



Engaging online, AI and expression of views

A professional guide for teachers

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What is this guide for?

Teaching is complex work which requires constant ethical decision making. What teachers value, say and do really matters. As a teacher, you are expected to act in an ethical way in your use of technology and when expressing your views. Social media, artificial intelligence (AI) and data protection are areas that present both benefits and risks. This guide is intended to inform your understanding of ethical behaviour in these areas and how they interact with legislation and your professional responsibilities. It prompts you to consider your actions and whether you might require further advice or professional learning.

One of GTC Scotland's roles as the independent regulator for teachers in Scotland is to champion and enhance teacher professionalism. We work in the public interest to enhance trust in teaching by setting, upholding and promoting high standards. This involves providing information or advice where we identify any risk areas, where further focus is required to embed teaching standards or when action is needed to assure trust in teaching.

For the purposes of this guide, teachers include teachers of primary, secondary, additional support needs and further education. You should read this together with the Professional Standards and the Code of Professionalism and Conduct (COPAC). Together these form the teaching standards set by GTC Scotland which describe teacher professionalism in Scotland.

This guide is for GTC Scotland registered teachers and is also relevant to anyone, including members of the public, wishing to understand the expectations of registered teachers when engaging online or expressing views.

What is expected of teachers?

COPAC sets out the principles of conduct that are expected of teachers in meeting their professional and ethical obligations. It is designed to provide guidance and raise awareness of issues and situations which can potentially arise. Parallel to this, the professional values of social justice, trust and respect and integrity are core to teaching standards and underpin your identity as a teacher.

Your commitment to these professional values should be demonstrated in your online activity both at work and outside of work. As a teacher, you have a responsibility to be a positive role model to learners, always exercising sound judgement and due care when online. What you say and do in your professional and private life, whether online or in person, shapes the way that people think about you and the reputation of the teaching profession in Scotland.

Employers also have expectations of teachers, and you should be familiar with these and their relevant policies.

How to communicate online



Your school, college or workplace account

Online communication can encourage casual dialogue, for example; emojis, text-speak and GIFs. These can often disarm inhibitions, bringing a new dimension and 'feel' to relationships. As a result, traditional boundaries between teacher, learner, colleagues, parents and carers, can become blurred. Teachers need to be alert to this by maintaining a professional tone online. In your professional capacity, you should communicate with learners, parents and carers through official school or college platforms. This helps build professional relationships and maintain appropriate professional boundaries.

Your personal account

Your commitment to maintaining teaching standards is central to the integrity of professional regulation. It is important to consider what you post online, on social media, and who and what you associate with on social media.

Engaging safely and ethically online isn't just about what you post, it's also about who you follow and what they post. Many people do not need to be as mindful online as teachers do, which is why you need to be vigilant about who you allow into your networks, who you share your personal account(s) information with and what is shared through your social media. You need to exercise professional and ethical diligence when your personal and professional life inhabit the same communities.

Comments from family, friends or others may not be appropriate for teachers to share. It's important to assess the suitability of posts thoroughly before they are shared to prevent any negative associations and their impact on your professional standing.

Your online activity may be searched by learners, parents or carers or potential employers.

Checking your personal online accounts and restricting privacy settings will help you control your online footprint. Practising good cyber security helps minimise the risk of your conversations, photos, events attended – anything linked to your personal life – being accessed and altered. You should review your visible historic social media posts to ensure they align with your professional values. Once you post, you have lost control over the comment or data you have shared.

Keeping learners' data safe

COPAC 2.1 – 'You must treat sensitive, personal information about learners with respect and confidentiality and not disclose it unless required to do so by your employer or by law.'

As a trusted teacher you have access to sensitive information about learners. You must collect, store and use personal data safely and lawfully. Failure to do so can have legal implications. Learners' data takes different forms and is gathered and stored in a variety of ways. Data must be obtained with appropriate permissions, used for specific purposes and stored securely. If it is not, the data is more vulnerable to cyberattacks and data breaches. It is important to be aware that under data protection legislation, learners have a right to request a copy of the information held on them; this includes on social media.

You should ensure that you are familiar with, refer to and carefully follow your school, college or employer's data protection policy and privacy notices when accessing and using learners' data.

COPAC 4.5 – 'Be mindful of Data Protection Act requirements concerning handling information about parents, carers and learners.'



Expression of views



Teachers, like all other citizens, have the right to freedom of opinion and expression. This right is balanced with your duty to safeguard learners, promote equality and inclusion and maintain public trust in the profession. Teachers are expected to uphold the professional values in their public and online conduct as well as in their work environment.

It is important to avoid making public or online statements which could cast doubt on your ability to discharge your professional duties. Comments that could be reasonably interpreted by others as offensive, abusive or inflammatory could give rise to an impression that you discriminate against certain types of learners, parents, carers and colleagues. Your online and public statements must be consistent with maintaining the reputation of the teaching profession and with protecting the rights of all learners and colleagues.

