

Professional Advisory

Maintaining Professionalism –
Use of Electronic Communication and
Social Media

UPDATED

The Council of the Ontario College of Teachers approved this professional advisory on September 27, 2017.

This advice applies to all members of the College including, but not limited to, teachers, consultants, vice-principals, principals, supervisory officers, directors of education and those working in non-school board positions.

Ontario
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Maintaining Professionalism - Use of Electronic Communication and Social Media

This professional advisory is intended to help Ontario Certified Teachers (OCTs) understand their professional boundaries and responsibilities in the appropriate use of electronic communication and social media.

For the purposes of this advisory, electronic communication encompasses social media and other messaging forms that enable users to interact, create, share and communicate information online. For example, electronic communication includes, but is not limited to, messaging or video chat software, websites, apps, email, texting and blogging. It also includes social media networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

Introduction

Electronic communication and social media create new opportunities for extending and enhancing education. However, as the number of communication forms increase, so does the chance of an unintentional mistake. Ontario Certified Teachers must be aware of the potential risks associated with electronic communication and social media so that they can use them safely and appropriately. By being aware, you can minimize risks and model the digital professionalism expected for teaching professionals.

Maintaining professional boundaries in all forms of communication, technology-related or not, is vital to maintaining the public trust and appropriate professional relationships. However, when more informal communication channels are used with students and parents,¹ professional boundaries can begin to blur. This advisory will help you to use your professional judgment to identify and avoid potential risks.

The Starting Point – Maintain Standards

This professional advisory supports the College’s *Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession* and the *Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession*. The standards, which were developed by members of the College and members of the public, guide and inform the practice of Ontario’s certified teachers.

The ethical standards – in which care, trust, respect and integrity are the cornerstones – identify ethical responsibilities and commitments. “Members express their commitment to students’ well-being and learning through positive influence, professional judgment and empathy in practice,” the standards say in reference to care. Honesty, reliability and moral action are embodied in the ethical standard of integrity. The standards of practice guide the professional judgment and all actions of the teaching profession.

¹ In this advisory, ‘parent’ means the student’s parent, legally appointed guardian, or any person in a custodial role such as adoptive parent, step-parent, or foster parent.

Innovative Opportunities for Teaching and Learning

Electronic communication and social media tools provide exciting opportunities to learn, teach and communicate with students, parents and your colleagues. They serve a range of purposes from helping students and parents access assignments and resources to connecting with communities all over the world.

Members also use the Internet and social networking sites as instructional tools, seeking resources to develop lesson plans and information to enhance their teaching practice. These tools provide powerful new ways for members to collaborate and dialogue with others, expand their professional network and continue their professional learning. Used thoughtfully and appropriately, new technologies offer opportunities for members to model digital citizenship for students and deliver the curriculum in innovative and engaging ways.

However, some of the most popular social media platforms were not created specifically for educational purposes and their use can expose members to risk when it comes to maintaining professionalism. While members should be cautious when communicating electronically and online, this does not mean it must be avoided altogether. Keep interactions professional, as you would in the classroom, and build a positive online presence. Know and respect proper professional boundaries with students, even when students initiate electronic interaction.

Private vs. Professional

There is a distinction between the professional and private life of a teacher. Ontario Certified Teachers are individuals with private lives; however, off-duty conduct matters and sound judgment and due care must be exercised.

Teaching is a public profession. Canada's Supreme Court ruled that teachers' off-duty conduct, even when not directly related to students, is relevant to their suitability to teach.² Members must maintain a sense of professionalism at all times – in their personal and professional lives.

Professional Vulnerability

Ontario Certified Teachers can be vulnerable to unintended misuses of electronic communication and social media. Even the most innocent actions can be easily misconstrued or manipulated. The immediacy and simplicity of a text message, for example, may lead to longer, informal conversations that become personal. Social media encourages more casual dialogue. Rules may relax and informal salutations may replace time-respected forms of professional address.

Electronic messages are not anonymous. They can be tracked, misdirected, manipulated and live forever on the Internet. Social media sites create and archive copies of every piece of content posted, even when deleted from online profiles. Once information is digitized, the author relinquishes all control.

The use of the Internet and social media, despite best intentions, may cause OCTs to forget their professional responsibilities and the unique position of trust and authority given to them by society. The dynamic between a teacher

2 R. v. Audet, [1996] 2 S.C.R. 171; Ross v. New Brunswick School District No. 15, [1996] 1 S.C.R. 825 and ; Toronto (City) Board of Education v. OSSTF, [1997] 1 S.C.R. 487.

and a student is forever changed when the two become “friends” in an online environment.

Ontario’s certified teachers should never share information with students in any environment that they would not willingly and appropriately share in a school or school-related setting or in the community.

Online identities and actions are visible to the public and can result in serious repercussions or embarrassment. As the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Ontario notes, users may intend to share their online existence solely within their own network, but in theory anyone can access the users’ musings, photos and information. Further, the words can be altered, forwarded and misquoted.

Criminal and Civil Law Implications

Inappropriate use of electronic communication and social media can also result in a member being criminally charged and convicted, or facing civil action. Examples of actions and resulting charges are:

- posting harmful images or videos, or making slanderous comments, leading to civil actions such as defamation
- disclosing personal or confidential information about the school, students or colleagues, thus breaching workplace privacy policies and provisions in the *Education Act*
- posting the work of others without proper attribution, raising copyright violation issues
- breaching a court-ordered publication ban
- inciting hatred against an identifiable group

- disclosing information about a minor, contrary to the *Youth Criminal Justice Act*
- using technology to harass a student, colleague or others, contrary to the *Criminal Code*
- using a computer to lure a child or for juvenile prostitution under the *Criminal Code*
- exchanging or forwarding compromising photos, videos, or audio recordings of students leading to charges of possession or distribution of child pornography.

