

Should I be Friends with my Pupils?

Human communication is increasingly conducted electronically. Most of us and many of our child and teenage students use email. In addition many of our students under 18 use social media sites such as Facebook and applications such as Snapchat. Many ELT professionals are using these professionally and personally too. Twitter is particularly popular among ELT professionals. Mobile phone and computer technology continue to converge enabling access via mobile phone and other handheld devices. As a result of this sharp rise in electronic communication it is likely that we will encounter our students on line. Some of us may already have received 'friendship' requests from our students in forums like Facebook – hence the title of this article. To what extent is it appropriate or desirable for us to interact with our students electronically?

In trying to answer this question I refer mainly to Facebook as it is the electronic social forum that I know best. I refer in this article to 'electronic' as opposed to 'real life' communications and I trust that most people will understand what I mean by this distinction. But for many children (and some adults) electronic communication is so important a part of day-to-day life as to be considered part of their 'real life'. Aware of this blurring of distinction I therefore also seek to answer the question as to how far 'friendship' with our pupils is acceptable in a more general sense. I hope that my conclusions will provide some guidelines for our communication with children both electronically and in what for the time being we will continue to call 'real life'.

First it may be helpful to establish our current views. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements with regard to young learners and teenagers?

- It's OK to be friends with my pupils in real life and on line.
- It's OK to be friends with my pupils in real life, but not on line.
- It's OK to be friendly with my pupils in real life and on line.
- It's OK to be friendly with my pupils in real life but not on line.

And how about these statements?

- My students are already interested in online social networking. As a teacher I can't ignore this, any more than I would ignore their interest in music. I should look for ways to use it in my teaching and to enhance my relationship with my pupils.
- I want my class / school to be a social community. Social networking sites like Facebook provide an opportunity for this.

What is a friend?

This may sound like an odd question – surely we all know what we mean by a friend? But actually the answer is important in addressing the subject of this article: Should I be friends with my pupils?

According to The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English¹, a 'friend' is, 'a person who shares the same feelings of natural liking and understanding, the same interests, etc, but is not a member of the same family.' I'd quibble with that: I think that a member of our family can also be a friend - "She's not just my mum; she's my friend." In addition, we obviously vary in the depth of friendship we feel for different people. A 'good' or 'close' friend is someone I trust and whose company I enjoy. I would want to spend time with that person and share confidences, for example about work, about other people and about myself. At the other end of the scale, I may

enjoy the company of a dinner party guest; I would consider my guest to be a friend by virtue of having been invited. But the level of intimacy may be much less than that shared with a 'good' friend. Another characteristic of friendship is our willingness to go out of our way to help someone: 'A friend in need is a friend indeed.' But we might also help people who are not our friends. So the precise meaning of 'friend' is not clear. What I think we can say is that friendship always involves **socialising**. Whether electronic or in the real world, friends will choose to spend time together because they enjoy each other's company.

Facebook Friends

According to researchⁱⁱ, most users of Facebook have many more Facebook friends than 'true' or 'close' friends. Facebook friends might be people they were at school with but have lost touch with; people they met on holiday; various members of extended family; even people they have never met, for example friends of friends. Many Facebook friends are more like the old-fashioned idea of 'acquaintances' – people we happen to have met – potential friends, perhaps, rather than 'real' friends, though the extent to which this is true will vary from person to person. It's important to understand this. Being 'friends' in Facebook (and in much online communication) is not necessarily the same as being 'friends' in 'real life'.

Being friendly

We can make a further important distinction between 'being a friend' and 'being friendly'. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines 'friendly' as, 'acting or ready to act as a friend.' I don't agree. To me, being friendly means acting in a pleasant and positive manner towards someone without necessarily wanting or intending to become a friend.

Should I be friends with my pupils?

It might be helpful to look at some official UK advice on this matter. This is contained in a document called 'Guidance for Safe Working Practice for the Protection of Children and Adults in Education Settings'ⁱⁱⁱ produced by The UK Department for Education and Skills (now known as Department for Children, Schools and Families) in February 2005. On 'Social Contact' the document states:

'Staff should not establish or seek to establish social contact with pupils for the purpose of securing a friendship or to pursue or strengthen a relationship. Even if a young person seeks to establish social contact, or if this occurs coincidentally, the member of staff should exercise her/his professional judgement in making a response and be aware that such social contact could be misconstrued.

