

Emotional Safety in Professional Learning
(Professional Growth + Emotional Risks -Context Collapse)

Strengths and Weaknesses of Privacy, Security, and Acceptable Use Policies

There are a few strengths and weaknesses in the policies governing social media use for professional learning.

Strengths

1. DigCompEdu and ISTE offer guidelines for responsible use, which in turn helps educators navigate the online world ethically and safely. DigCompEdu was created by the European Union around 2017, and lays out 6 main competencies and 22 sub competencies. It focuses on supporting teachers in their work with learners from different backgrounds for whom digital technologies and resources may not be readily accessible (UNESCO, 2025).
2. Protected Spaces such as password/private online spaces (such as district Facebook groups or Microsoft Teams) can be a way for educators to have emotionally safe contexts where educators can ask for help outside of the public eye. Where they can rely on each other for help and ask for support, from likeminded people (Willet, 2023)

Weaknesses

1. Privacy Policies are so dense that 72% of pre-service teachers admit that they have read one for the services they use. (Marin et al, 2022)
2. Many school policies are focused on “DO NOT” consisting of a list of actions that are not acceptable rather than proactive in building a safe PLN. This can be confusing for teachers and possibly deflating when trying to engage in building a PLN but are given restrictions rather than instructions. (Willet, 2023)

One thing I think is really relevant here is *Context Collapse*. Will expand here

K. Bret Staudt Willet (2024) Early career teachers' expansion of professional learning networks with social media, *Professional Development in Education*, 50:2, 386-402, DOI: 10.1080/19415257.2023.2178481

- Context Collapse (Definition)
 - A phenomenon on social media where multiple, normally distinct social contexts merge, bringing together diverse audiences, such as students, parents, administrators, and peers, into a single space.
- **Emotional Risks of Context Collapse**
 - Scrutiny and Self-Censorship
 - Since there is no certainty about who is viewing teachers' activity, teachers often feel they are under constant scrutiny. This inhibits emotional safety required to be vulnerable or ask for help with things such as classroom management or instructional issues in their online PLN's
 - Comparison Spiral
 - Context collapse often creates spaces where educators feel forced to create highly curated and social media worthy content from peers. For a teacher with a possible under-resources school, seeing a classroom with more resources from a wealthier district can lead to a comparison spiral rather than feeling supported within their own PLN
 - Blurred Professional Boundaries
 - By not having clear boundaries between public and private lives, can create uncertainty for professional integrity. Teachers and educators often feel pressure to be constantly

available to students and parents, which removes the lines and boundaries necessary for personal well-being and recovery.

- **Impacts on Professional Learning**

- Professional growth requires a certain amount of taking risks and reflecting on mistakes. Context collapse can make educators reluctant to share anything that isn't perfectly polished for fear of professional retaliation or reprimand, and may cause inhibition of risk taking
- There is also more tension that can arise when teaching beliefs conflict with those of school culture. Educators may turn to social media for a broader perspective. However, context collapse can increase these tensions if colleagues or supervisors observe these discussions online, leading to further professional discomfort.

- **How to reclaim emotional safety**

- Many educators can move their professional interactions to password protected or private spaces.
- Teachers can manage context collapse by using different platforms for different purposes (Instagram for personal use and Twitter for professional networking) - to ensure they have different spaces for different motivations
- Platforms like reddit can provide a safer space for authentic inquiry because they have a level of anonymity, reducing the pressure and self-promotion found on highly visual platforms like Instagram
- Educators can cultivate a deliberate professional online persona that is visible in positive ways, carefully managing their footprint and to protect their reputation from the risks of audience merging.