Faculty, Students and Social Media: Interpersonal relationships and higher education in the 21st Century

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Technology in the 21st century has continued to change the nature of interpersonal communications and relationships. Social media in particular continues to evolve and shape a variety of experiences, including higher education and students’ relationships with institutions and faculty. The *New York Times* recently reported that of 381 college admissions officers surveyed, 31 percent admit to researching potential students on social media pages (Singer, 2013). It is not just students, however, who are put under a microscope on social media. As colleges and universities look to integrate computer-mediated communication (CMC) into the classroom, faculty members are struggling to weigh the personal nature of social media against the professional nature of their work as instructors and mentors (Sleigh, Smith, & Laboe, 2013). Research has demonstrated that CMC, when implemented correctly, can increase learning outcomes in the classroom and provide mutually beneficial results to both the student and the instructor (McArthur & Bostedo-Conway, 2012). A key factor in this success may rest on the faculty’s shoulders of maintaining an appropriate presence on social media; allowing students to see faculty as both personal and professional beings (Sleigh et al., 2013). Both parties need to exercise caution in establishing student-teacher relationships on social media, as there is limited information to help define personal boundaries, determine appropriate content, and identify the ramifications that may enter the classroom as a result.

Li and Pitts (2009) demonstrated that faculty-student relationships benefit from interactions outside of the formal classroom or scheduled office hour experiences. Students report greater affective learning, satisfaction, and engagement in the course materials when they feel a greater interpersonal relationship with the instructor (McArthur & Bostedo-Conway, 2012). Where the research begins to diverge, however, is in the boundaries surrounding those interpersonal relationships and interactions with students and faculty through social media and
other 21st century technology. There is no map to guide faculty on how to utilize Facebook or Twitter to facilitate the learning process or to grow interpersonal relationships with students. Much of the current research suggests that students are looking for a balance of personal and professional information from their instructors, but that information should not cross boundaries into inappropriate or “too personal” information. Faculty members risk losing credibility in the eyes of their students if the information posted on social media wanders into this nebulous “inappropriate” category, which certainly does not bode well for the educational experience of the students or the reputation of the instructors (Sleigh et al., 2013). This predicament is further compounded by the informal and subjective nature of social media, which seems to encourage sharing and perhaps even over-sharing of personal information (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013).

When utilizing social media, faculty must be keenly aware of the interpersonal boundaries in the student-teacher relationship. “Facebook can cause teachers to reflect deeply on the boundaries of their relations…many teachers have created separate pages that are for students only, so that lines are not blurred between personal and professional lives” (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013). The maintenance of boundaries between student and teacher facilities “teacher credibility,” which along with positive interpersonal relationships, best predicts student success in the classroom. The danger social media poses is stripping faculty of this credibility should a boundary or line be crossed into “inappropriate” territory, and what students consider these boundaries to be is ambiguous and at times unpredictable. Some topics consistently rank high on this invisible inappropriateness scale, such as politics (both conservative and liberal). Other topics are less predictable, such as religion, which may depend on the particular student’s background (Sleigh et al., 2013).
Despite the potential pitfalls, a majority of faculty members using social media report having students as social network friends (Schneider, Jones, Farris, Havrda, Jackson & Hamrick, 2011). In this study, which reviewed data from both private and public higher education institutions, both faculty and administrators were interviewed regarding social media in the student-teacher relationship. While a majority of faculty reported connections to students via social media, in general most faculty and administrators “felt that it was not advisable to interact with students through social media…but that such interaction was less inappropriate if initiated by the student rather than the faculty member” (Schneider et al., 2011, p. 74). The implication in the research is that most faculty and administrators still felt, that even student initiated, social media contact between faculty and students in general is perceived as inappropriate in the context of student-teacher interpersonal relationships.

Another challenge for faculty is that 21st century technology has created a generation of “digital natives” who have grown accustomed to constant, instant access to people and information (McArthur & Bostedo-Conway, 2012). Students have come to demand communication with their schools and instructors follow this model and expect instantaneous responses, which places a time-consuming burden on faculty. A faculty member who is unwilling or unable to be accessible on demand then risks alienating students, almost suggesting that some kind of CMC is required to maintain healthy student-teacher relationships. Fortunately, a number of CMCs exist that do not require a personal social component, such as email, discussion boards hosted on the institution’s website, and other learning management software designed to facilitate both formal and informal conversations regarding course content (Li & Pitts, 2009). Another option for faculty is to hold “virtual office hours” in place of standard office hours, which creates an alternative for both traditional and commuter students. Studies suggest that
these virtual office hours are viewed favorably by students, but are not necessarily more utilized by students than traditional office hours or email messages (Li & Pitts, 2009). It also allows faculty a planned, structured time to respond to CMC with students without being held to an unreasonable standard of immediacy.

There is plentiful research about how an instructor’s social media presence impacts the classroom and the student-teacher relationship, but there is a noticeable dearth of information regarding a student’s presence on social media and how that may impact how faculty view their students. By “friending” professors on social media, students open a door to their private lives and information shared on social media. As Singer (2013) stated in the New York Times, “given the impulsiveness of typical teenagers” it is concerning what faculty or administrators may uncover in a student’s social media profile (para. 8). It is easy to argue that freshman and sophomore university students still fall into the behaviors of “typical” teenagers, despite being classified as adults. Of the administrators that did respond to the Times article, many worried that using social media in the admissions process could lead to “unfair or inconsistent treatment” (Singer, 2013, para.12). Could this possibility carry over into the classroom? Would instructors who interact with their students on social media be able to separate a student’s online content with his or her performance in the classroom? Would a student then, perhaps unwittingly, jeopardize his or her grades or prospects for recommendations with an inappropriate social media post? How might one classmate’s social media presence influence the classroom dynamics and discussions with other classmates? In this area, there are far more questions than answers as research has not yet caught up with all of the aspects of 21st century technology in communications.
Much of the research in this area is forthcoming, which may be the best indicator that both faculty and students should proceed with caution when it comes to social media and interpersonal relationships. While the research suggests that student-teacher interaction outside of the formal classroom setting greatly benefits the students and their academic performance, faculty would be wise to consider other means of fostering these relationships other than social media. CMC does not simply mean Facebook or Twitter, but can encompass a wide variety of tools available, such as email, discussion boards, blogs, “virtual office hours” and other learning management tools that allow for dialogue between students and instructors (Li & Pitts, 2009). Educational institutions would also be wise to begin crafting policies and procedures related to the use of social media, for both faculty and students. Schneider et al. (2011) noted a general lack of policies related to social media, as well as a lack of consensus as to what is and is not appropriate for faculty using social media. As Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam (2013) note, “it seems timely to explore the many challenging dynamics of the relationships [outside of the classroom] so that teachers can maintain healthy and useful connections with their students” (p. 83). The dynamics of student-teacher relationships on social media are challenging indeed, as there is no clear path for either faculty or students to use to navigate what is and what is not appropriate. Until such a map exists, it may be prudent for faculty and students alike to keep their social identities separate from the classroom and the student-teacher relationship experience, as to avoid potential landmines buried just beneath the surface on social media.
References