Staff should not give their personal details such as home/mobile phone number; home or e-mail address to pupils unless the need to do so is agreed with senior management.

This means that adults should:

- always approve any planned social contact with senior colleagues, for example when it is part of a reward scheme or pastoral care programme
- advise senior management of any regular social contact they have with a pupil which may give rise to concern
- report and record any situation which they feel might compromise the school or their own professional standing.

The above document was written mainly for an 'off line' context. In November 2007 it was updated to 'Guidance for Safer Working Practices for Adults who work with Children and Young People'^{iv} taking into account electronic contact as follows:

Communication with Children and Young People (including the Use of Technology)

Communication between children and adults, by whatever method, should take place within clear and explicit professional boundaries. This includes the wider use of technology such as mobile phones, text messaging, e-mails, digital cameras, videos, web-cams, websites and blogs. Adults should not share any personal information with a child or young person. They should not request, or respond to, any personal information from the child/young person, other than that which might be appropriate as part of their professional role. Adults should ensure that all communications are transparent and open to scrutiny.

Adults should also be circumspect in their communications with children so as to avoid any possible misinterpretation of their motives or any behaviour which could be construed as grooming. They should not give their personal contact details to children and young people including e-mail, home or mobile telephone numbers, unless the need to do so is agreed with senior management and parents/carers. E-mail or text communications between an adult and a child young person outside agreed protocols may lead to disciplinary and/or criminal investigations. This also includes communications through internet based web sites.

This means that adults should:

- not give their personal contact details to children or young people, including their mobile telephone number
- only use equipment e.g. mobile phones, provided by organisation to communicate with children, making sure that parents have given permission for this form of communication to be used
- only make contact with children for professional reasons and in accordance with any organisation policy
- recognise that text messaging is rarely an appropriate response to a child in a crisis situation or at risk of harm. It should only be used as a last resort when other forms of communication are not possible
- not use internet or web-based communication channels to send personal messages to a child/young person

This advice may come as rather scary news to teachers who regularly or even sometimes converse with their students electronically. Teachers who count their pupils among their Facebook Friends will probably be panicking. But before we go further we should note a few things in relation to the above advice:

1. The advice refers to mainstream British education and aims to protect adults against the possibility of allegation in an increasingly litigious society, as well as protecting students against the possibility of grooming^v. Some people might consider the advice to err on the side of caution. A lack of trust between adults and children may appear to be implicit, particularly to people living in countries where the relationship between adults and children is less formal than in Britain.
2. The advice was written before the huge rise in electronic communication by both adults and children. It does not fully take into account the changed situation in which many people spend a large part of their time engaged in electronic social communication. It is not surprising that adults and children occasionally encounter each other on line, just as they may occasionally encounter each other in the streets and parks of their city. A code of conduct is required for such encounters.

3. Professional educators and institutions are increasingly setting up their own forums where adults and children communicate electronically. It is not unusual for teachers to set up class 'Wikis'^{vi} or similar, with students contributing and communicating both at school and at home. These may be very worthwhile educationally but there may also be a blurring of the distinction between school and home, between public and private, that we need to take account of.
4. Institutions, class teachers, etc, may set up social forums (as distinct from educational projects like Wikis) to encourage community feeling among their students. For example, several UK language schools run Facebook sites for their students to stay in contact between courses. There may be good commercial reasons for this. Again a code of conduct is needed.
5. Students from a particular class or school may spontaneously set up their own social forums. When I was researching the possibility of a Facebook forum for students attending English Country Schools I was surprised to find a thriving group already in existence, set up by a former student and complete with official logo copied from our web site. In situations like this the organisation needs to decide whether it wishes to be 'officially' involved or not. Some considerations are:
 - a. Is the site open or closed? Who decides membership?
 - b. What image of the school is the site projecting to its members and possibly to the public? Would the school feel happy, for example, if some students were publicly using bad language?
 - c. Given the potential for cyber bullying and predatory behaviour by adults, does the school have a duty to monitor activity in a forum that bears its name?
6. In this particular case we decided to set up our own 'official' forum with cooperation from the 'unofficial' site making it clear which was which. Interestingly, shortly after the official site was established a parent contacted us to say that a bully would be attending our summer school that year. Since the alleged bully was a user of our official forum we decided to publish our Child Protection Policy to the site, with particular reference to bullying. In the event no bullying took place: we may have forestalled it by reaching and informing our students in the electronic space in which they were congregating.
7. The previous paragraph raises the difficult question as to whether adults (for example teachers) and children should share membership of the same Facebook group. Official UK advice (see above) suggests an emphatic 'no'. But in a world where our lives are increasingly led online, are we really saying that we wish to set up 'no go' areas where children (under 18 years) may congregate and adults may not go? Any parent with experience of unsupervised children's parties will tell you why this might not be a good idea. If we trust our teachers to interact with pupils in a friendly and professional manner in the real world, why should we not also trust them to interact in a friendly and professional manner online? Children sometimes seek advice from adults they know and trust and it seems a pity to deny them this possibility just because the communication is electronic.

