Professional Guidance on the Use of Electronic Communication and Social Media

THE GENERAL
TEACHING COUNCIL
FOR SCOTLAND

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Purpose of Professional Guidance

The increasing popularity of social media in recent years has allowed many teachers to enhance their classroom practice, introducing their pupils to new tools and delivering the curriculum in innovative and engaging ways. The majority of teachers using these tools do so without encountering any difficulty. However, registered teachers and those who may be seeking registration in the future, (such as student teachers), should be aware of the many challenges and ramifications associated with the use of electronic communication and social media.

This Professional Guidance will help identify potential dangers, offer some guidance about how to avoid them and provide a context for responsible, professional use of electronic communication and social media.

Reference to online communications and social media include software, applications (including those running on mobile devices), e-mail and websites, which enable users to interact, create and exchange information online. Examples include, but are not limited to, sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Wikipedia and MySpace. Also included is the use of SMS and instant messaging clients, such as, MSN Messenger and BBM.

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First Principles

This Guidance should be read with reference to The Code of Professionalism and Conduct (CoPAC) and the Student Teacher Code (STC) of GTC Scotland ('the Codes') which set out the key aspects of teacher professionalism. Maintaining the public's trust in the individual teacher and in teaching as a profession sits at the heart of being fit to teach, and this can be undermined not only by behaviour occurring in a teacher's professional life, but also within their private life, including activity online.

New Contexts for Teaching and Learning

From e-mail to text and from blogging to tweets, technology is becoming an ever-present in our lives and an increasingly essential tool in the classroom. These new technologies open up a whole range of possibilities to help pupils, and others involved in their education; they provide new access to assignments and resources, connect classrooms in other communities and countries in ways unthinkable only a few years ago.

The ability to communicate in real time with others and access networks across the world brings with it great opportunities for teachers. It also offers great challenges as the boundary between teacher and pupil can quickly become blurred.

These days all professions are subject to wide scrutiny and it can be hard to tell the difference between perception and reality. The views of teachers on their own profession are important and are at the centre of a self-regulating profession.

However, the perspective of parents and the understandable fears of the wider public about inappropriate use of the internet also have to be considered; and these views can sometimes be shaped by sources which are unpredictable - including the media. Teachers therefore need to be alert to the risk that actions which might, on the face of it, seem quite innocent can be misunderstood and misconstrued by others.

Private versus Professional

As the GTCS Codes state, teachers are individuals with private lives, however, off-duty conduct matters and may have bearing on their professional life. Therefore sound judgement and due care should be exercised as conduct which may not directly relate to pupils may be relevant to a teacher's fitness to teach.

Professional Vulnerability

A teacher can be vulnerable to unintended misuses for electronic communication. E-mail, texting and social media encourage casual dialogue and very often, very innocent actions can easily be misconstrued or manipulated.

Electronic messages are not anonymous and can be tracked and live forever on the internet. Social Media sites archive content posted, even when deleted from online profiles. Once information is placed on line, the author relinquishes control of it.

Social Media brings with it a new dimension and 'feel' to a relationship and this is particularly important when a student and a teacher become 'friends' in an online environment. A teacher should never share information with students in ANY environment that they would not willingly or appropriately share in a school or school-related setting or in the community.

The Legal Implications

The Codes draw attention to the potential impact of criminal convictions on registered teachers and those wishing to become registered.

Unwise behaviour online can also result in criminal action or in some cases, civil action brought by others and therefore requires caution.

Fitness to Teach Implications

At the heart of GTCS's Fitness to Teach framework is the protection of children and young people and vulnerable adults and the trust the public has in the teaching profession. Therefore all complaints are considered fairly and in the same way regardless of whether or not they are associated with the internet or involve electronic communication.

For example the behaviours listed below have warranted disciplinary measures:

- inappropriate electronic communication with pupils, colleagues and parents/carers, including SMS and instant messaging;
- posting/sending sexually explicit pictures/images to colleagues or pupils;
- grooming - whereby a teacher uses electronic messages with a view to establishing an inappropriate relationship with a pupil;
- possessing, making, viewing or distributing indecent images of children;
- using inappropriate YouTube content in the educational setting.

How can teachers minimise risk when using electronic communication and social networking?

As a teacher you should:

- always maintain a formal and courteous and professional tone in communicating with pupils and ensure that professional boundaries are maintained;
- only use official channels of communication e.g. GLOW and work e-mail addresses and be aware of and comply with employer's policies and guidance;
- not exchange private text, phone numbers, personal e-mail addresses or photos of a personal nature with pupils;
- firmly decline student-initiated 'friend' requests from pupils and do not instigate any yourself. Use your own discretion when dealing with friend requests from parents. It is acceptable to decline these invitations and remind parents of more formal channels which they can discuss their child's education;
- operate online in a way in which would not call into question your position as a professional;
- realise that pupils will be naturally curious about your personal life outside school and may try to find out more about you.
- Manage your privacy setting and keep them under review. These are particularly important in regard to photos, and remember that no privacy mechanism is 100% guaranteed;
- ensure your settings prohibit others from tagging you in any photos or updates without your permission and you can ask others to remove any undesirable content related to you;
- audit and re-evaluate the information about you and who has access to it if you are entering a programme of teacher education, or your Teacher Induction Period;
- be aware that potential employers may try and view your online social media profiles;
- consider that conversations held online may not be private. Be aware of who may have access to what you post;
- assume that information you post can be accessed and altered;
- not discuss pupils, colleagues, parents or carers online or criticise your employer or others within the school community;
- respect pupil privacy and confidentiality at all times;
- use strong passwords and change them regularly. Protect your mobile phone/smart phone/tablet computer with a PIN, especially when in school to protect access to its content and potential misuse;
- bring the matter to the attention of your employer using the proper procedures, if you are the victim of cyber bullying or uncomfortable with comments, photos or posts made by pupils of or about you.

How can teachers minimise risk for their pupils when using electronic communication and social networking?

As a teacher you should:

- report the matter to your manager using the appropriate procedures if you come across or are made aware of inappropriate use of electronic communication or social networking by a pupil or concerning a pupil;
- alert your pupils to and encourage them to use appropriate and safe online behavior;
- be aware of and comply with your employer's rules and policy in regard to taking and sharing photos of children.

In Conclusion

Before posting materials online stop and ask yourself:

1. Might it reflect poorly on you, your school, employer or the teaching profession?

2. Is your intention to post this material driven by personal reasons or professional reasons?

3. Are you confident that the comment or other media in question, if accessed by others, (colleagues, parents etc) would be considered reasonable and appropriate?