



Teaching For Success®

Quick Answers

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Q: Should I Use Social Media in My Teaching?

A: Facebook? It Depends

by Steve Vaitl, DC

There has been a rather lengthy discussion taking place regarding the use of Facebook as a teaching and communication resource in higher education. The discussion can be found on the professional networking site LinkedIn.com. It can be accessed in the group labeled LinkedIn Higher Education Teaching and Learning.

While there is no clear-cut consensus one can identify when reading through the more than 300 comments of this discussion currently, there are a number of issues educators should consider when evaluating potential use of Facebook. Assuming there is no policy within an institution regarding Facebook use or other policies governing off campus contact of students by the faculty, three distinct paradigms emerge.

Personal use only

One is the use strictly as a personal contact site for family and close friends, to the exclusion of students either past or present. Although there does seem to be some exceptions made for former students, educators of this perspective tend to make use of other social/professional networking sites to maintain contact with even graduated students. Obviously this precludes the use of Facebook as an educational tool.

Strictly Professional

The second paradigm is to use Facebook as strictly a professional tool. No personal photos, contacts, friends or family are included in their use of Facebook by these instructors. They post only work-related links, observations or other tidbits they decide are professional in nature. Contact with close friends and family is either via e-mail or totally offline.

Combination use

The third, is held by the majority of participants and is a combination of both professional and personal use. This presents the biggest challenge potentially and certainly raises the most secondary issues, which tend to be rather complicated. Let's focus on the third and most complicated of the three.

Top challenge

The number one challenge here is keeping a distinction or separation between one's personal and professional life. Making use of the privacy settings afforded by the network is utilized by many of these instructors. It is noteworthy that those from western cultures see this as highly important while faculty from eastern cultures tend toward no separation of any kind.

What about using multiple profiles?

The most discussed choices surrounds the use of more than one profile on Facebook. Using one for personal and one for professional contacts. On the surface this looks to be an ideal solution as some have indicated they have chosen to do. However within the Terms of Services, which everyone must agree to before allowed to have a profile, it clearly states "You will not create more than one personal profile." This sparked a great deal of debate surrounding the validity of the types of user agreements used on web sites, specifically their legality.

After posting this question in the Answers section, a number of attorneys said they most certainly are legal and enforceable within the US. And of course, with the global nature of the internet and Web 2.0 tools, this question is ultimately not unique to the US. Faculty from other countries are asking the same question.

Though the discussion continues, using Facebook and other nontraditional means of communication for educational opportunities beyond the classroom a common thread seems to be, "the decision is one of professional preference and personal comfort level." If your decision is to use it, Facebook's own help section does suggest using their group or page feature or simply using the friends list security feature.


There are also a number of suggestions given by a British educationalist, Stephen Hephell you may wish to consider as a set of guidelines.

In preparing this article, it did occur to me, that there has been no mention in the discussion of student privacy or the US FERPA Law. But that is for another TFS QuickAnswer, perhaps.

Editor's note:

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