I predict that adults and children will increasingly interact online and that this is likely to be increasingly fuzzy in terms of public / private and levels of formality. As I hope I have shown, we need some guidelines to govern this and I'd like to propose the following:

Facebook guidelines

1. If schools or classes set up social networking forums on sites like Facebook for children under 18 they should be closed groups. I know of at least one school that allows anyone to join its Facebook group, presumably hoping that it might recruit new students through 'friends of friends'. I think this is dangerous. It is like allowing the public to wander

around the school. Except that in cyberspace it much easier for badly motivated adults to pretend to be a member of their target group.

2. Schools may prefer not to allow adults and children to share the same Facebook group, other than those adults necessary to monitor and administer the group.
3. If however schools allow staff and pupils to share the same electronic forum they must put in place clear guidelines covering their interaction (see below).
4. Adults who have a personal account on Facebook and who also administer, monitor or take part in a Facebook group containing children should create a separate 'professional' account that they use for educational purposes. The professional account should as far as possible be devoid of personal information. Adults must not initiate or agree to 'Friendship' requests from children using their personal account as this will result in an adult's personal photos, correspondence with friends, status updates, etc, being available to children.

Regarding electronic communications with children in general I suggest the following (taken from English Country Schools' safeguarding policy):

Staff must exercise the same discretion and maintain the same professional distance in any electronic contact with children (anyone under 18) as they would in normal day-to-day life. Electronic contact includes telephone communications (including texting) and on-line environments. In particular:

- Never initiate electronic contact with a child unless for clear pedagogical purposes that have been sanctioned by your employer.
- If a child contacts you electronically, keep your tone friendly, professional and neutral.
- Avoid situations that involve the exchange of personal information, personal photos, virtual gifts or the use of any application that suggests or encourages the sharing of personal feelings.
- If a child seeks to develop an inappropriate personal relationship with you electronically, do nothing to encourage this; inform your employer and send a copy of any relevant communications.
- If a child confides sensitive information to you electronically, such as details of abuse, react as shown in the table above, 'If a child discloses abuse'. Record the details and send a copy of all relevant communications to your employer.
- While a school may have good reasons to create an online social community, social forums such as Facebook present particular risks. Staff should not initiate or accept 'friendship' requests from children, however innocent these requests may seem, as this provides access to photos and other intimate details of each other's personal lives.

To return now to the questions I posed at the beginning of this article, I conclude:

- It's not OK to be friends with my pupils in real life or on line in as much as that involves socialising and the exchange of personal information.
- It's OK to be friendly with my pupils in real life and on line, providing particular communication guidelines are followed.

I'm aware that the subject of this article is contentious. I have approached it on the basis of my own experience in a particular educational and cultural situation. My conclusions might be regarded as lacking in trust or showing too much trust depending on your point of view. I would be very interested to hear what others think. If you'd like to comment, please email me at etchells@countryschools.co.uk

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ⁱ Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, ISBN 0-582-84223-9

ⁱⁱ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/scienceandtechnology/science/sciencenews/3306173/Facebook-study-reveals-users-'trophy-friends'.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/irsc-guidance-for-safe-working-practice.pdf>

^{iv} <http://www.teachingpersonnel.com/assets/pdf/SafeWorkingPracticeGuidance.pdf>

^v 'grooming' – the act of gaining the trust of a child so that sexual abuse can take place.

^{vi} A wiki is a collection of web pages designed to enable anyone with access to contribute or modify content. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki>