

Ena Begovic
Ford Forum Paper 2011

ABSTRACT: The advent of the 21st century marked a technological revolution. The most notable aspect of this revolution was the mainstreaming of the Internet and, subsequently, the introduction of various Internet “byproducts.” Perhaps the most popular and influential byproducts are Facebook, Myspace, and other social networks. Indeed, social networks have infiltrated virtually every domain of life, including education. In this essay, I will explore how social networks can exert (and have exerted) both positive and negative influences on the student-teacher relationship. I will attempt to provide an answer to the ultimate question: *Should* students and teachers be “friends” on social networks?



The Effects of Social Networks on the Student-Teacher Relationship

Imagine that you are a teacher. Now, imagine logging into your Facebook account; once on your homepage you notice a red icon in the upper left hand corner indicating a “friend request.” You eagerly click on the icon to see who it could be. To your surprise, it is one of your students! What should you do? Should you accept your student’s request or deny it? This is a common scenario faced by teachers across the nation due to the recent introduction of social networks. These social networks have presented new ways for students and teachers to interact, and in turn, have impacted the student-teacher relationship. This paper will explore both the positive and negative influences of social network-mediated interaction on the student-teacher relationship, and will attempt to answer the question of whether

students and teachers should be “friends” on Facebook, Myspace, and other social networks.

Social networks are virtual forums that allow individuals to reconnect and socialize with old friends and family, and become acquainted with new people. A central feature of these social networks is that they allow the users to provide information about themselves, such as marital status, hobbies, and favorite quotes; post pictures; share their own thoughts and daily activities; and write messages on their friends’ profile pages. All this personal information about the user is available to the user’s friends. That means if a teacher and student become friends on a social network—which is a common occurrence—the student gets access to his or her teacher’s private information. Can all this self-disclosure about the teacher be detrimental to the student-teacher relationship? Researchers do not think so. In fact, such disclosure could quite beneficial to the student-teacher relationship.

Research on teacher self-disclosure spanning decades has continually found that self-disclosure is a form of immediacy, or “behavior that enhances psychological and physical closeness between people,” and therefore has positive implications for relationships (Mehrabian 1971, as cited in Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds, 2007). In addition to students directly endorsing the fact that immediacy, both verbal and nonverbal, is an important skill for teachers to have (Frymier & Houser, 2000), researchers have found that

immediacy strengthens bonds between students and teachers by promoting feelings of trust and care (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Consequently, students feel more comfortable asking “stupid” or “risky” questions, that may actually be important, and hence enlightening for the student (Frymier & Houser, 2000, p.217). Another study indicated that a strong student-teacher bond is strongly associated with a student’s level of persistence in an academic setting, as well as student retention (Tinto, 1987, as cited in Fusani, 1994).

Other lines of research have focused on motivation. For instance, Frymier (1993) was interested in whether a teacher with a high level of immediacy would motivate students throughout a semester. She found that students who scored low or moderate on motivation at the onset were greatly affected by a teacher’s immediacy behaviors. Specifically, these students become significantly more motivated by the middle and end of the semester if their teacher displayed high immediacy behaviors. However, students who were motivated at the start of the semester continued to be motivated throughout the semester regardless of teacher immediacy behaviors. A subsequent study by Frymier and Houser (2000) reported that perceived teacher immediacy was positively correlated with student motivation and affective learning—the positive or negative attitude toward learning. Christophel (1990), and Andersen, Norton, and Nussbaum (1981) reported similar findings.

Recently, researchers have been interested in studying social network-mediated self-disclosure. For instance, Mazer et al. (2007) investigated if a teacher's immediate behavior, specifically self-disclosure, outside of the classroom (i.e on Facebook) would affect students' motivation towards learning in the classroom. In the study, the participants were randomly assigned to view one of three versions (high self-disclosure version, medium self-disclosure version, and low self-disclosure version) of a Facebook profile belonging to a teacher at the participants' university.

The high self-disclosure Facebook profile included personal background information, such as relationship status, favorite books, movie quotes, and membership in several groups/fan pages; pictures of the teacher in various social situations, and with family members and friends; and comments posted by the teacher about attending different social functions. The medium self-disclosure Facebook profile included some personal background information, such as favorite movies and books; and pictures of the teacher with her family in her home. In this version, the teacher did not post any comments on her profile. In the low self-disclosure profile, the teacher only included her position at work for personal background information, and had only one photo (a face-shot of the teacher). Again, as in the medium self-disclosure profile, the teacher did not post any comments on the low self-disclosure profile.

Mazer et al. (2007) reported that the students who viewed the high self-disclosure version of the teacher's Facebook profile stated that they expected to be more motivated in the teacher's class compared to students who view the low self-disclosure profile version. In addition, students who viewed the high and medium self-disclosure profile versions stated that they anticipated to perceive the classroom climate more positively and have higher levels of affective learning compared to students who view the low self-disclosure profile version (Mazer et al., 2007).

However, there may be caveats attached to acts of self-disclosure. As Sorensen (1989) points out, the nature of the disclosure—that is, whether it highlights positive or negative aspects of the teachers—is critical. Sorensen (1989) explored this issue by instructing student participants to categorize 150 disclosure-type statements by rating the likelihood that a good or bad teacher would make that given statement. The findings indicate that students associated negative self-disclosure statements with bad teachers, and positive self-disclosure statements with good teachers (Sorensen, 1989). Amount of self-disclosure is an important factor to consider as well. Specifically, too much or too little self-disclosure on the teacher's behalf can cause students to perceive their teachers in a negative manner (Cyanus, 2004). Both the nature and amount of self-disclosure are critical factors, and are relevant for in class behaviors and in the social network environment.

Despite these general positive aspects of social networks, they also possess the ability to severely damage student-teacher relationships, as well as the reputations of the particular individuals involved. Hardly a month goes by without a headline in some newspaper or television/radio news channels about a social network-mediated misconduct between students and teachers. In fact, these inappropriate relationships are so prevalent that a website called “badbadteacher.com” is dedicated to keeping track and publicizing such incidences (Simon, 2008). Some claim that the nature of social networks is strictly to blame for these incidences. Others admit that social networks do make it easier for such inappropriate relationships to develop, however, social networks are not to blame. “They [predatory teachers] are going to find a way to do it, whether it’s over Facebook or not” says Randy Turner, a fellow teacher interviewed for a CNN article (Simon, 2008).

Social networks, and their ability to easily facilitate inappropriate student-teacher relationships, have alarmed school districts across the nation to a point where several are implementing strict no-tolerance policies. For instance, the Torrance Unified School District in California “prohibits any type of sexual relationship, sexual contact, or sexually nuanced behavior between a school employee and an enrolled student [via] ‘Myspace’ or similar Web sites [...]” (Harris, 2010). Other school districts have included even more stringent clauses that prohibit general “unprofessional and/or personal

communication with a student” through any means (including, but not limited to social networks) (Harris, 2010).

Such extreme measures have not been implemented in colleges and universities; though, this is no surprise considering that students in college/university are legal adults. While no formal policies have been implemented, guidelines and suggestions about online student-teacher relationships have been made publicly through posts on online blogs and discussion groups/forum. For example, Faculty Ethics on Facebook, a group on Facebook, propose 12 social networking guidelines that teachers should consider, such as: “[Exercise] appropriate discretion when using Facebook for personal communications (with friends, colleagues, other students, etc) with the knowledge that faculty behavior on Facebook may be used as a model by our students;” “Considering that the uneven power dynamics of the academy in which professors have authority over students, continue to shape the online relationship, even when the network tool (such as Facebook) is apparently democratic;” and “Not friending students unless they request the connection. Not poking students. Never pressuring students to friend the professor (such as repeated mention of a faculty profile in class” (Faculty Ethics on Facebook, n.d.).

There are a variety of arguments highlighting the positive and negative consequences social networks can (and do) have on the student-teacher

relationship. Arguments on both sides are convincing, which makes the task of finding an answer to the ultimate question of whether students and teachers should be friends on social networks even harder. Public opinion is clearly “on the fence” regarding this topic. For instance, Edutopia, a website catering to teachers, posted a poll for its registered members asking “Are teacher-student friendships inappropriate on social-networking sites?” Thirty-one percent (215 votes out of a total vote of 685) voted “Yes. The intimate, revealing nature of social-networking sites makes them an improper place for students and teachers to communicate.” Thirty-nine percent (265 votes) voted “No. As long as teachers' personal pages and communication are suitable for student viewing, social-networking sites can be used to reinforce positive teacher-student connections.”

Another sizable portion of respondents (27%) voted “Maybe. If they choose to be available to students who want to make an appropriate connection, teachers should create professional profiles separate from their personal pages” (Ring, 2008). Similarly, in a survey asking students whether it is appropriate for teachers to have Facebooks, 33% claimed that it is “somewhat inappropriate” for teachers to have Facebook profiles, while 35% felt that it was “somewhat appropriate” for teachers to have Facebook profiles (Mazer et al., 2007).

The question still reminds: Should students and teachers be friends on

social networks? I believe that there is no right or wrong answer to this question. It is undeniable that social networks are of value to the student-teacher relationship, and banning them from students and teachers would be unfortunate. However, Facebook, Myspace, and other social networks have a great potential for blurring the traditional, appropriate relationship line between students and teacher. Can a compromise be made? According to some, it can, namely, by having special school-created social networks. This way students and teachers have a chance to interact and form strong relationships, while still providing security and deterring inappropriate behavior by the means of content monitoring. Will this approach work? There is only one way to find out.

References

- Andersen, J. F., Norton, R. W., & Nussbaum, J. F. (1981). Three investigations exploring relationships between perceived teacher communication behaviors and student learning. *Communication Education, 30*, 377-392.
- Cayanus, J. L. (2004). Effective instructional practice: Using teacher self-disclosure as an instructional tool. *Communication Teacher, 18*, 6-9.
- Christophel, D. M. (1990). The relationships among teacher immediacy behaviors, student motivation, and learning. *Communication Education, 39*, 323-340.
- Faculty Ethics on Facebook. (n. d.) In *Facebook* [Group page]. Retrieved March 27, 2011, from <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2229343363&v=info>
- Frymier, A. B. (1993). The impact of teacher immediacy on students' motivation: Is it the same for all students? *Communication Quarterly, 41*, 454-464.
- Frymier, A. B., & Houser, M. L. (2000). The teacher-student relationship as an interpersonal relationship. *Communication Education, 49*, 207-219.
- Fusani, D. S. (1994). "Extra-class" communication: Frequency, immediacy, self-disclosure, and satisfaction in student-faculty interaction outside the classroom. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 22*, 232-255.

Harris, C. (2010). Friend Me?: School policy may address friending students online. *School Library Journal*, 56, 16.

Mazer, J. P., Murphy, R. E., & Simonds, C. J. (2007). I'll see you on "Facebook": The effects of computer-mediated teacher self-disclosure on student motivation, affective learning, and classroom climate. *Communication Education*, 56, 1-17.

Ring, S. (2008, August 4). *Are teacher-student friendships inappropriate on social-networking sites?* Retrieved from <http://www.edutopia.org/poll-student-teacher-social-networking>

Simon, M. (2008, August 12). *Online student-teacher friendship can be tricky.* Retrieved from http://articles.cnn.com/2008-08-12/tech/studentsteachers.online_1_facebook-users-myspace-social-networking-sites?_s=PM:TECH

Sorensen, G. (1989). The relationships among teachers' self-disclosive statements, students' perceptions, and affective learning. *Communication Education*, 38, 259- 276.