# Digital communication, staff conduct and student safety

**Guidance to employees in interpreting the requirements of the Code of Conduct**

## Introduction

The BCE Code of Conduct Employees clarifies and affirms the standards of behaviour that are expected of employees of Brisbane Catholic Education in the performance of their duties.

In accordance with the BCE Code of Conduct Employees it is expected that employees will be caring, compassionate adults who take an interest in students and who set appropriate boundaries within employee-student relationships.

Digital communication is swiftly evolving and it is essential that appropriate boundaries are safeguarded within the employee-student relationship. This document provides guidance to individual employees, as well as principals and other leaders in responding to issues relating to the maintenance of professional relationships when using digital communications.

## What is considered digital communication?

Modes of digital communication that may be utilised by staff to interact with students include email, instant messaging, social networking, gaming, texting and mobile phones. It is anticipated that new forms and modes of digital communication will develop in the future.

## Key principles

- Digital communication is a vital part of contemporary life and work and has many valuable uses in learning and teaching
- Schools undertake a responsibility to promote digital literacy and positive digital citizenship in their students
- Staff members have a responsibility to model the types of behaviours that students are encouraged to learn
- Digital communication has the potential to break down the boundaries that once existed in the context of a physical school environment. The creation of a virtual environment leads to positive opportunities and possible dangers for staff and for students and their families.
- All public or publicly-known behaviour of BCE employees is open to scrutiny within the employment relationship.
- The BCE Code of Conduct Employees provides direction to employees on their relationships with students and their family members, and their professional colleagues, in all contexts.
- A framework of rights and responsibilities is useful in considering interactions between the various members of a school community, who can be expected to take responsibility for their actions in accordance with their roles.
- As professionals, BCE employees take responsibility for their professional relationships and understand that the setting and maintenance of appropriate professional boundaries is

critical to a safe, supportive and transparent professional community for both adults and students.

- Employees who maintain sound professional boundaries are better placed to manage risk, minimise workplace stress and prevent burnout.

## The BCE Code of Conduct Employees - employees and digital communication

The BCE Code of Conduct Employees sets down clear directions regarding interactions with students. The same principles that apply to face-to-face communication also apply to digital communication.

Some key requirements of the Code include:
- That employees will set appropriate boundaries within employee-student relationships
- That as employees are in a position of trust arising from the nature of their work, their relationships with students are open to scrutiny
- That employees must always treat students with respect

Accordingly, employees need to understand that their digital communications with students can never be regarded as purely private or confidential. As the relationship with the student is a professional one that cannot be separated from the employee's employment, it must always be accountable to the profession and open to the scrutiny of the employer. Employees who believe that they have private relationships with students that may exempt them in any way from these requirements should consult the *BCE Code of Conduct Employees Conflict of Interest* documentation and discuss the position with their principal (or delegate).

Conduct which is contrary to the Code's requirements in this regard may amount to professional misconduct which will be dealt with in accordance with Brisbane Catholic Education's issues management processes (including any misconduct, investigative and unsatisfactory performance processes).

## When digital communication may lead to inappropriate behaviour or harm to students by staff members

Some instances where digital communication by employees with students may become inappropriate and involve a risk of harm to students:
- Where digital communication becomes informal and social rather than professional. Informal and social communication involves a 'lowering' of professional boundaries, whether inadvertent or intentional, and can confuse students about the nature of the relationship and the intentions of the employee.
- Where professionalism becomes compromised because employees become aware of 'too much information' about students' personal lives or students can become aware of 'too much information' about employees' personal lives.
- Where the timing and frequency of the contact suggests that the usual context of a professional relationship is not present i.e. modes of digital communication are often accessible 24/7 as opposed to reasonable school/work hours.
- Where employees provide and allow students access to their personal digital communication contact details and receive unwanted contact and communication through student initiation of the contact at a time and situation of the students' choosing.

It is unfortunately too often the case that digital communication between adults and young people has been used as a means of 'grooming behaviour' by the adult, resulting in the abuse and harm of the young person. In such situations involving school staff or other professionals, the content and manner of the digital communication has reflected underlying unprofessional attitudes and conduct.

The Queensland College of Teachers has reported that where an inappropriate relationship developed between a teacher and a student:

- Not all contact was initiated by the staff member;
- The initial contact was often for a school-related or other legitimate purpose;
- The initial communication was often school-based or related to a member of the school community;
- Mutual trust was often established by sharing private opinions about school issues and/or individuals, thus eroding the professional boundary between employee and student;
- Relationships developed and disclosures were made, in the 'virtual' relationship, that were not consistent with those appropriate to the professional relationship;
- Professional boundaries were often progressively broken down with an gradual increase in the use of familiar and intimate terms;
- 'Grooming' behaviours often grew from conversations that included a sexual element, and from attempts to meet up outside school;
- Communications were often clandestine and secretive.

## Social networking and professional boundaries

The prevalence of social networking in the lives of students and other members of the school community is increasing. Given the public nature of these sites and the widespread participation in them by students and parents, involvement by employees in social networking requires attention to be given to maintaining appropriate professional boundaries.

