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Facebook: The New Classroom Commons?

By Harriet L. Schwartz

A neighbor is busy, a colleague is tired, a long-lost friend wants to know which 80s band best describes me. A few of my students are stressed about their forthcoming internships, and another is working on her research. I know this because their Facebook postings tell me so.

Without a doubt, my Facebook page provides plenty of minutiae. But is it useful in the context of academic relationships, specifically with students? Is Facebook a new commons keeping us connected? That's an important possibility, given financial strains that limit students' discretionary time on campus and increased enrollment in flexible-format programs. Or is Facebook yet another example of technology trumping substance?

Of course, there has been much discussion about the issue of boundaries on Facebook. Some suggest faculty members can resolve potential dilemmas in relation to students by making sensible decisions about what to post and by fine-tuning our privacy settings. But the challenges and opportunities run deeper. For those of us who want to be appropriately accessible to students in the cyberhallways they frequent, while also keeping in touch with everyone from our kids to old friends, Facebook is worth considering as a communal space, albeit one that requires discretion.

New technologies create alternative points of connection, according to the educators Laurent A. Parks Daloz, Cheryl H. Keen, James P. Keen, and Sharon Daloz Parks, who predicted a new commons in *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Beacon Press, 1996). With historical roots in the town green, the commons is "a place where the diverse parts of a community could come together and hold a conversation within a shared sense of participation and responsibility," they suggest.

"As earlier forms of the commons fade and shadowy substitutes take their place, we find ourselves ambivalent inhabitants of a new global commons," they write, adding, "boundaries are shifting" between work and home and those we call "we" and "they." And that was

eight years before Facebook was created.

While e-mail has challenged longstanding norms by helping to craft a culture wherein some students expect 24/7 access to professors, Facebook presents even more-profound questions regarding boundaries and the mixing of the personal and professional.

I joined Facebook when an increasing number of alumni wanted to keep in touch via the then-new social-networking tool. Using Facebook for professional communications was easy. I posted little personal information. I noted a few favorite bands and movies and then stuck to passive Facebooking, responding only when contacted by others.

Eventually, though, I was friended by people from my past, my youngest stepdaughter, and a few current advisees. The demographic of my Facebook friends shifted slowly. Nonetheless, my apathetic approach worked fine until a few months ago, when forty-somethings everywhere seemed to feel a sudden urge to network socially online.

Having gone years with only one or two Facebook transactions a month, I was now getting friended by people from my past at the rate of several a week. Then it happened—worlds collided. In this space where I was keeping in touch with alumni and my stepdaughter, a long-lost high-school friend posted on my wall something like: "Hey Harriet, I think I remember when we were at that party. ..." Fortunately, there were no tales of drunken debauchery. Nonetheless, that posting pushed me to consider the deeper questions posed by this shared social space.

Are my students my friends? After that party post by my high-school friend, I considered whether I might adopt the policy suggested by other professors: not allow students access to my Facebook page. But I try to remain open to new technologies and to consider them in the context of prevailing student culture. Working to balance cultural shifts with my commitment to boundaries, I decided to remain mostly passive in this area of my Facebook life. I would accept friend invitations from students but not initiate them, and generally not post to students except in response to their posts to me. Granted, the fact that I teach adult master's-degree students rather than undergraduates makes my stance manageable.

Are Facebook posts public or private? One of my most striking realizations about Facebook is that my view of what is private and public is different from that of many of my students. The public-versus-private debate is complex. My 24-year-old stepdaughter maintains that employers are not fazed by photos of

job applicants drunk at college parties. "They know students drink," she says. I disagree. I'm not inclined to shift my own sense of what is private or to completely buy into shifting boundaries simply because my students (or stepdaughter) hold a different view. However, I'm eager to understand the ways in which students experience online space and then to re-examine what that means in terms of my wish to connect with them.

My passive approach worked until an increasing number of students began sending me their status updates. To clarify: Many Facebook users post updates noting what they are up to at a given moment. For example, "Sandra is going to take a nap" or "John is watching TV." Some users send those status notes to everyone connected with their page. So, because I am a Facebook friend with many of my students, their status notes appear on my page—I don't even have to visit their pages to see what they are posting. That presented a new dilemma.

