The Dangers of Being a Friend: Risks of Social Networking

by Erin Wilcox

Because of both an increasing population of young teachers who have connected to students as “friends” in cyberspace and a few near misses with troublesome incidents, our school began to look at the ramifications of social networking. After following articles in a variety of journals, we consulted our lawyer and decided that the wisest course of action was to ask staff not to be linked to students online in the “friend” relationship on social networking sites. The lawyer explained that we had the right to ask this of staff, as their employer, because social networking had direct bearing on their ability to perform their duties of employment.

Some of the staff asked, “What is social networking?” Others didn’t seem to mind our request, but a small group, on the younger side of the average teaching age, had a startled reaction that was a bit negative. After several animated discussions among themselves, they asked me to come and entertain their questions in a focus-group format.

Upon entering the room, I realized that this discussion was going to be a little more heated than anticipated. All these teachers could see was what they were losing, and they simply believed we were sticking our heads in the sand. They passionately shared that social networking is how students communicate in today’s world. Teachers made comments such as, “E-mail is for old people … it is so three years ago.” “Even the presidential primary is going to be held in MySpace this coming year. We are missing the boat by thinking we can avoid this technology.” “Adults need to be there with the kids instead of abandoning them out in a scary world with no rules.”

I agreed. If we can’t or won’t address these concerns, we aren’t doing our job. However, I explained that there were some legal and indeed some personal liability issues that supersede these concerns but make them no less valid.

The reasons for our decision to bar the social networking fell into three broad categories:

First, kids simply share too much information about themselves on social networking sites. If you as a teacher are physically present as kids talk, you have a duty to warn them that if they continue sharing information, you might have to take either disciplinary action or counseling action. If students are threatening harm to themselves or others, you need to get them help. On a MySpace page, however, you may come across information on someone else’s page that was never meant for you. The lawyer said that you cannot abdicate your duty to supervise. You are a mandated reporter of possibilities such as suicide and child abuse, but you also remain in your school-related supervisory role for other issues as well. In all fairness to students, in these cases you have not let them know that if they share information with other students, then you may share it with the authorities. You have become a passive receiver of information that was never meant for you, and now you have a burden that the students did not trust you with.

Also included in this risk is that much of what students share on these sites is not true. Students may lie about their age and maybe even about their drinking or sexual behavior. Bragging is rampant. That fact makes it hard to know whether to report something you read, especially if the student is just a “friend” of a “friend.”

The second reason for not participating on these sites is that doing so compromises your ability to maintain the
appropriate teacher-student relationship. Below are a few examples of the difficulties some teachers have encountered:

- **Anyone can post on your site.** There were examples similar to these in many articles we read: “That was cool. Let’s go out and get some beers next week.” “Thanks for helping me pass my test.” These posts would certainly raise questions in the minds of parents or other students.

- **It is much harder to keep an appropriate distance.** Research on effective teaching indicates that there needs to be an appropriate, professional distance between teachers and students. A common mistake of the inexperienced and ineffective teacher is to have too much of a buddy-buddy relationship with students (Marzano 2007).

- **You can become overly involved emotionally.** Once you become intimately acquainted with students, you may have a great deal of difficulty staying impartial. Problems creep in such as favoritism and the inability to report personal problems even when those problems cross the line into areas in which students need professional help.

- **You may experience fear of reprisal or of ostracism.** Once you gain entrance into an inner circle of a group of kids, you may—for fear of reprisal—find it difficult to report inappropriate behavior of one or more members of the group. Whether the situation deals with the popular in-crowd or with gang members, if you report something to the authorities, you risk your relationship with the entire group. Also, if you discipline students, they might use something they learned from your site against you or might violate your family in some way.

- **Students may interpret your inaction as consent.** If you ignore something that really does require action, kids may interpret that inattention as consent. In the world of social networking, you may have been on some students’ sites just thinking, “OK, I’ll ignore all inappropriate information because I’m here to develop relationships.” Meanwhile, the students are thinking that you tolerate and even accept their behavior because you haven’t reported it. You have compromised who you are and what you stand for because you have learned about it and haven’t done anything.

The third major risk of social networking deals with the impersonation of teachers by students. We have had this problem happen at our middle school and high school levels. Fortunately, the incidents have fallen in the category of pranks, so far, but such occurrences could certainly be more serious. Students simply create bogus pages and then claim to be the teacher. Then they write such comments as, “I’d like to talk to you about your great website after class.” The joke is to watch students go up to the teacher and make fools out of themselves. That is the somewhat harmless version. You can imagine that there are probably many other versions out there.

We decided that our best defense against these possibilities is to have a policy that our teachers cannot connect as “friends” with our students via social networking. Our position is that we have 1,250 students to educate on a long-term basis. We do not want to do anything that jeopardizes the future of the school or the professional reputation of each teacher at the school. So, even though a few of the teachers may not be pleased with our decision, we believe that it is in the best interest of the students, the teachers, and the school.

But what about being irrelevant in the world and the communication style that the younger generation has chosen? At the end of our meeting, we brainstormed a few ideas that we will start with, and then we challenged all the staff members to go back to their buildings and work on some more. Here are a few of the ideas: (1) in the middle school and high school computer classes, teach a short unit on responsible social networking, using an in-class blog on the pros and cons; (2) do a point-counterpoint article on it in English classes; (3) create an in-house high school “Commons” version of social networking by the advanced computer class; (4) discuss the topic in a student forum and see what other ideas the students can come up with; and (5) keep talking about it!

**Reference**


Erin Wilcox, MA, serves as the executive director of instruction for Colorado Springs Christian Schools (CSCS) in Colorado Springs, Colorado. She has also been a technology coordinator, a middle school principal, and the chair of the Educational Technology Committee for the five K–12 schools of CSCS.