Connecting With Students While Maintaining Ethical Boundaries

**Ethical Boundaries**

- The ethical boundaries of the teacher-student relationship have received a lot of negative press over the last decade. Intimate relationships between students and their teachers have been propelled to the national forefront, and with it, increased suspicion when it comes to teachers’ relationships to their pupils.

**What is Professionalism?**

- Being an educator is increasingly being viewed as a professional occupation. The relationship between the client (in this case the student and their parents) and the practitioner (the teacher or academic institute) is a professional one. Ethical boundaries need to be established in order to protect both parties from the potential (or supposed) abuse of “power, control, and [or] influence” (Aultman).
Why Establishing Ethical Boundaries is Difficult

- The problems with these boundaries in regards to teaching are twofold. First, they are not firmly established within the trade and are only recently beginning to be discussed at length.

- Secondly, establishing a strict set of ethical codes seems contradictory to the teaching process. It fosters impersonal connections with students when research shows that this is exactly the opposite of what they need.

What are These “Ethical Boundaries”?

- There is not a definitive source on what the ethical boundaries are in regards to the teacher student relationship, and the ethical guidelines of other professions do not seem totally applicable.

- Teachers should familiarize themselves with the specific rules and regulations of their school and district. There is also a source that they can look to provide a wealth of information on the types of ethical issues that can arise.

- In a study done by Lori Price Aultman (et al.,) many different teachers were interviewed to find out what kind of ethical issues they dealt with in their experiences and how they dealt with them. They were able to establish various boundaries that are helpful in maintaining a professional stance.

1. **Curricular Boundaries**: This includes discussing themes of morality or emotionally charged issues with vulnerable populations.

2. **Emotional Boundaries**: Teachers need to be able to mask and control their emotions, realize when to let go, and avoid cursing in front of their students.
3. **Relationship Boundaries:** Engaging in intimate relationships: such as engaging in romantic and/or sexual relationships with current or former students. Touching or intimate gestures (Hansen).

   Gestures that are appropriate include “high fives,” “handshakes,” or “open handed pats on the back.” A good rule is to make sure that touching is done in a public setting and includes only those gestures that would be appropriate in front of the principal or the student’s parents.

4. **Power Boundaries:** Teachers should not use their authority to harm a student nor should they allow a student to violate a school rule or law. Teachers should also not reward or punish a student based on their relationship with the teacher, their popularity, or favors done by the student or teacher.

5. **Institutional Boundaries:** These include driving a student home, leaving the classroom for a short time to deal with an upset student without another teacher being present. Also, allowing students to violate a school rule violates institutional boundaries.

6. **Financial Boundaries:** Teachers should avoid providing their own money for the classroom or classroom activities in excess. Altruistic gestures such as performing favors, providing unprofessional services, giving gifts, or loaning money to an individual student can be inappropriate. Loaning money to a student for lunch is not a serious ethical offense.

7. **Communication Boundaries:** Talking about highly personal subject matter with the students or engaging in conversations with students when the student is sharing information that does not benefit the student crosses ethical boundaries. Breaches in confidentiality and offering advice on personal matters should also be avoided. Teachers are mandated reporters, so it should be mentioned to a student that there are conversations that cannot be kept confidential. More information on this can be found here: [http://education.uic.edu/cte/files/mandatedreporting.pdf](http://education.uic.edu/cte/files/mandatedreporting.pdf)

   One aspect that was not mentioned in Aultman’s study but is worth mentioning is engaging in friendships with students through the use of social networks such as Myspace or Facebook (Dunn).

8. **Temporal Boundaries:** Spending too much time with one student can detract from time spent with other students.
9. **Expertise Boundaries:** Not having the training to deal with certain student personal issues should make teachers shun away from acting as therapists or social workers. They should offer encouragement and listen to the student, but again, schools employ counselors because they have training to deal with serious issues and their expertise should be used.

(Aultman et. Al.,)

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**Maintaining Professionalism**

- In order to learn about students’ backgrounds and interests the use of “Let’s get Acquainted” sheets can be used on the first day of class (Aultman). These sheets could discuss the hobbies and interests of students, as well as ask them questions about their academic career. If the student has specific trouble areas either with a subject or material, it can be known from the beginning in a discrete manner. [http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/1294](http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/1294).

- Conversations with students that are not entirely academic should not be discouraged, but if they can be in anyway tied in to the material being discussed it is encouraged (Aultman).

- Teachers could also design classroom activities that allow for a greater opportunity to discuss the teachers’ or students’ backgrounds and interests, as well as encourage bonding between the teacher and students or between the students themselves.

- If a Teacher feels uncomfortable with using appropriate physical gestures they can substitute using more positive vocal encouragement to their students. A good way to think about this is if a “touch makes up for a 1,000 words” than as teachers we must compensate a 1,000 words for a touch when it could be deemed as appropriate or necessary (Hansen).

- Connecting with the students in a professional way can be as easy as using humor and keeping the class light hearted (Carr).
**Final Thoughts:**

- Teachers need to know the types of ethical boundaries that arise when teaching in order to prevent themselves or their students from being harmed in anyway.

- Aultman’s research has provided a good source of what these boundaries are but a teacher also needs to familiarize themselves with the rules and regulations of their particular school.

- Teachers should not be afraid to connect with their students; they simply need to find ways that allow them to do so while still maintaining the professionalism that is required of other professional fields, but one that is unique to teaching.

**Resources:**

Coaching and Advising for Teachers: [http://www.cedu.niu.edu/~shumow/itt/coaching.html](http://www.cedu.niu.edu/~shumow/itt/coaching.html). “Student teacher Relationships”, “Communicating w/ Adolescents”, and “Adolescents Expectations of Teachers” could all be helpful.


“Getting to Know you” questionnaires are available here: [http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/1294](http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/1294)

References on Mandated Reporting: [http://education.uic.edu/cte/files/mandatedreporting.pdf](http://education.uic.edu/cte/files/mandatedreporting.pdf)

**References:**