If you have any concerns about a view you have expressed, online or in public, you should seek advice from your employer and you may wish to contact a professional association.

COPAC 1.4 – ‘You must uphold standards of personal and professional conduct, honesty and integrity so that the public have confidence in you as a teacher and teaching as a profession.’

Online conduct

Teachers should be mindful when engaging in online spaces (for example, social media, blogs and forums). The disclaimer “views are my own” is unlikely to provide protection from any repercussions of what is posted. What you share reflects on you and the teaching profession.

You must avoid posting content or engaging in discussions which could be perceived as discriminatory, offensive, obscene or sexually explicit in a way that undermines your professional role. If you are contributing to professional discussions online, you are expected to be respectful, constructive and act with honesty and integrity, in line with the teaching standards.

Teaching environment

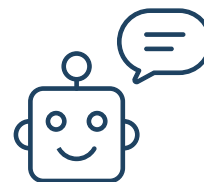
Teachers should ensure that their teaching environment is inclusive, accessible and safe.

Teachers are expected to model inclusive language. You must avoid expressions that could undermine equality duties or learners’ rights.

Teachers sometimes discuss controversial or sensitive topics which are relevant to learning. Discussions must have due regard to learners’ age, stage and individual circumstances. All views must be presented fairly and factually. You must remember you have professional responsibilities to promote equality, diversity and inclusion and to tackle discrimination. You, as a teacher, have made a professional commitment to learning and learners that is compatible with the aspiration of achieving a sustainable and equitable world as required in the Professional Standards.

COPAC 5.3 – ‘You should recognise that you are a role model and therefore should be aware of the potentially serious impact which any demonstration by you of intolerance or prejudice could have upon your standing as a teacher and your fitness to teach.’

Artificial intelligence (AI)



The ways in which education uses technology and in which people learn are transforming. As AI becomes increasingly integrated into education settings, it is essential that teachers understand both the opportunities and responsibilities associated with its use, which includes keeping learners safe. AI tools can aid lesson planning, personalise learning, streamline administrative tasks and enhance learner engagement. Its ethical use in an education setting, by you and your learners, must align with teaching standards, safeguarding practices and the best interests of learners.

You should be mindful of data privacy and intellectual property implications, ensuring that any AI tools used comply with relevant data protection and copyright laws and your employer's policies.

AI continues to be explored as a tool to enhance teaching and learning, but it should not be a replacement for your professional judgement. For example, it should never be used to make decisions about learner welfare and safeguarding. When using AI-generated content or tools, you must ensure appropriateness and inclusivity. It is important to be conscious of the concerns which have been raised about AI, for example potential inaccuracies and biases as well as the environmental impact of AI use, such as the carbon and water footprint. You must be transparent with colleagues, learners, parents and carers about the use of AI.

The fast rate at which AI is developing means that guidance and regulation on its use can lag behind the technology itself. In all circumstances, teachers are expected to think ethically when making professional judgements to ensure AI use is safe, responsible and in the best interests of learners.



What you can do



To help you engage online and express your views in a safe and responsible manner, you should ask yourself:

- have I considered the consequences of who or what I associate with online?
- do I check my account regularly for who I have added and who has added me?
- before I post this online, could the content reflect poorly on me or the teaching profession?
- am I practising good cyber security to help minimise the risk of my conversations being accessed and altered? For example, is my password secure and am I accessing information over a trusted network?
- what measures do I have in place to control my online footprint?
- am I storing and using photos, videos and other data in line with my employer's policy and the law?
- do I understand my employer's policies about information sharing and data retention?
- am I being open with colleagues, learners, parents and carers about my use of AI in teaching?
- am I becoming over-reliant on AI which could have an impact on my critical thinking as a teacher?
- is my use of AI ethical in terms of privacy, equality and sustainability?
- have I reviewed the [Equality and diversity professional guide for teachers](#) which has further guidance on expression of views and factors to be aware of?
- have I considered the consequences of what I am planning to say in a public setting?
- have I reported and followed up on any concerns I have about trolling, online behaviour, expression of views or AI use to my employer?
- have I considered this guidance in the light of any teaching I do?
- have I considered any professional learning or support I may need?
- do I know where, and how, to access support and protection for myself or others? This could be from colleagues, employer, or the wider education community including professional associations.
- have I reviewed the [Ethics in teaching: speaking up guide](#) to ensure I maintain my position of trust as a teacher?



The General Teaching Council for Scotland

We are the independent regulator for teachers in Scotland. We work in the public interest to enhance trust in teachers by setting, upholding and promoting high standards.

www.gtcs.org.uk
gtcs@gtcs.org.uk