Employees should use very great care when accepting friends or fans on social networking sites, especially where communication between employees and students involves actions being taken to establish 'friend' status with each other, either directly or indirectly. Such action may provide access by employees and students to social information, including information about each person's 'friends', sometimes unwittingly.

It is BCE's position that for an employee to communicate with students through a personal page on a social networking site is to endanger the maintenance of professional boundaries, and that as such it is very difficult for employees to justify the necessity of communicating with students in this way.

## Blogs, other types of public commentary and professional boundaries

There are many places on the World Wide Web where employees may make public comment and display photographs, videos, or other content. It is important that employees ensure that any material they post does not lead to an adverse effect on the employer-employee relationship.

In accordance with the BCE Code of Conduct Employees, employees are expected to "*avoid by word or action, any influence upon students that is contrary to the teachings and values expressed by the Catholic Church in whose name they act* ".

Employees need to be aware of this in any virtual situation where they can be identified, directly or indirectly, as an employee in a particular school or of Brisbane Catholic Education in general.

When employees contribute to blogs or make public commentary using digital media, they need to be aware that their contributions may come to the attention of students, parents or colleagues.

If an employee publishes material indicating that they are involved in activities, or hold opinions, that reflect poorly upon their status as professionals or as Church employees, it is likely that this will also become a matter of public knowledge and have adverse consequences on their employment.

Employees should also be cautious about the content of emails sent, as emails can easily be circulated to a large audience.

Further, inappropriate public comments made by 'Friends' on an employee's social networking site may also reflect badly on that employee's professional status.

## Collaborative learning spaces and professional boundaries

Information technology can be a powerful and positive tool for learning within the school context through the provision of collaborative learning spaces.

Whenever such spaces are utilised within the school environment it is recommended that:
- The space is carefully chosen and configured for the purpose. Careful consideration should be given and a risk assessment undertaken before choosing social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *MySpace* or publicly-viewable blogs for such purposes;
- The staff member responsible knows and understands how to maintain the collaboration space as a safe place for students that is limited to the members of the relevant student group and appropriate others;
- The collaboration space is subject to the scrutiny of at least one other senior staff member within the school, who will also have moderation rights;
- Parents are informed about the students' involvement and provided with appropriate assurances about the safety and appropriate use of the space. Parents should also be made aware of the appropriate use of such spaces.
- Consideration be given as to the appropriateness of the conditions of use of the space. For example, the terms and conditions of use for popular sites such as *Facebook*, *LinkedIn* and *Twitter* generally include an agreement to hand over the control of all content that is posted.

## Acceptable use of ICT resources and professional boundaries

Employees are reminded that, in accordance with the *Conditions of Use of ICT Resources* document, all digital communications using BCE systems and hardware are considered to arise from the employment relationship and as a result are subject to monitoring by BCE. The inappropriate use of such facilities can result in disciplinary action.

## Guidance to employees in maintaining professional boundaries when utilising digital communication

The following points are recommended for the consideration of employees:
1. If employees have a personal page on a social networking site such as *Facebook,* they should ensure that its security settings are such as to prevent public access to personal details and private communications. It is strongly recommended that employees do not allow current students to be 'Friends' (or 'Friends of Friends') on such sites.
2. It is also strongly recommended that employees not be 'Friends' (or 'Friends of Friends') on students' personal pages on social networking sites.
3. If employees conduct a blog, or use the internet to make available material such as photographs, videos, music recordings and art works, it is strongly recommended that they ensure that, if they are identifiable as the author, the content does not compromise their position as a professional or as an employee of Brisbane Catholic Education. The use of password protection or of an alias may need to be considered.
4. If employees wish to communicate with students or parents by email, this should only be for approved school purposes and should follow school protocols. Employees are strongly recommended not to give their private email addresses to students or parents. If the school recommends or encourages the use of email communication with parents and/or students for official purposes, this should be conducted through the BCE email system.
5. Email communications with students or parents should be regarded as official communications, and conducted accordingly and subject to any requirements that are laid down at school or BCE level. Employees should ensure that email communications are saved for future verification should concerns be raised.
6. Employees are not normally expected or required to use a private mobile phone for contact with students and/or parents for work purposes. The school landline or a school mobile phone would normally be used for such a purpose. Employees are recommended not to give their private mobile (or home) phone numbers out to students or parents.
7. Employees should not routinely use any form of digital communication for social (or non-school) contact with students. If there is a legitimate reason for such contact to occur, then this should be made known to the Principal (or delegate).
8. Employees should ensure that any use of the internet as a collaborative learning space involving students should be approved by the principal (or delegate) and have adequate safeguards and oversight at school level.
9. Schools should consider giving guidance to students and parents about appropriate ways of using digital communication to communicate with staff members.
10. Should employees find that students, parents or others from the school community are communicating with them inappropriately, and the matter has not been appropriately resolved, the matter should be brought to the attention of the principal.