

Secondary School Teacher-Student Communication in Facebook: Potentials and Pitfalls

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Abstract

In this paper we report on a multi-method study that seeks to explore the scope, nature and purposes of FB interactions between secondary school teachers and their students explore if, how and why secondary teachers use FB to interact with their students. Issues of privacy, authority, and even abuse have fueled socio-political debates on the desirability of teacher-student FB contact, leading some authorities to curtail or even prohibit such contact. However, little is known about the *actual* FB interactions between teachers and their (under-aged) students, the scope and the nature of these interactions, and the reasons why teachers choose (not) to interact with their students through this platform. Combining survey data as well as in-depth interviews, this study then makes a first step in this direction.

Keywords: Facebook, teacher-student interaction, interviews.

Introduction

Originally created for university students, Facebook (FB) has by now become the best known social networking site for students of all ages as well as for teachers. According to a recent survey, 81% of secondary school student and 42% of teachers in Israel reported having an active Facebook account (Geocartography Knowledge Group, 2011). Since adults and teens share a common platform to connect and keep in touch with friends, classmates, relatives, and co-workers, 'befriending' one's teacher, university professor or student outside the classroom context is only two or three clicks away. Indeed, in 2011 27% of Israeli teens reported that they are friends with at least one of their teachers (Geocartography Knowledge Group, 2011). The possibility and increasing *reality* of teacher-student contact in FB has opened up a Pandora's Box of ethical and moral issues that have occupied the minds of many parents and teachers, as well as legal authorities and policy-makers. These questions, together with several recent, media-covered cases of sexual misconduct, have fueled debates over whether teachers and students should be allowed to communicate through SNS and other social media. More and more local authorities are taking action and have curtailed and even prohibited student-teacher communication through social media. For example, by decree of the national Ministry of Education, Israeli teachers are not allowed to communicate with their students through any Social Network Site (SNS) since December 2011, whereas New York City public schoolteachers may not contact students through personal pages, but can communicate via pages set up for classroom use since April 2012. Those in favor of teacher-student social networking, on the other hand, have in turn presented a variety of arguments supporting student-teacher communication, ranging from the pedagogical and instructional potential of harnessing SNS

technology for educational purposes (e.g., Greenhow Robelia & Hughes, 2009), constitutional rights such as teachers' and students' freedom of speech, and/or the inevitableness of the phenomenon.

Against this background of extensive media coverage and political debate on the one hand and the widespread use of FB on the other, more light has to be shed on how school teachers and students actually communicate through FB. From a research point of view, this aspect of FB use has received little attention. The few existing empirical investigations focus solely on higher education settings (e.g., DeSchrijver et al, 2009; Forkosh-Baruch & Hershkovitz, 2011; Madge et al, 2009; Ophus & Abbitt, 2009; Wang, et al, 2012) and often report on students' self-reported willingness to communicate with college instructors through SNSs, rather than describing *actual* interactions (e.g., Madge et al, 2009; Ophus & Abbitt, 2009; Roblyer et al, 2010; Teclehaimanot & Hickman, 2011). A recent literature review on college student FB use shows that they primarily use it for social purposes, and very little so for academic purposes (Hew, 2011). However, as more and more college and university faculty open FB accounts, this may be changing. Wang et al (2012), for example, report on a case study of two college courses in which the common online learning management systems (e.g., Moodle) were replaced by FB groups (see also Meishar-Tal, Kurtz, & Pieterse, 2012; Towner & Lego Munoz, 2011). Others have shown that even in the absence of teacher-initiated learning activities, college students use FB for *post-hoc* critiquing of learning experiences and the exchange of logistical or factual information amongst themselves (Grosbeck et al, 2011; Lampe et al, 2011; Selwyn, 2009).

The present study

The present study is a first attempt to describe and characterize actual teacher-student FB communication and how (if at all) secondary teachers harness FB for pedagogical purposes. More specifically, the questions that we address are as follows: Which are the FB channels through which teachers communicate with their students and what are their characteristics? What are teachers' motives for choosing FB as a teacher-student communication channel and what goals does this communication serve? What are the affordance and the limitations of teacher-student communication in FB? Do teachers intentionally use FB for pedagogical and teaching purposes? If so, how?

