teachers post online. It
is common to see content related to alcohol, drugs, and
sex posted on future teachers’ social networking profiles.
Both preservice teachers and many inservice teachers
do not seem to understand that the line between their
personal lives and professional lives is not black and
white in today’s world. Colleges of education and dis-
trict professional developers need to have in-depth con-
versations across the country on the topic of using so-
cial networking sites.

WHAT ARE SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES?

Social networking sites are interactive websites de-
dsigned to build online communities for individuals who
have something in common — an interest in a hobby,
a topic, or an organization — and a simple desire to
communicate across physical boundaries with other in-
terested people. These sites are not unlike the old-fash-
ioned “party line” telephones, but they leave a more per-
manent record of the conversations. Most social net-
working sites include the ability to conduct live chats,
send e-mails, upload videos, maintain a blog or discus-
sion group, and share files. Users can also post links to
pictures, music, and video, all of which have the poten-
tial to create a virtual identity.

The basics of these websites are simple. A person
visits a social networking website, creates an account
and user profile, and then uploads any personal infor-
mation into his or her “space.” Once a page is established,
its owner can make the profile public, which means that
anyone can view the page and information, or private,
which means that a person must be invited to view
the page. A mutual relationship between users called
“friending” links profiles together, creating the back-
bone of the website’s social network. If the profile is

PROFESSIONAL LIFE MEETS LIFE ONLINE

What happens when the online world of the teach-
er reveals more than professional information? What
happens when a website provides a glimpse into a teacher’s life after school? As we have become firmly rooted
in the technology tools of the 21st century, social net-
working has evolved to be an integral part of our reali-
ty. The introduction of online social networking has
created a cultural shift related to the idea of privacy:
some people today are willing to expose more about
themselves. The social networking tools are so easy to
use that anybody — students, parents, other teachers,
and administrators — can create online identities. Are
there any rules when it comes to teachers using social
networking sites?

Some teachers view the social networking sites as
an avenue to enhance instruction. High school teacher
Alyssa Trzeszowski-Giese claims that her profile on
Facebook has allowed her to establish deeper relation-
ships with and understandings of her students because
she can communicate with them beyond the four walls
of the classroom. She states that quiet students are
sometimes more vocal online because they feel more
comfortable behind the artificial cloak of anonymity offered by the Internet. Tapping this medium has proved to be a resource for tying classroom instruction to “real life” for her students.

Other school professionals have created social networking profiles as a means to generate buzz about school programs. Missouri teachers and club sponsors Phil Overeem and Jami Thornsberry use Facebook to provide updates on club information. Overeem credits Facebook with increasing his club’s attendance by 50%. High school social studies teacher Andrew McCarthy from Hickman, Missouri, uses Facebook to remind his students of upcoming homework deadlines and quizzes.

In contrast to the benefits that teachers are experiencing from using social networking technology, other uses are coming under fire. Recent reports in the media have shown teachers being reprimanded for what school districts consider “inappropriate activity.” The content on these questionable pages includes candid photos, racy or suggestive song lyrics, and references to sex or to alcohol or drug use. Venting about personal frustrations at work has also caused problems. While completely banning teachers from having social networking profiles seems downright draconian, some school districts have taken a range of disciplinary actions, including dismissal, against what they consider to be questionable uses of social networking sites by teachers.

Tamara Hoover, a teacher in Austin, Texas, was fired from her position as a high school art teacher when nude photographs of her were discovered on the website of her partner, who is a professional photographer. Hoover was fired based on “conduct unbecoming a teacher,” even though some might interpret the photographs as professional and artistic. Hoover agreed to a cash settlement with the school district, and now she uses her MySpace profile to promote teachers’ free speech rights. The case has attracted national media attention.

In St. Augustine, Florida, middle school physical education teacher John Bush was fired over the content of his MySpace profile. He was dismissed when the district superintendent reviewed what he called an inappropriate photograph and comments on the page. The superintendent admitted that the content was not pornographic but claimed that the profile contained things that students and parents should not know about a teacher.

Anu Prabhakara, a foreign language teacher at Southern Middle School in Maryland, was investigated by her school board after posting content critical of the school system, parents, and teachers in an expletive-laden MySpace blog. She exclaimed, “When the [expletive] did parents decide that their kids are not responsible for anything they do?” After a child revealed that she had read the offending comments because she was a “friend” of her teacher on MySpace, her mother reported Prabhakara’s comments to administrators.

Other teachers who have expanded their online social networks to include students as “friends” have also found themselves in hot water. Matthew Cepican of Rialto High School in Rancho Cucamonga, California, is still communicating with former students on his MySpace profile after being booked on suspicion of lewd acts with a minor.

An online social networking profile can cause problems even before a teacher enters the profession. Stacy Snyder, a teacher candidate in secondary English education at Millersville (Pennsylvania) University, was denied her teaching certificate and given an English degree rather than an education degree after campus administrators discovered photos on her MySpace profile in which she portrayed herself as a “drunken pirate.” The 27-year-old filed a federal lawsuit against the university asking for $75,000 in damages.

**PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT**

Long before the advent of social networking sites, teachers’ private lives had been scrutinized. A 1915 document outlining rules for teachers, such as “you are not to keep company with men” and “you must under no circumstances dye your hair,” is often seen posted on classroom walls as a tongue-in-cheek reminder of the way things used to be. The document is evidence that society has always been interested in the actions of teachers beyond the classroom walls. In today’s world it is simple to “google” someone you want to know more about. Students may google their teachers out of curiosity, and principals may google prospective teachers in order to see online portfolios of their professional endeavors. Such inquiries have led to some interesting circumstances.

