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## NET Friendships

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### FACEBOOK AND THE PHENOMENON OF SOCIAL NETWORKING

TODAY: The dangers of posting too much personal information on the Internet.

SATURDAY: Chantal Eustace on how Internet sites have transformed our personal relationships.

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School principal Mark Classen knows the dangers of posting too much personal information on the Internet.

Last spring, he was removed from his position at Harrison Hot Springs elementary after a parent reported seeing a nude photo of him among hundreds of travel pictures he had displayed on his personal website for viewing by friends and family.

The community was stunned, the school board ordered an investigation and Classen was publicly painted as a potential child abuser.

For two months, he was on administrative leave while his reputation and character were scrutinized. He issued an apology, saying it was an innocent holiday picture -- taken by his wife on a beach in New Zealand -- and he never intended it to become public.

### 'STUPID' MISTAKE

Investigators eventually concluded he was telling the truth and parents, upon hearing more details about the picture and the circumstances, generally agreed there was no cause for alarm. Board chair Jim Sinclair summed up Classen's actions as a "stupid" mistake.

For most, the consequences of posting too much personal information on the Internet are embarrassment and possibly damaged friendships. But for those in positions of trust, such as educators, a thoughtless post can be a career-killer.

With the growing popularity among adults of social networking groups such as Facebook, educators are being warned by their professional regulatory body that they face significant risk when they open themselves to the world. The Vancouver board of education is considering banning teacher-student communications on such sites.

"While there is nothing wrong with teachers using Facebook in their personal lives, Facebook does expose both teachers and students to fairly significant risks when it comes to respecting the boundaries between educator and student," the B.C. College of Teachers says in a posting on its website titled Facebook 101.

The posting says the "social networking" aspect of Facebook and similar sites makes them more dangerous than personal websites because of the way information is shared.

Participants post pictures and details about themselves and then send that information -- along with updates about their lives -- to those they have accepted as friends.

There are privacy settings, but not everyone uses them -- or uses them well.

The college warns that teachers who accept students as "friends" are blurring the lines between their public and private lives, which it says is a serious concern for professionals entrusted by the public to provide a service. That can undermine a teacher's authority and threaten the safe relationship that needs to exist between teachers and students, the college says.

"Teachers [who] would never take a child to lunch or offer to drive a student home [other types of potential boundary violations] may not even hesitate to add a student as a 'friend' on Facebook, exposing the student to personal information that the teacher would never consider sharing in a classroom setting," the posting says.

"You need to be aware that this is happening with increasing regularity, placing students and educators at risk."

The college says it issued the warning to raise awareness and encourage discussion. Its website provides members with an opportunity to respond anonymously to the article and reaction has been wide-ranging.

"I find it frustrating that some members of society panic when it comes to professionals being allowed to utilize materials such as Facebook in their own personal lives," one teacher wrote. "If we are 'professionals,' we should have enough sense to know what is appropriate and what is not."

Added another: "I like to think of myself as a teacher who is capable of maintaining a professional boundary even if I converse with my students in cyberspace on trivial issues. I'm more likely to be able to reach them in class if we have an understanding that we have shared positive experiences."

But others were adamant that they would never accept a student as a Facebook contact.

"I do not wish to be 'friends' with my current students -- in reality or virtually. I also find it a bit creepy to think that students could find out too much about my life."

#### PUBLIC SPACE

Julia Poole, who teaches information-communications technology in Surrey schools, uses Facebook regularly to connect with family, friends and former classmates. She says the college has exaggerated the risk, adding that the best advice for teachers on Facebook is to use common sense.

"People have to remember that it's not like talking to your best girlfriend ... you can't really be that intimate," she said in an interview. "I look at Facebook as being a public space. I don't think there'd be anything that I would share on my Facebook account that I wouldn't want my grandmother to see."

Still, she suggested that teachers who want to use Facebook to communicate with students should consider setting up a classroom account so that students won't have access to their personal information. That allows teachers to set the rules and educate students about cyberspace behaviour.

James McConville, a teacher with Coquitlam's online school, is an enthusiastic Facebook user who says the site allows him to connect with colleagues for professional discussions and to stay in touch with former students.

"It's great to be updated with how they're doing. I just love hearing their stories about what courses they're taking, especially if it's related to something I taught them in the past.... it's nice to keep that connection."

Since he is now a coordinator in the district and no longer in the classroom, he hasn't had requests from current students who want to be Facebook friends. He says he wouldn't hesitate to add students as friends but he would keep his account focused on professional issues.

But he said he knows others feel differently and debate is raging about whether teachers should accept students as friends and indeed whether schools should allow Facebook access.

McConville is strongly opposed to restrictions, saying that would drive social networking underground and further separate adults from kids.

