



Education Workforce Council

Guide to using social media responsibly

February 2016

1.0 Introduction

Social media are a range of web-based applications that allow people to create and exchange content. The popularity of social media has grown rapidly in recent years with widespread use of sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and LinkedIn, as well as dating websites, blogs, emails, texting and instant messaging.

When used responsibly and appropriately, social media can offer you several benefits as an education practitioner, such as:

- building and maintaining professional relationships;
- giving you access to support networks, providing a means of discussing professional issues and sharing good practice;
- providing access to professional learning opportunities and / or educational resources.

However, there are also a number of dangers and pitfalls you need to be aware of when using social media. This guide aims to help you by highlighting how those dangers and pitfalls could affect you, and potentially your ability to continue practising.

All Education Workforce Council (EWC) registered practitioners are subject to the Code of Professional Conduct and Practice which sets out the key principles of good conduct and practice for registrants. This guidance should be read in conjunction with the Code which can be downloaded from our website.

2.0 Dangers and pitfalls of using social media

2.1 Common issues facing professionals

The way you use social media in your private life is a matter for your own personal judgment. However, you should still exercise caution in the content you upload to any social media site and consider whether it could compromise public confidence in the education workforce.

Using social media can blur the boundary between your private and professional life and these days all professions are subject to far greater public scrutiny making practitioners vulnerable to unintended misuse. It is inevitable that people (learners, parents, public, prospective employers) will be curious about individual practitioners and may try to find out information about you.

It is therefore important you are cautious about which social media you use, and how and with whom you communicate.

Bear in mind:

- the standards expected of you do not change because you are communicating through social media;

- email, texting, blogging and other social media communication encourages casual dialogue. Innocent comments or posts can be misconstrued or manipulated. The 'feel' can be different;
- you can be vulnerable to unintended misuses;
- acknowledging, liking or sharing someone else's post can imply you endorse or support their point of view;
- you can be mentioned / identifiable in inappropriate posts, sometimes without your knowledge or consent;
- your conduct online does not have to relate to learners in order for it to have a bearing on your fitness to practise;
- postings online are subject to the same laws of copyright and defamation as written / verbal communication;
- unwise behaviour online can result in criminal or civil action.

2.2 Privacy and confidentiality

Bear in mind the personal material you might intend only to share with friends or family could be accessible to a much wider audience, and that once uploaded to the web, it may not be possible to delete it or control how widely it is shared.

Some social media sites have privacy settings which allow users to control and put restrictions on who has access to their personal information, but the default settings on some sites may allow content to be shared beyond an individual's preferred, closed network of friends or family. It is therefore important you familiarise yourself with the privacy provisions of any social media site you use, and bear in mind the limitations of keeping information private online.

If you are unsure whether or not communication you post online could compromise your professionalism or reputation, think carefully about the appropriateness of posting it.

In particular, you should be aware that:

- your personal information can easily be accessed by others. Social media sites cannot guarantee privacy regardless of what settings are in place;
- once information is published online, your control of it is lost. It can be difficult to remove as other users may share or comment on it;
- information uploaded anonymously can, in many cases, be traced back to its point of origin;
- information about your location may be embedded within photographs and other content, and available for others to see;
- although individual pieces of information may not breach confidentiality on their own, the sum of published information online can be enough to identify a learner or parent and consequently have potential for reputational damage to you, and possibly your employer.

3.0 Examples of cases investigated by the EWC

The examples below are some of the cases referred to the EWC for investigation relating to social media. These are illustrations of where practitioners have breached the Code of Professional Conduct and Practice:

- a teacher engaged in a sexual relationship with a learner which began with communication via mobile telephone and text messages with sexual content;
- a teacher sent a string of sexually explicit messages via Facebook and Skype to a learner;
- a teacher's computer was found with hundreds of downloaded indecent images on it;
- a teacher with a number of learners as 'friends' on Facebook posted inappropriate comments about drinking and parties;
- a teacher subject to an EWC hearing received disproportionate press coverage when inappropriate photographs and video clips previously posted online were accessed by the press;
- a teacher used an eBay account to illegally sell counterfeit goods;
- a teacher re-tweeted insulting comments about the victim of a serious criminal offence;
- a teacher posed online as a pupil and made a false report to a charity helpline about a senior member of staff.

4.0 Guidance to help practitioners minimise risk when using social media. You should:

4.1 Follow the guidance

- adhere to employer or agency policies, procedures and guidelines using official channels of communication;
- adhere to the EWC Code of Professional Conduct and Practice;
- use trade union and other guidance;
- understand any social media application before using it, and be clear about its advantages / disadvantages.

4.2 Act responsibly

- conduct yourself online in a way which does not call into question your position as a professional;
- consider your online persona and how others perceive you. Be careful when writing profiles or establishing email addresses;
- never create a false identity;
- consider who or what you associate with online, and always maintain professional boundaries with learners;
- never exchange private phone numbers, personal e-mail addresses or photographs of a personal nature with learners;
- never accept or initiate Facebook friend requests, or other such invites, with current or former learners. Discretion should be used when dealing with friend requests from parents;

- ensure your privacy settings are appropriate, and be aware that not all information can be protected on the web - there is no privacy mechanism that is 100% guaranteed;
- ensure your settings prohibit others from tagging you in any photograph or update without your permission;
- be aware of photographs published online which include you, and where they may be posted;
- do not discuss learners, parents, or colleagues online, or criticise your employer;
- protect yourself by always logging out of any social media site you are using at the end of a session.

4.3 Not be complacent

- be aware that others may try and view your online social media profiles, or even just Google your name. For example, potential employers, learners, parents, press officers;
- appreciate that learners will be curious about you, and may search the internet for your personal information;
- manage your privacy settings, especially in relation to photos. If you do not, assume the information you post will remain in the public domain, and be capable of being accessed, changed, shared and manipulated;
- audit and re-evaluate information about your online self regularly, and ask others to remove any undesirable content about you;
- use strong passwords and change them regularly. Never share passwords;
- protect your mobile telephone, laptop, tablet. Know where they are and who has access to them;
- bring any social media concerns to the attention of your employer or agent as soon as you become aware.

4.4 Summary

Before posting anything online, ask yourself:

- might what I'm posting reflect poorly on me, my employer or profession?
- is my intention to make the post driven by personal or professional reasons?
- am I confident that the posting, if accessed by others (colleagues, public, parents etc) would be considered reasonable and appropriate for a professional?

5.0 How we can help you further

- The EWC offer presentations which focus on fitness to practise and the use of social media. If you or your employer would like to arrange one in your school or college please contact (information@ewc.wales);
- The EWC's Code of Professional Conduct and Practice for Registrants with the Education Workforce Council, and Information about the EWC's fitness to practise work can be found on its website www.ewc.wales/site/index.php/en/fitness-to-practiseFitness
- Any queries should be referred to the Fitness to Practise Team at fitnesstopractise@ewc.wales.