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Manage Your Digital Footprint

Here's a new task to add to your day: online reputation management.

So you don't write a blog or comment on blogs. You don't belong to MySpace or send email messages to students. Not only do you not become a "Friend" with students, you don't even belong to Facebook.

Nothing to worry about, you think. Wrong, according to Julia Hengstler. Even if you never personally go online in any form, you probably still have a digital footprint. It could even include video of your teaching, taken with a student phone and uploaded onto a web site. Shutting your eyes to the web is not enough to maintain a positive reputation.

Hengstler now teaches in the education faculty at Vancouver Island University and spent more than a decade as a secondary teacher.

She suggests you check out your digital footprint. Do a Google search on your name — and don't forget to search for images, video and blogs, all possible on Google. Check for your name on ratemyteacher.com and on YouTube. For a look into the "deep web," try pipl.com. You may find more of a footprint than you imagined.

Hengstler points out that your footprint — and reputation — is built in two ways. One is active — the blogs, articles, photos, videos you post. The other is passive — what others put on about you. All of it is permanent because of the nature of the Internet.

If something terrible and untrue is said about you, you may be able to get the web site to take it down. However, it is still out

there. It could be on personal computers where it was already downloaded.

Much of the web exists on digital archives, even after data is removed from the source web site.

Taking content down in

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one place does not remove it from others.

Building and maintaining a positive professional online profile requires active work. If you allow yourself to be identified entirely by what others post, you have no control over your online identity. While active participation will not entirely erase the damage others may do to you, you can develop a positive presence that will help to balance whatever else is out there.

Of course, when you are active on the web, you can do a lot of damage to yourself. Hengstler calls this playing “professional Russian roulette.” You have probably heard some stories, or read them in discipline reports from the Ontario or BC College of Teachers.

Inappropriate email to a student — the rule should be that as you are writing, imagine that your principal and your student’s mother are standing behind you, reading what you are writing.

The family photo book on a photo site that included a picture of him swimming in the nude created a problem for a BC principal. Candid shots of drinking or provocative behaviour can haunt you. Some people now insist that when they attend a party that no pictures be taken, fearing that something will get posted on the web that will have a negative impact on them.

On Twitter the people following you can see who you are following and check out what they are saying. Even though your tweets and retweets may be perfectly fine, your reputation can be affected by what others are saying or the language they are using — linked to you even though you are unaware and are not

responsible for what is being said when your network is visible to others.

With all the possible negatives, one might think that Hengstler is making the case for staying off the Internet. Not at all.

Joining up may be dreadful and dangerous. It can also be rewarding, both professionally and personally, if you come to it thoughtfully and consciously. You may also want to create your online presence by building two personas, one professional and the other personal. However, you must be aware that because of the nature of the technology, these two may well be linked by someone at some point.

Hengstler argues that teachers should develop a “professional tool box” for the web. For example, Facebook now allows for the creation of “groups” within it. A group set up for a class could be a space for doing work on Facebook, without the teacher and students being “Friends.” Social networking tools like Ning allow the creation of intact groups, such as classes or an enclosed space for a professional learning community. Caution and good sense should always be at the top of the tool box.

She also sees a pedagogical reason for teachers becoming immersed in online experiences. Many of our students’ lives are being lived online. For some, it starts before birth as an ultrasound picture gets posted by about-to-be parents.

Leaving the online experience to children and youth without mature models and examples is both dangerous and professionally irresponsible. The young lack the perspective of the long-term impact of what they do today.

Before the permanence of the digital record of our lives, most of what we did as children was forgotten beyond anecdotes of parents and friends — and forgiven. That is a luxury not available to today’s children. Our professional responsibility is not only to own our professional online identity and reputation, but to understand enough that we can provide advice and be an online model for our students.

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