If I see that one of my students is frustrated with her homework, should I respond? Keep in mind that she hasn't contacted me directly regarding her frustration. I continue to see others' Facebook posts as semipublic diaries, so it seems intrusive for me to jump in. The idea that Facebook postings are at all private may seem bizarre. But my reserve comes from the fact that students' updates are still written words originating from their private, personal experiences; my 43-year-old mind imagines their postings as semiprivate, intended for sharing among peers but not necessarily with one's parents or professors.

My sense is that many Facebook users do not perceive postings as private or intend them to be. To test my assumption, I considered other points of reference: If I were walking down a hall and a student looked upset, would I check in with her? Of course I would. What if my students view Facebook more like a hallway than a diary?

I e-mailed a few of my advisees to ask how they would feel if I responded to a status note indicating that they were having trouble with course work. One student answered, "If we didn't want your help, we wouldn't have friended you in the first place." Another reminded me that "dialogue helps create solutions." A third suggested, "Facebook is a way for us to be together outside of the classroom."

So perhaps for students, Facebook truly is an extension of the classroom, something like a grad-student lounge in which all kinds of connections take place, some routine and some substantial.

Mentoring on Facebook: Are you kidding? Conventional wisdom suggests that the idea is preposterous. Mentoring stirs images of long conversations in a professor's office, not quick hits online. But emerging theory offers a new perspective. Joyce K. Fletcher and Belle Rose Ragins, in *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work: Theory, Research, and Practice*, suggest that there is developmental potential in even a single interaction, calling these exchanges "mentoring episodes."

Fletcher and Ragins based their model of "relational mentoring," which includes both episodes and longer-term relationships, on relational-cultural theory. Developed by Jean Baker Miller, the model suggests that growth in relationships happens when both people experience "the five good things": increased energy and well-being, potential to take action, increased knowledge of self and other, a boost to self-esteem, and an interest in more connection. Fletcher and Ragins apply those criteria to determine whether a short-term interaction can be considered a mentoring episode.

Do all of my interactions with students on Facebook meet the criteria? Certainly not. Do I still prefer in-person meetings to Facebook and e-mail? Yes. However, at least some Facebook interactions include most of the five good things. For example, a student posted a question regarding her internship proposal, and I responded. I experienced a little rush of energy and self-esteem from the interaction; given the tone of our exchange, I suspect she did, too. She was able to take action, and one could argue that I was taking action as her adviser. I remained interested in more connection in general after our exchange, and given that I received an e-mail message from her soon after, it seemed that so did she.

The criterion that wasn't met literally was increased knowledge of self and other. However, there was an increase in knowledge. My student gained information regarding her proposal, and I expanded my understanding of the internship process by considering her question. Many of the brief exchanges I have with students before or after class and via e-mail messages meet the same "five good things" criteria as this Facebook exchange.

Recently I created a Facebook group page for the students in our department. A third of those in our program and at least one alumna have joined. I have posted a few announcements and important links. This Facebook group is only moderately active, though students stop by occasionally for informal chats as well as networking.

These days I hear from students via not only Facebook, and of course e-mail, but also texting and instant messaging. Within the

context of boundaries I choose to set (for example, I do not answer text messages in the late evening), I try to respond in kind if the students' inquiries are simple. And I ask to switch to telephone or a face-to-face meeting if their questions are more complex. All told, I consider these exchanges to be worthwhile. The array of contact points made possible by various technologies can be seen as annoying and intrusive or full of possibility.

Being available to students via e-mail, texting, instant messaging, and Facebook requires me to set boundaries, and that takes a little more work and discipline than merely holding office hours. In my experience, students appreciate my accessibility and without question respect my boundaries. I believe that even this surface-level contact is important, helping us maintain and strengthen our connection until the next big question arises.

I now see Facebook as part of the larger commons, a space in which we stay connected. Facebook, instant messaging, and the like keep my metaphorical office door open. And that increases the potential for real-time, face-to-face conversations that are rich with connection, depth, risk-taking, and growth.

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