

# Professional Advisory

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Use of Electronic Communication  
and Social Media

<https://www.oct.ca/resources/videos/social-media>

The Council of the Ontario College of Teachers approved this professional advisory on February 23, 2011.

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

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## Use of Electronic Communication and Social Media

This professional advisory is intended to provide a context for the responsible, professional use of electronic communication and social media by members of the College.

For the purposes of this advisory, electronic communication and social media encompass software, applications (including those running on mobile devices), e-mail and web sites, which enable users to interact, create and exchange information online. Examples include, but are not limited to, sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Flickr, YouTube, Wikipedia, Picasa and MySpace.

## Introduction

Electronic communication and social media create new options for extending and enhancing education. However, as the number of channels of communication in society increases rapidly, so does the rate of misuse. Professional boundaries can blur. Even the most experienced members may be susceptible to unintentional mistakes.

Maintaining professional boundaries in all forms of communication, technology-related or not, is vital to maintaining the public trust and appropriate professional relationships with students. Members must be aware of the numerous challenges and the ramifications associated with the use of electronic communication and social media.

It is the purpose of this advisory to identify potential dangers and to offer suggestions about how to avoid them.

## The Starting Point

This professional advisory supports the College's *Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession* and *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 Ontario's teaching practitioners.

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 actions of the teaching profession.

## New Frontiers in Teaching and Learning

Electronic communication and social media can be effective when used cautiously and professionally. They serve a range of purposes, from helping students and parents/guardians access assignments and resources related to classroom studies to connecting with classrooms in other communities and countries.

Members also use the Internet and social networking sites as instructional tools and for professional development, seeking information on lesson plans, new developments and methodologies.

However, the most popular social media applications were not created specifically for educational purposes and their use can expose members to risk when it comes to maintaining professionalism. It is up to members to 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. Practitioners are individuals with private lives, however, off-duty conduct matters. Sound judgment and due care should 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.<sup>1</sup> Members should maintain a sense of

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<sup>1</sup> *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.

professionalism at all times – in their personal and professional lives.

### **Professional Vulnerability**

Practitioners can be vulnerable to unintended misuses of electronic communication. Social media encourage casual dialogue. 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. 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 members to forget their professional responsibilities and the unique position of trust and authority given to them by society. The dynamic between a member and a student is forever changed when the two become “friends” in an online environment.

Members 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:

- making inappropriate online comments that lead to civil actions, such as defamation
- disclosing confidential information about the school, students and colleagues, thus breaching workplace privacy policies and provisions of 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 also be used as evidence in criminal and

civil proceedings. The findings and orders of a criminal or civil proceeding are used as evidence in College disciplinary hearings.

### **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, e-mail and telephone conversations between members and others, including students, colleagues, parents/guardians, employers, family and friends, expose members to the possibility of disciplinary action. Cellphone 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 a personal nature may lead to a complaint of professional misconduct.

Inappropriate use of e-mails and other forms of electronic communication have been used as evidence in disciplinary cases and cited in findings of professional misconduct.

Some behaviours that have warranted disciplinary measures include:

- inappropriate electronic communication with students, colleagues, parents/guardians and others
- 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. Thus, some behaviours that do not include any physical contact can be considered to be sexual abuse, and remarks of a sexual nature communicated online fall within the definition of sexual abuse.

Members have been found to have groomed a student for sexual purposes, using electronic messages to gradually win a student's confidence 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 member.

## **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.
- Alert students to appropriate online behaviour and the proper use of comments and images.
- Maintain your professional persona by communicating with students electronically at appropriate times of the day and through established education platforms (for example, a web page dedicated to a school program, project or class rather than a personal profile).
- Maintain a formal, courteous and professional tone in all communications with students to ensure that professional boundaries with students are maintained.
- Avoid exchanging private texts, phone numbers, personal e-mail addresses or photos of a personal nature with students.
- Decline student-initiated “friend” requests and do not issue “friend” requests to students.
- Notify parents/guardians before using social networks for classroom activities. Let them know about the platforms you use in your class to connect with students and consider giving them access to group pages.

### **Understand privacy concerns**

- Operate in all circumstances online as a professional – as you would in the community.
- Manage the privacy and security settings of your social media accounts. Privacy settings can shift and change without notice. Check the settings frequently.

- Assume that information you post can be accessed or altered.
- Ensure that the privacy settings for content and photos are set appropriately and monitor who is able to post to any of your social media locations. Students should not be among those who are allowed to view or post on it. Remember, no privacy mechanism is guaranteed.
- 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.

### **Act professionally**

- Consider whether any posting may reflect poorly on you, your school or the teaching profession.
- 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.
- Respect the privacy and confidentiality of student information.
- 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.

### **Important questions to ask yourself**

- When interacting with students electronically am I using electronic communication and social media to enhance their learning or to satisfy a personal need?
- 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/guardians, my supervisor, my family or the media seeing?
- Would my peers or supervisors consider what I have posted as reasonable and professional?
- 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?

Members should be able to answer this:  
How does my online presence – that which I control and that which is posted by others – reflect my professionalism, and how does it reflect on the teaching profession?

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