

Should Students and Teachers Be Online "Friends"?

In the virtual world, the definition of a student-teacher relationship is hazy, particularly on social networks like Facebook and MySpace, where adults and teens share the same forums to connect and keep in touch with friends, classmates, relatives, and co-workers. Chances are, your teen has already found her teachers on Facebook and sent friend requests to join their networks.



But is it appropriate for your child to "friend" a teacher on a social network? Terrence Jegaraj, a senior at Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan, primarily adds former teachers or instructors from summer programs in which he has participated. "I am friends on Facebook with a current teacher of mine, but there are teachers who tell us specifically not to add them until we graduate," says Jegaraj.

Many of the teachers we asked, in fact, were reluctant to add students on Facebook. While a teacher can use some networking sites, such as Twitter, to extend a classroom discussion or offer quick homework assistance in 140 characters or less, networks like Facebook and MySpace easily blur the student-teacher relationship because of the personal information made available on profiles.

"I think that students and teachers have different personas in the classroom than outside of it, and the two should not necessarily be mixed," says Heather Steed, a recent graduate of Florida State University in Tallahassee, Fla. As a student herself, Steed never added instructors on a social network until she completed their class.

"There needs to be a certain distance between teachers and students in order to maintain respect," adds Rabbi Avi Schwartz, an educator at Magen David Yeshiva in Brooklyn, N.Y. "A teacher needs to be a role model, mentor, and advice giver – not a 'friend.'" When a high school student gains access into a teacher's network of friends and acquaintances and is able to view their family photos, for instance, the student-teacher dynamic is altered. "Friending students provides more information than you are willing to provide in an educational setting," says Patrick Sweeney, an adjunct professor of history and government in Houston, Texas.

But student-teacher relationships can be transparent and visible to others online, which may have its pros and cons. Carlton Brown, a former community college instructor in Pittsburg, Pa, says interaction on a social network may be viewed and evaluated by classmates and others on the website, which, in turn, may deter inappropriate behavior. "Parents also have the opportunity to review and make judgments," says Brown. If you have your own account on Facebook, you may opt to join your child's teacher's classroom group as a parent "chaperone," for example, to supervise the discussion. (Based on current research, though, teens flock to Facebook because it's mainly a parent-free space, so this type of supervision may not work for all families.)

Alternatives exist, however, for teachers and students who wish to enhance learning outside of the classroom via the Internet. Schwartz has helped many students with homework or studying via instant messaging, and even keeps in contact with parents this way. Other tools – such as online classrooms on sites such as Blackboard and forums within a school district's website or teacher's own webpage – make student-teacher interaction possible on the Web. Of course, don't rule out more traditional methods to foster close student-teacher connections. "Appropriate relationships between teachers and students can be built by attending office hours or emailing for class-related advice," says Steed.

While students may be eager to find and friend their teachers on Facebook, many of them understand the implied rules and boundaries of this virtual environment. "I do understand why my teachers do not want me to add them until I graduate," says Jegaraj. "I think being friends with a teacher on Facebook while being their student may close the gap between the teacher-student relationship, and some teachers may not want this to happen while they are still teaching their students."

Ultimately, sites like Facebook are social environments. Teachers guide students in a professional capacity, and being social doesn't seem like part of the job description.