Methodology

A mixed-method approach was adopted in order to obtain both in-depth, qualitative insights about secondary school teacher-student FB communication, as well as information about its scope and generalizability: First of all, a self-report, online survey was developed to gather quantitative data on, among others, teachers' attitudes towards FB (in general and teacher-student communication in particular), their actual online actions, and their preferences for different communication formats for student-teacher communication, along with a range of demographic variables. The online survey was distributed to Hebrew-speaking, public secondary schools and posted on several open online teacher forums. Participation was anonymous, voluntary and open to all secondary school teachers, whether they had an active FB account or not. Hundred-and-eighty teachers have thus far completed the survey. In parallel, eight teachers who were known to actively communicate with their students through FB were approached for in-depth interviews. These teachers were recruited through snowballing techniques based on personal acquaintance and through online postings with open invitations. The interviews are semi-structured and last approximately 90 *min* each. The complete set of topics that the interviews are intended to cover mirrors the online survey, with additional

emphasis on teacher insights about the affordances and the limitations of FB for student-teacher contact and the potential consequences for student-teacher relations.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary analyses of these two data sets yield, among others, the following findings: Despite the decree issued by the Israeli Ministry of Education in December 2011, many teachers still communicate with their students through FB. Of the 178 teachers that completed the survey thus far, 70% have active FB accounts. Of these, 40% have ongoing FB contact with their students, 19% stopped but did so in the past, and 41% had never communicated with their students on FB. As one teacher indicated, *“I will not give up because of the Ministry’s decree. There is room for my own judgment and I decide that I will, if the way I use it contributes.”* The most common communication format was through a closed FB group that was specifically created for classroom communication (52%) and through private messages with individual students (40%). Writing on a student’s personal wall was less popular (14%). Teachers also rated different goals for their own student communication in FB. Purposes that received the highest ratings related to (1) logistic and organizational management of classroom communication (e.g., publishing dates for tests, uploading materials), (2) being available for help, especially during and before exam periods, and (3) to improve their relationship with and knowledge of their students (e.g., trying to understand them better, be a part of their lives, deepen the relation with students). These rather different purposes are also reflected in the extent to which teachers were ready to expose personal information: 43% recommended using their personal profile (e.g., *“I have nothing to hide”*), whereas 57% recommend using a professional teacher profile only. Only few indicated that they intentionally use(d) FB for formal learning/teaching purposes, even though teachers in both the questionnaires and the interviews mentioned *informal* pedagogical purposes, such as being a role model for appropriate behavior (both in general as well as online) and for expanding students’ horizons.

The interview data revealed several *additional* insights into teachers’ motives for and reflections on FB involvement with students: First of all, the importance of adult presence and monitoring what goes on in this medium was emphasized. Many of the interviewed teachers described instances in which they personally intervened, such as after witnessing cyber bullying and other manifestations of aggression, detecting hate groups or identifying emotional distress. It is argued that these problems cannot be detected or solved without adult presence *within* the medium.

A common theme that was discussed extensively by all interviewees deals with concerns about blurring boundaries. These boundary concerns can roughly be divided in three categories: (1) *Boundaries of privacy*: This includes concerns that students may gain access to the teacher’s private life, as well as concerns about being exposed to unwanted aspects of students’ private lives and the responsibility that this brings with it; (2) *Boundaries of authority vs. intimacy*: On the one hand, teachers indicated that befriending students allowed them to improve their relation with them and bring them closer. On the other hand, they also reported that students sometimes addressed them in inappropriate ways (as ‘buddies’) and had to remind them of the differences in roles and status; and (3) *Boundaries between the professional and personal-leisure*: One of the advantages of FB that is recurrently mentioned by teachers is that the threshold for contacting and seeking a teacher’s help are lower than through other communication means. However, the downside of being available is that their work ‘invades’ their private life and leisure time. Several teachers also mentioned concerns about students developing a dependency on their teachers always being available for help; instead of trying to solve problems by themselves or with peers, they may turn to the available teacher too quickly.

Among the interviewees, we found a minority of teachers who invented creative FB activities for formal learning purposes. For example, one History teacher helped students create profiles of historical contemporary characters and develop discussions between these characteristics on issues of their times. An English teacher intentionally used closed, separate FB groups for each class and regular, intentional private messaging with students as a means to improve their English. These private messaging activities were an integral part of her teaching and every student was expected to participate in them on an almost weekly basis. It is reasonable that in the context of the emerging practices of FB teacher-student interactions, these attempts will be exemplary.

Conclusions

These first preliminary findings raise several questions about the ways in which teachers may capitalize on the affordances of Facebook for student communication while avoiding the many potential pitfalls. One important question relates to whether and how teachers may use Facebook for innovative, collaborative forms of online learning that extend beyond the traditional classroom, and whether this is at all recommendable or feasible. Judging from the sample of teachers that participated in the current study, most of the teachers are not considering Facebook for such purposes. However, initiatives by champion teachers or by professional designers (e.g., Robelia et al, 2011) may trigger changes. The implications of these findings, along with additional analyses of the full data set, will be discussed at the meeting.

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