As communities have viewed what they consider to be inappropriate information on an increasing number of teachers’ social network spaces, judgments have been made, and a range of consequences have been experienced. No matter how significant the outcome, these cases create lasting opinions about individuals and affect the entire profession. While judgments about whether or not personal information should be publicly displayed cannot be based on personal feelings or underlying moral or religious beliefs, predictable legal interpretations have not yet been firmly established. Moreover, the
choices teachers make about what to post must be influenced by the context of the diverse communities in which they work. Whether we like it or not, teachers are held to a higher standard of moral behavior than is the population in general. This expectation is reflected in the clauses of state certification procedures, such as this one from Arizona, which mandates that teachers shall not “engage in conduct which would discredit the teaching profession.”16 It is under these state clauses that teachers have been denied entry into or dismissed from their profession.

Because of the alarming possibility of life-changing consequences to teachers, professional associations have published guidelines for teachers’ participation in social networking sites. The Association of Texas Professional Educators suggests that teachers should not post anything that they would be embarrassed to have their supervisors discover. The association also provides guidelines for dealing with student-initiated contact, such as “friend” invitations and comments.17 Understanding the risks involved for teachers, the Ohio Education Association recently sent a memo to all members strongly discouraging them from joining social networking sites in light of an investigation into teacher misconduct on the sites launched by the Columbus Dispatch.18

AN UNCHARTED LANDSCAPE

Teachers, like all other Americans, are protected by the free speech clause of the First Amendment. The landmark Supreme Court decision in Tinker v. Des Moines asserted that students and teachers do not “shed their constitutional rights . . . at the schoolhouse gate.”19

Furthermore, in Pickering v. Board of Education, the Court clarified that a teacher’s speech is protected if it is speech in regard to issues of public importance.20 Yet in Connick v. Myers, the Supreme Court further elaborated on that ruling by citing that the First Amendment rights of a public employee are weighed against the ability of the government employer to maintain an efficiently run organization.21 These two court decisions together form what is commonly referred to as the Pickering/Connick balancing test. Under the Pickering/Connick test, a teacher could be disciplined for speaking out publicly against a school administrator only if that speech interfered with the efficient operations of the school.22 This litmus test has shaped court interpretation of teachers’ First Amendment rights for some time now.

However, the legal system has not yet established a clear-cut test of whether discipline is appropriate for any off-duty free expression of a teacher that is not of public concern. Virginia high school art teacher Stephen Murmer was fired after a video of an art project that involved the use of his buttocks and other body parts to spread paint on a canvas was discovered on the video-sharing site YouTube. In October 2007, Murmer filed a lawsuit in federal court to challenge his dismissal.23 Similar cases are bound to arise in the near future, given the number of teachers being reprimanded or fired for posting personal content on social networking sites in the past two years. The decisions in these legal challenges will ultimately define how teachers’ speech is evaluated in the social networking realm.

A CALL TO ACTION

Because of the Internet’s new social networking capabilities, opportunities for providing personal information in public places have become readily available, widely acceptable, and almost commonplace. Likewise, the general public can use Internet resources to seek information about any individual. Some individuals who wish to project a particular image on a social networking site will naturally think through the short- and long-term consequences of their choices. But others may not fully understand the public nature of the Internet and the potential impact of their choices to be circumspect about or fully expose their personal lives. Making decisions about what and how to share private information cannot be taken lightly, as negative consequences for a teacher are lasting. As new teachers enter the profession, they are just as accountable as veteran teachers for decisions related to professional conduct. How can we support both current teachers and future teachers so that they can make informed choices, without impinging on their personal rights?

In a world where social connections and friendships are newly defined by user-generated content on the Web, it is unclear where privacy ends and professional life begins. Based on media reports of teachers using MySpace, it is clear that many educators are learning to define this line for themselves. It might be best to view these situations as significant ethical dilemmas posed by a technology-dependent, 21st-century world. And more dilemmas will surely be upon us as we experiment with ways to use any new technologies. But those engaged in such experimentation must weigh the risks. Those of us who are committed to the field of education cannot stand idly by and allow careers to be jeopardized. At the same time, we must not be deterred from exploring new possibilities and discovering appropriate uses of these powerful tools. The over-
all benefits are surely worth the risks, but the risks in each situation must be identified and thoughtfully weighed.

Teacher preparation and district inservice programs should be responsible for showcasing the value that any technology can add to teaching and learning experiences. But as with any powerful tool, using technology can have positive or negative outcomes. Helping educators to understand personal, professional, and societal responsibilities is an important professional development matter. It is incumbent upon those in the profession who are informed to share recent thinking about the conscientious use of technology, about the negative consequences of using technology, and about personal freedoms and choices. Such knowledgeable educators should also be responsible for sharing their wisdom about advancing technological tools, because it is through informed decision making, rather than prescribing what should and shouldn’t be taking place, that innovative uses of technology will best be supported.

Social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, do not mark the end of the line for innovations that push the envelope of professional ethics for educators. As the Web becomes more and more transparent, computer-savvy individuals will be continually enticed to experiment, and those who take risks will open new opportunities and help society work through some hard issues. But all educators — whether naturally given to innovation or not — need to exercise care in navigating an uncharted course through often turbulent waters.

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