Electronic communication and social media can be used as evidence in criminal and civil proceedings.

Disciplinary Implications

The College’s disciplinary process is based on the presumption of innocence and the right to a fair hearing. However, intentional or inadvertent misuse of social media and electronic communication could have serious disciplinary consequences professionally.

Inappropriate online, email and telephone conversations between teachers and others, including students, colleagues, parents, employers, family and friends, expose teachers to the possibility of disciplinary action. Cell phone use, for example, is one of the largest entry-level gateways to the distribution of child pornography. Even one-time errors in judgment involving the exchange of photos, videos, audio recordings or comments of an intimate or personal nature may lead to a complaint of professional misconduct.

Inappropriate emails, texts and other forms of electronic communication have been used as evidence in disciplinary cases and cited in findings of professional misconduct.

Examples of inappropriate electronic communication include:

- intimate or personal texting with students
- inviting students to meet privately or without a valid educational context
- sending personal email or social networking contact information to students to communicate for personal reasons
- using informal and unprofessional language with students, such as profanity
- criticizing students, parents or colleagues openly on Facebook
- posting or forwarding content, links or comments that might be considered offensive, discriminatory or inconsistent with professional or ethical standards.

Other behaviours that have warranted disciplinary measures include:

- sending graphic sexual materials electronically to students
- using school equipment to access, view or download pornography, including child pornography
- luring students and non-students via the Internet, as defined by the *Criminal Code*.

The *Ontario College of Teachers Act* and the *Student Protection Act* include “behaviour or remarks of a sexual nature by a member towards a student” in the definition of sexual abuse. Remarks of a sexual nature communicated online without any physical contact can be considered sexual abuse.

Teachers who have been found to have groomed a student for sexual purposes often use electronic messages to gradually win a student’s trust and establish an inappropriate relationship. Even if a member waits until the student has graduated before a sexual relationship occurs, the electronic communications with the student could result in findings of professional misconduct against the teacher.

Minimizing the Risks: Advice to Members

Interact with students appropriately

- As a digital citizen, model the behaviour you expect to see online from your students.
- Teach students appropriate online behaviour and the proper use of comments and images.
- Maintain professional boundaries by communicating with students and others electronically at appropriate times of the day and through established education platforms (for example, an authorized school web page rather than a personal account).
- Maintain your professionalism by using a formal, courteous and professional tone in all communications with students and parents.
- Avoid exchanging private texts, phone numbers, personal email addresses, videos or photos of a personal nature with students.
- Do not issue, and decline, “friend” or “follow” requests from students. Consider the privacy implications of accepting these requests from parents.
- Notify parents and your school administrator before using social networks for classroom activities. Check your employment policies to see if you are required to provide an administrator or parents with access passwords.

Understand privacy concerns

- Respect the privacy and confidentiality of student information and others in your school community.
- Obtain consent forms before tweeting or posting any student work, digital pictures or other identifying information on social media or websites.
- Check frequently the privacy and security settings of photos and other content on social media accounts as they may change without your notice. Remember, your privacy is never guaranteed.
- Set appropriate restrictions to maximize your privacy on social media accounts, ensuring that students cannot view or post content.
- Assume that your emails and the content you post can be accessed or altered.
- Review and understand all user agreements before providing consent,
- Monitor regularly all content you or others post to your social media accounts and remove anything that is inappropriate.
- Ask others not to tag you on any photographs without your permission.
- Ask others to remove any undesirable content related to you and keep record of your request.

Act professionally

- Operate in all circumstances online as a professional – as you would in the community.
- If you are using a web page or social media site professionally with students, treat the space like a classroom. Apply the same rigorous professional standards.
- Consider whether any content may reflect poorly on you, your school or the teaching profession before you post it.
- Be transparent and authentic. Use your true, professional identity at all times. Even if you create a false identity, courts can compel disclosure of your true identity.
- Avoid online criticism about students, colleagues, your employer or others within the school community.
- Avoid impulsive, inappropriate or heated comments.
- Ensure that your comments do not incite others to make discriminatory or other professionally unacceptable comments.
- Use your professional email and social media accounts for professional electronic communications; avoid using your personal accounts.
- Be aware of your employer’s applicable policies and programs regarding the use of social media/e-communications and the appropriate use of electronic equipment. Even if your employer has no applicable policy, it is your responsibility to exercise good judgment.

Pause and ask yourself important questions

- When interacting with students, am I using electronic communication and social media to enhance their learning or for personal reasons?
- What are my reasons for sharing this information with a student? Are they professional or are they personal?
- Is this picture or comment something I would be comfortable with my students, their parents, my supervisor, my family or the media seeing?
- Would my peers or supervisors consider what I have posted as reasonable and professional?
- Would I write this/post this knowing it can never be truly erased and may remain in the public domain indefinitely?
- Would I communicate this way in my community?
- Are the photos, videos or audio recordings I am posting susceptible to misrepresentation or manipulation?
- Am I keeping current in my awareness and knowledge of social media technology developments to protect myself from misuse?
- How does my online presence – that which I control and that which is posted by others – reflect my professionalism? How does it reflect on the teaching profession?

Apply your professional judgment. If you are unsure whether an action is appropriate, wait and seek further advice from your colleagues, your employer, and your federation or member association.

Additional Information

For additional information, you can view the Ontario College of Teachers video *Professional Advisory: Electronic Communication, Social Media* at oct.ca/resources/videos/social-media.

You can also consult *Professionally Speaking/ Pour parler profession* for articles on how educators use social media in the classroom to enhance teaching and learning.



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