



The promise, reality and dilemmas of secondary school teacher–student interactions in Facebook: The teacher perspective



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ABSTRACT

We report on a multi-method study that seeks to explore if, how and why secondary teachers use Facebook (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. Proponents of harnessing Web 2.0 and Social media technology for learning purposes, on the other hand, have emphasized the many potential advantages for formal and informal learning. However, there is little empirical research on the scope, the nature and the purposes for secondary school teacher–student contact through social network sites. The present study makes a first step in this direction, by triangulating teacher survey data ($N = 187$) with in-depth teacher interviews ($N = 11$). Findings from both data sets show that teacher–student FB contact comes in different forms and serves a range of purposes, which fall into three main categories: Academic-instructional, psycho-pedagogical and social-relational. Advantages, dilemmas and limitations of FB contact with secondary school students are identified.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Arguments against and in favor of teacher–student Facebook interactions

Facebook (FB) has become the dominant social network site worldwide with 1.23 billion active users reported in 2013 and 140 billion friend connections (Facebook, 2014). It is used by individuals of all ages, but especially secondary school and university-aged youth (Facebook, 2014). It is also increasingly used by teachers and college faculty. ‘Befriending’ one’s teacher or student is then only a few clicks away. Indeed, in a 2011 survey, 27% of Israeli teens reported that they are ‘friends’ with at least one of their teachers (Geocartography Knowledge Group, 2011). This new reality has given rise to ethical, pedagogical and social concerns that are discussed in public media outlets and involve parents, teachers, legal officials and policy-makers. These concerns, together with media-covered cases of potential sexual misconduct, have fueled debates over whether teachers and students should be allowed to communicate through SNS and other social media, leading some authorities to curtail or even prohibit student–teacher communication through social media. In Israel, in which the current study is set, concerns about privacy issues as well as protecting, what has been referred to as, the already “eroding status of teachers” led the Ministry of Education to issue a national ban on teacher–student communication through any Social Network Site (SNS). Eighteen months later, in April 2013, this restriction was adapted to allow some forms of student–teacher contact, but only through separate, professional profiles that were especially created for that purpose. Similar restrictions have been formulated in many other parts of the world (e.g., Queensland, Australia, New York and Missouri, USA).

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Those in favor of online teacher–student social networking, on the other hand, have presented a variety of arguments in favor of student–teacher communication. These range from constitutional rights (i.e., teachers' and students' freedom of speech), the inevitableness of the phenomenon, and the pedagogical and instructional potential of harnessing SNS technology for educational purposes (e.g., Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009). Underlying this latter argument are two claims, one relating to pedagogical theory and the other to convenience. First, the central features of many social network technologies are, in principle, well aligned with current socio-constructivist views on learner-centered, meaningful learning (Greenhow et al., 2009): Unlike typical Learning Management Systems (LMS) which are often criticized for being asymmetrical and teacher-centered (Palaigeorgiou, Triantafyllakos, & Tsinakos, 2011), SNSs such as Facebook, encourages egalitarian contributions and discussions by all users. It allows learners to self-organize and collaborate on shared interests and to link and share online information resources easily. As FB is an integral part of high school and college students' routines, learning applications that piggyback on these routines may help to bridge formal and informal learning by situating opportunities within their everyday social contexts and appropriating peer interactions on both curricular and extra-curricular topics. Consequently, FB is attracting interest from educators and from learning scientists as a potential platform for online collaborative learning (e.g., Greenhow, Menzer, & Gibbins, 2014; Tsovaltzi, Puhl, Judele, & Weinberger, 2014). In terms of convenience, those students and teachers who already use SNSs regularly may welcome the integration of all communication in one single platform instead of having to switch between phone calls, email, LMSs and other communication media for different purposes.

However, conceptualizing FB as a learning platform also poses challenges. Researchers have warned against exploiting FB for learning (e.g., Junco & Cotton, 2012). Kirschner and Karpinski (2010), for example, reported on a negative relation between time spent on FB and college grades. More recent research suggests that it depends on *how* FB is used that makes a difference in whether academic outcomes are positive or negatively related (e.g., Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear, & Piggott, 2010; Junco, 2012). For example, posting status updates and chatting on FB were negatively related to GPA, whereas using FB for collecting and sharing information were positively predictive (Junco, 2012).

1.2. Empirical research on student–teacher Facebook interactions

Against this background, it is surprising that there is little empirical research that focuses on actual FB interactions between secondary school teachers and students, and how they use FB for school-related purposes. The existing empirical investigations available have focused on college and university settings (e.g., DeSchrijver et al., 2009; Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009; Ophus & Abbitt, 2009; Wang, Woo, Choon, Yang, & Liu, 2012). They often report on students' self-reported willingness to communicate with college instructors through SNSs, rather than describing actual interactions (e.g., Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010; Teclehaimanot & Hickman, 2011). A 2011 review of research on college students' FB use shows that they primarily used it for social purposes, and very little so for academic purposes (Hew, 2011; see also Arteaga Sanchez, Cortijo, & Javed, 2014). However, as more and more faculty and teachers open FB accounts, this may be changing. Students may be 'domesticating' (Haddon, 2006) FB for more academic purposes. Indeed, several recently published case studies have described how in college settings commonly used LMSs (i.e., Moodle) are being replaced by FB groups (Deng & Tavares, 2013; Towner & Lego Muñoz, 2011; Wang et al., 2012). Others have shown that even in the absence of teacher-initiated learning activities, college students use FB for post-hoc critiquing on learning experiences and the exchange of logistical or factual information amongst themselves (Grosbeck, Bran, & Tuiru, 2011; Lampe et al., 2011; Selwyn, 2009; Sanchez, Cortijo, & Javed, 2014).

However, little is known about actual teacher–student FB communication in secondary school contexts. A recent study by Hershkovitz and Forkosh-Baruch (2013) reports that whereas high school students tend to view FB as "their" territory, they do seem to welcome it as an available means for teacher communication. Studies that explore the extent and nature of secondary school teacher–student interactions in SNSs are then needed.

1.3. The present study

The present study fills a gap in the literature by focusing on teacher–student FB interactions in secondary school contexts. We adopt an exploratory approach to investigate teachers' perceptions of student–teacher FB interactions and how (if at all) and why secondary teachers try to harness FB for pedagogical purposes. More specifically, the questions we address are as follows:

1. What are the most commonly used FB communication channels, and why?
2. What are teachers' motives for choosing FB as the medium for teacher–student communication and what purposes does this communication serve? For example, do they at all use FB for pedagogical and teaching purposes? If so, how?
3. What, if at all, are the dilemmas that teachers experience regarding student–teacher FB contact?

A multi-method approach (Fontana & Frey, 1998) was adopted in order to triangulate both quantitative information about characteristics of teacher–student communication in FB (study 1), as well as in-depth, qualitative insights into the motives, experiences and evaluations of teachers' FB interaction with their students (study 2). Data for both studies were collected in parallel between June–October 2012, which is well within the period during which the general ban on SNS communication between Israeli teaching staff and secondary school students was in effect. It should be noted that the data collection and analyses were conducted separately by two different research teams, one focusing on the quantitative and the other on the qualitative data set, and were only combined upon completion of the separate analyses. We therefore present each study separately here and discuss their combined findings in the Discussion section.

2. Study 1: Teacher surveys

Based on the themes identified in the literature review described above, a self-report survey was developed to gather quantitative data on the scope of teacher–student FB communication, the FB channels that were chosen for this communication (research question 1), and the purposes for teacher–student communication (research question 2).

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