"I'm one of those educators who believes we should get into the playground with them because if we don't, we're saying we're better or different from you," he said. "It doesn't give us that whole opportunity to be mentors."

"Instead of banning it, we should have more conversations about when it's appropriate and what is appropriate."

#### NOT A PEER

Anne Guthrie-Warman is on the other side of the debate. As president of the Vancouver Secondary Teachers' Association, she's seen what happens when teachers cross the boundary between professional and personal relationships with students.

It's an issue that all school districts are struggling with, but it's particularly poignant in Vancouver in light of the bombshell that exploded in 2006 with the airing of long-held secrets about former teacher Tom Ellison's systematic abuse of students at Prince of Wales high school over many years.

Although Ellison's crimes took place 20-plus years ago, the fact that so many ignored what were obvious signs of trouble forced school officials to ask whether it could happen again. The district hired Don Avison, a former deputy minister of education, to review policy to determine if there is sufficient protection for students.

Avison's recommendations included developing a code of conduct for all district employees and the district recently released a first draft. On a list of "unacceptable" behaviour by staff members, the policy includes:

- Sharing overly personal/private information about themselves.
- Online communication with students on private e-mails or social networking sites.

"An adult is not a peer of the students," the draft says. "In working with students, adults must take great care that their actions and motivations will never be misinterpreted. The burden of responsibility and accountability rests with the adult."

Guthrie-Warman said she understands that teachers are trying to make connections with students, but said they must be cautious not to become a confidante. "You can connect, but I think you have to be very careful about the kinds of things you listen to or say to students."

Teachers should not reveal personal information about themselves to students -- apart from

the barest of details -- and should refer students to school counsellors if they begin talking about personal problems, Guthrie-Warman said.

Students and teachers should not regard each other as friends, even if it's only in the Facebook context, she added.

Elaan Bauder is a Grade 8 teacher in Coquitlam who has conducted workshops and written an article to help teachers who are curious about Facebook. She explains the importance of setting privacy levels so the whole world can't read their posts.

Her rule with students is that she won't communicate with them as long as they are attending Kwayhquitlum middle school, where she teaches. But once they have left, she will accept them as friends, although with limited access.

"Everyone has a different comfort level," she says, noting some teachers won't accept students until they have graduated from high school.

Mike Hengeveld, who teaches physics, science and math at Templeton secondary in Vancouver, joined Facebook because he was trying to locate a former student to tell him about a hockey event. Facebook, he said, is the equivalent of a phone directory when trying to locate young people.

But he didn't stay long, deciding it involved too much navel-gazing.

While he strives to maintain a professional relationship with students, he says the dynamics in the classroom have changed from when he was a kid. Some students try to be chummy and talk to teachers in a casual way, as if they were friends.

He occasionally has to spell it out for them: "I'm not your buddy. I do your marks, man," he told one the other day.

"I didn't think of teachers as buddies," Hengeveld recalled in an interview. "They were never my buddies."

While teachers are debating their personal privacy on Facebook, it seems teenagers are doing the same thing. Bauder says students appear to be losing interest in the site, possibly because they don't want to share details of their lives with adults.

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#### TEACHER RESPONSES TO INTERNET 'FRIENDS'

- "I have had many students ask me to add them as a friend on Facebook and I have agreed to add all of them. I have also added many parents of my students to my Facebook. The reason I have agreed to add students is that I have no reason to hide anything from them. As an educator, my private life pretty much mirrors my professional life."

- "Yes they ask me and no I do not add them. I feel my personal life is private and I can't control what my friends write on my wall. I do not want my students exposed to my pictures or friends or family or commenting or reading where I go and what I do on my own time."

- "I don't see an issue with adding them as a friend as long as I'm not pursuing them to 'be my friend.'"

- "I have denied 'friend' requests from students on Facebook. There is information about me on Facebook that I would rather not share with students. Being a younger teacher, students

sometimes already challenge the professional boundary and I have no interest in making this more flexible."

- "I know that I personally have some things on my Facebook page that some might deem inappropriate. This is why I have never added students and I have all the privacy settings in place. While I have nothing to be ashamed of on my profile, I understand that there are others who may not feel the same way. I do, however, feel that educators are entitled to a life outside of school."

- "Teachers must remember they are accountable for anything they do -- in the classroom, on the street and online. It's the nature of our profession."

- "Teachers are human just like any other profession[al] and as long as you maintain your boundaries and privacy settings, there should be no issues."

- "It indicates a degree of immaturity and lack of appropriate boundaries for any professional to be using such a tool. I see too many teachers not only pursuing 'friendship' relationships with students but bragging about it in staff rooms. Boundary training definitely needs to be addressed in university and at school sites."

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