

Should You “Friend” Your Students?

Yes

Exchange heard in a high school hallway:

Librarian: *Hey, how’s the play coming along? Are you ready for your big role?*

Student: *I think it’s going fine, but I’m pretty nervous.*

Librarian: *I know you’ll be great. See you after the performance.*

This is the kind of interaction that I have with high school students both in person and on Facebook. Yes, I am a Facebook user, and yes, I friend high school students. (More specifically, I accept their requests for friendship. I never ask them to friend me.)



Marsha Redd

Some see this behavior as unprofessional. To that I respond: If you see students at the mall or at a restaurant and they say, “Hello,” do you ignore them? Of course not. It’s perfectly acceptable to carry on a pleasant, “friendly” conversation outside the

No

Should I friend my students on Facebook? Are you talking about those 12-year-olds who dominate my days? Those frenetic preteens whose energy and drama keeps my classroom buzzing from 7:30 a.m. to 2:45 p.m.? Definitely not. We have to draw the line somewhere. After all, they already think we hang on hooks waiting for their arrival each morning and believe our lives consist of lesson planning and grading papers. And I think I’m OK with that. I’m not sure they can handle all sides of me. I know I don’t need to handle any more of them.

I’m not suggesting that we allow students to think that we have no lives outside of school. It’s healthy

for students to know that our lives are complex, just like theirs. Sharing an appropriate amount of information about our families, interests, studies, travel, etc., promotes a respectful learning atmosphere where our passions outside the classroom might translate into engaging lessons and activities for students.



Jeannine Ortiz

boundaries of the school building. I don't view the digital environment of Facebook as all that different from other public spaces. I behave professionally at school, at the mall, or online. I realize that Facebook is a public space, and my postings and those that I allow on my page are professional. This would be the case even if I did not friend students.

It's true that the students do not always understand the public nature of social networking sites. But then isn't it a benefit when an adult whom they respect models appropriate behavior? I think social networking sites are great avenues by which educators might provide guidance.

I originally got started with Facebook when I was asked (actually begged) by my son, who had just gone off to college. I was absolutely thrilled that he wanted to keep in touch with me, and I jumped at the chance to

I've struggled with how much to let my students know about my personal life. If I let them, they would spend hours asking questions about whatever topic I allowed them to explore. Maybe I'm just trying to avoid taking all that time out of my day, but I find that maintaining a respectful classroom where students know what the expectations are is the best learning environment for them. If some of them were my "friends," they might feel that deadlines no longer apply to them, or the established boundary between student and teacher does not exist for them. This is where the blurring of the line begins. I've seen it happen.

In an age where teachers have to be hypersensitive to the relationships we establish with students, why would we want to jeopardize our reputations to have students friend us in the same way our adult friends do? It's not appropriate, even if there's nothing inappropriate about it. Our job is to teach

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keep up with what was going on in his life. When students want to friend me, I feel similarly complimented that they wish to share their lives with me. They enjoy it when I wish them a happy birthday or make a comment about how nice they look in the prom pictures they post. I make these same kinds of comments in person at school, too. It's just another way of connecting with them.

Some may see this behavior as inappropriately "hanging out" with students, but if that is the case, then I guess I'm "hanging out" with them at school, too. I take every opportunity to make connections with them. They still know that I am the adult, and they respect that.

There was a time when teachers could be fired for smoking or drink-

ing (on their personal time, no less), and I'm sure there have been a host of other such rules governing the behavior of educators over the years. Today we would find these restrictions ridiculous.

The times, my friends, have done what they always do; they have changed. This is a digital age, and our students are digital natives, while most of us, the educators, are digital immigrants. We can't effectively teach them until we can reach them, and as long as we have digital accents, we are impeded.

Marsha Redd has been involved with technology for the past 25 years, first in the business world and then in education. She is currently a library media specialist for Kelloggsville Public Schools in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

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them, engage them, lead them, and mold them, not "friend" them.

I've stayed in touch with hundreds of students over the years, and the ease and popularity of Facebook seems like a tempting way to do that. But do we really want our students knowing who our adult friends are and what they're doing? I think not. I might friend a former student who is now an adult, but not a child, and definitely not a current student.

In an age of technology, where blogs and social networking sites are everywhere, we could easily set up a more educationally centered site for networking with students and former students that is separate from our adult social networking site. For example, my district has started

a summer reading networking site where students and teachers can network and blog about their favorite books and other academic topics. This way, the focus is education, but the discussions could include other appropriate content without any risk of giving a wrong impression or revealing too much of your personal life. It's all about balance.

Jeannine Ortiz has been teaching English language arts for 15 years. She recently began a master's program in educational technology at Long Island University to become a certified technology specialist. She also recently won a Model Schools Grant.

Want to weigh in on this debate?

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