

Teacher-student interaction on social networking sites: teachers' perceptions and experiences

Sandra Rääm^{a1}, Andra Siibak^a

^a *University of Tartu, Institute of Social Sciences*

Summary

Due to the „context collapse” (Marwick & boyd, 2010) on networked publics, students and teachers have suddenly gained access to each other's information, which previously was considered private.

Although there has been a heated debate in the USA about whether it is ethical and legal for teachers to interact with their students on social media (Lehrer, 2011; Miller, 2011), the topic has gained much less attention in a European context. In comparison to many school districts and states in the US which have passed policies and regulations designed to limit teacher-student interactions on social media (Lehrer, 2011), similar student-teacher communication bans have only been passed in Rhineland-Palatinate and Schleswig-Holstein states in Germany (German state bans, 2013). In Estonia, there has been no public discussion on the topic, nor have the schools developed any rules or recommendations for the teachers. As teachers are historically seen as mentors and role models for the youth (Miller, 2011), we believe it is crucial to gain additional knowledge about teachers' perceptions about the issue as well as their experiences and opinions about „friending” one's students and thereby having a chance to monitor their information sharing-practices.

The aim of the present article is to give an overview of a small group of Estonian teacher's perceptions and experiences about teacher-student interaction and content creation on social networking sites (SNS). In spring-summer 2013, four focus-group interviews with teachers (N=21) from high-schools in Estonia were conducted to study what kind of differences have the teachers noticed when comparing online content creation practices of their students and themselves, and also so as to find out on which occasions and how have the teachers decided to react on their students' posts. We also explored how a teacher-student „friendship” is formed and if the teachers feel a need for social media guidelines.

¹ Institute of Social Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences and Education, University of Tartu
Lossi 36, 51003 Tartu; sandra.raim@ut.ee

In the theoretical background of the manuscript, we will argue that in today's technology saturated society ICTs are strongly immersed to the culture, and help to generate differences between generations – between the 'digital natives', i.e. youth who have grown up in the area of rapid changes in digital technologies and the 'digital immigrants' i.e. members of the older generations who do not have that close relationship with digital technologies (Prensky, 2001). Relying on the findings of Ellison and boyd (2013), we then describe the main changes in communication that occur in networked publics. We will introduce the concept of social convergence (boyd, 2008) and describe that in addition to the „ideal audience” i.e. one's closest friends and peers, one's posts on SNS may also be available to „nightmare readers”, e.g. one's teachers, parents and bosses (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Studies suggest that young people do not seem to grasp the size and diversity of the actual audience SNS and fail to recognize the importance of contextual integrity (Nissenbaum, 2004) while composing their posts. We end the theoretical background by providing both positive and negative examples of teachers' SNS practices.

In the method and data section, we will describe the ways of data collection and analysis in greater detail. Empirical data was gathered by structured focus group interviews. The method was preferred so as to create a situation more similar to real life interaction (Patton, 2002). By stimulating group dynamics, we also hoped to identify the opinions our participants shared (ibid.). For data analysis, conventional qualitative content analysis was used.

Our strategic sample was made up of 21 high-school teachers from four schools. All of the teachers had to have a Facebook account and needed to teach in high-school. We also aimed to have at least one class teacher in every focus group, because they tend to have a closer relationship with their students. Our final sample comprised of 3 men and 18 women who were between the ages of 23–51. The focus-groups took place in spring-summer 2013 and lasted from one to two hours.

The findings of our study suggest that teachers believe the SNS user practices and content creation habits of teachers and students to be very different. According to the interviewed teachers the main differences between the generations had to do with the nature of the information shared and the audience amongst whom it was shared. Teachers in all our focus groups felt that students do not realize the actual size of the audience on SNS. Such misperception was considered to be typical to the present day youth and hence also a sign that young people have not fully grasped the idea of social convergence (boyd, 2008) on networked publics and the need for contextual integrity (Nissenbaum, 2004).

Furthermore, according to the teachers, students often tended to post inappropriate content on their profiles. Teachers claimed that in case they come across posts which contain messages of bullying or promotion of illegal activities, or notice photos which are either too revealing or about parties and alcohol, they feel the need to address the issue. The need to intervene was explained by the role of a teacher – all of the teachers in our focus groups agreed that the teachers should stay true to their traditional role of a mentor and role model both offline and online. Having a private face-to-face conversation or sending a private message through Facebook were considered to be the most effective ways for getting through to students on such occasions. Still, some of the teachers also felt that since Facebook is a public site, it is appropriate for teachers to voice their opinions by writing a public comment. Compiling such a public response was seen as a way of teaching the students the meaning of public space, however, on such occasions the possible negative effect on a student was clearly not thought through. Teachers also believed too active posting to be inappropriate, however, in such a case they did not consider it important or necessary to intervene.

In general, the teachers in our sample perceived the practices of their students to be typical of present day 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001). They opposed such behaviour with their own user practices, which in contrast, were claimed to be thought-through and rather minimal. The teachers said to value their privacy and hence the majority of them avoided making posts and uploading photos that could reveal something private e.g. information about their family, relationships, etc.

The teachers in our sample neither had any deep ethical or moral concerns about „friending” their students on Facebook, nor felt that there was a need to regulate student-teacher relationships on networked publics. Still, in order to become „friends” with one’s teacher on Facebook, the student had to first meet a certain criteria. For instance, the student needed to be personally known to the teacher either by attending the class they had taught or they had got acquainted through some after-school activity. Older students and the one’s whose content creation practices were considered to be more adult-like also had a bigger chance of the teacher accepting their friend-request. The teachers also believed that such a „friendship” should generally be initiated by the student.

Regardless the fact that our study participants did not feel a need for any guidelines, or recommendations on the topic, we believe that having some general guidelines to regulate teacher-student communication on SNS would actually benefit both parties.

Keywords: social networking sites, teacher-student „friendship” on social networking sites, privacy, generational difference, teacher’s role