

Should students do social media with teachers? (guest blog)

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Not cool for school?

Professors and lecturers are finally starting to use social media as a teaching tool – it seems particularly relevant for a Media and Communications Department. But what are the limits on the use of social media relationships between staff and students? Here’s the student view from Polis intern Vanessa Gottlieb.

When I signed up for Twitter I never expected to be using it two years later in a post-graduate course. I’ve never used social media to interact with my professors, or any other kind of authority figure. Had I known that my future tweet audience would include LSE staff I probably would have chosen a less embarrassing username.

But when my Political Communications professor suggested this morning that the course use Twitter to enhance our learning and afford us an opportunity to critically examine the Twitter hashtag, I went further and started ‘following’ him as fast as my blackberry data service could process the request.



Cool for school?

My social media conditioned brain then automatically led me to Facebook, where I located this professor’s profile in a matter of seconds. Luckily an acceptable standards of behavior flag went off before I could click the ‘Add to Friends’ button. I kind of instinctively knew that adding this professor on Facebook was not entirely appropriate, and a Facebook rejection on the first day of

class is not an ideal start, though I suppose it would have been one way to set myself apart from the rest of the pack.

So Facebooking your professors is probably a no-no, but why is Twitter OK? In theory, Facebook could be a really powerful way of expanding school related networking and networking skills, as well as an easy way of reaching out to students and encouraging participation. In this sense professors could use Facebook much as politicians do.

I suppose the real issue at play is the blurring of the boundaries between public and personal. Politicians, at least or especially in the US, gave up on pleas for any separation of public and private long ago. Teachers, however, still try to strike a difficult, somewhat precarious balance between in the classroom and out.

On the one hand, teachers occupy a unique space in our lives that is primarily though not purely ‘professional,’ often crossing boundaries into the more personal aspects of our lives, assuming the role of mentor and counselor. This road, though, does not often and should probably not go both ways.

And while the reality of social media platforms is that our interpersonal interactions are becoming increasingly informal, we still tend to hold teachers to a higher standard. They are not only our instructors they are also our role models.

And that’s probably why there is something inherently unsettling about the idea of my teacher casually browsing through photos of my drunken Saturday night. These are the people in our lives who have the highest expectations of us and to whom we want to show only our best selves. This runs both ways, and I can only imagine how uncomfortable a teacher would feel about a student seeing extra-curricular photos.

Twitter (despite the occasional Weiner) is somehow perceived as less intimate. On Facebook we share a great deal of private information from biographies to personal contact details to pictures. Twitter doesn't ask about your current relationship status or what religion you practice. Twitter has a 140 character limit.

As it turns out, our perceptions of the difference in levels of intimacy associated with Facebook versus Twitter are right. A 2010 Stanford study showed that our Facebook friends tend to be real, while average Twitter users have never physically met almost half of the people following them. This actually makes sense when we remember that, though often considered a social network, Twitter was actually meant to be a micro-blog. Following someone or having someone follow you on Twitter is no different from reading or writing a full-scale blog on Blogger or WordPress.

Like a blog and unlike Facebook, on Twitter you don't get to choose whether or not to accept someone as a follower. A tweet is just as public as a public statement or newspaper quote, and these days subject to as much public scrutiny. But with Facebook (though we should probably know better by now) on some level we still expect the information we post to remain relatively private and privileged. The use of Twitter involves a kind of conscious self-regulation that is often ignored on Facebook.

I don't want to have to watch my language on Facebook for fear of being judged by a professor. And to be honest, I don't really want to know which of my professors are obsessed with their cats or what they're doing on their Saturday nights.

So, Dr. @NickAnstead, I guess I'll just stick to following you on Twitter.

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