Role Clarity: How Faculty Can Map Their Own Boundaries

Whether we teach in classrooms or online, faculty face a range of boundary-related questions regarding our interactions and relationships with students, including availability, self-disclosure, and even how much we care or invest in our work. This article helps faculty consider complex boundary challenges in teaching.

BY HARRIET L. SCHWARTZ
Carlow University

Teaching involves interpersonal interactions in the classroom and online. As such, faculty establish, maintain, and adjust boundaries. Sometimes these boundaries seem obvious and we enact them without much thought. Other times we give significant consideration to these questions: How available should we be to students? What is a reasonable response time to student inquiries on evenings and weekends? How much should we self-disclose in teaching and advising? How can we care about students and be passionate about teaching and, at the same time, avoid feeling overwhelmed by student emotion or our own disappointment when we think students aren't working to their potential?

Popular culture often portrays the most obvious boundary violation in teaching: teachers and students engaged in sexual relationships. Most colleges have explicit—and appropriate—policies prohibiting these relationships, and faculty can learn about these and other institutional approaches via internet search. This article addresses boundary questions that are more frequent and typical in the lives of most faculty as we attempt to monitor the time, energy, and emotion we invest in our teaching.

Meet Harriet L. Schwartz

Harriet L. Schwartz, Ph.D., is professor of psychology and counseling at Carlow University in Pittsburgh where she also chairs the M.A. in student affairs program. Her new book "Connected Teaching: Relationship, Power, and Mattering in Higher Education" includes an expanded exploration of boundaries and role clarity as well as other elements of relationship and emotion in teaching. Harriet is the lead scholar for education as relational practice for the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute. In addition, she mentors doctoral students in qualitative research methods in Antioch University's Leadership and Change program, where she earned her Ph.D. www.harrietschwartz.com

Time, Space, Self-Disclosure, and More

Concepts of boundaries and role clarity help guide us in our professional relationships and interactions. This is particularly important when there is a power differential, as there is between students and faculty (Barnett, 2008). Role boundaries are intended to prevent faculty from abusing power, not only in potential sexual relationships with students but also in the teaching relationship itself (e.g. being more available to some students than others). Role boundaries also help faculty balance the time and energy we commit to teaching with our need for personal time.

Several dynamics in the teacher/student relationship establish context and shape faculty and student experiences of role boundaries, including identity, power, department/school norms and policies, and the faculty member's philosophy of teaching.

IDENTITY. Teacher and student identities shape expectations, reactions, and dynamics regarding boundaries. For example, students are more likely to challenge the authority of faculty of color, particularly women (Hua, 2018; Johnson-Bailey, 2015). These challenges may require minoritized faculty to establish their credibility and roles in ways that majoritized faculty may

not. When we consider the privilege and marginalization assigned to the range and intersection of identities between students and faculty, we see a vast array of influences, including not only gender and race, but also age, social class, nationality, and more.

POWER. Teachers, by virtue of their position, also hold positional power. As we assess

■ TALES FROM REAL LIFE > BOUNDARY DILEMMAS

Faculty face a range of small but important boundary questions through the course of a semester. The following are composite or anonymized examples:

I TEACH ONLINE AND HYBRID CLASSES. My working students do most of their assignments on evenings and weekends so that's often when they have questions or want feedback. How can I balance my wish to support them with my need for personal time?

I CARE ABOUT THIS STUDENT AND I WANT HIM TO SUCCEED. He says he wants to continue at a four-year institution but his application process is a series of fits and starts. He's about to miss a number of deadlines. I'm frustrated with him, or with his situation… I don't really know which it is. I just know that I'm dismayed that he's not doing his best to further his education and career. I believe he wants to pursue these options, but I know he has challenges. I find myself dismayed about his situation when I'm not even on campus. Am I too engaged? Do I care too much?

THE SEMESTER IS ALMOST OVER AND THE RAPPORT WITH STUDENTS FEELS STRONG. One evening in class, they ask, do you take Facebook friend requests from students? How about after we graduate? Can we follow you on Instagram?

student work, assign grades, and possibly write letters of recommendation, course faculty hold power in student lives. Likewise, by choosing whether to advocate for students trying to enter closed courses, writing recommendations, and otherwise helping student navigate their academic journey, advisors hold power, too. Some would argue this position power is inherent, though I would suggest it can be strengthened or weakened by the socio-cultural identity of teachers and students.

DEPARTMENT/SCHOOL NORMS AND POLICIES. Our departments and institutions may influence boundary decisions. For example, in some departments, each instructor decides whether to use their title or first name.

PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING. Finally, each faculty member's approach to teaching will guide their thinking about role boundaries. How much do I value student interaction and relationships? What level and types of availability do I consider appropriate (e.g. phone, text, social media)? More broadly, how do I understand my role as a teacher—to what degree do I provide additional help to students, be available as a mentor, welcome out-of-class conversations? Consider that one's stance regarding these elements may be influenced by our status as tenured/tenure-track or adjunct faculty.

Understanding Multiple Relationships in Teaching

College faculty, particularly those who teach full-time, are likely to engage in more than one kind of educational relationship with students. For example, alongside teaching, a professor may provide academic advising or research mentoring. Sometimes there can be tension between these roles—as advisors, we might see ourselves primarily as a guide and encourager, whereas as teachers we evaluate student work and hold students accountable for attendance, participation, and assignments. In balancing these multiple roles, we can draw on professional codes of ethics that remind us to do what is best for students, avoid harm, and to be sure we treat students equitably (Barnett, 2008).

HOW HAVE OUR VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES REGARDING **IDENTITY, POWER, AND THE TEACHING ROLE** SHAPED BOUNDARIES WE HAVE SET INTENTIONALLY AND REFLEXIVELY?

Still, even when we feel clear on the ethical guidelines, multiple roles can be difficult to navigate. I chair a small master's program and some semesters I hold three roles: classroom instructor, student advisor, and program chair. When students are doing well, this is not a problem and, in fact, allows for rapport and connection. However, when a student is struggling in my class and I am also their advisor and chair, I may find it challenging to balance these roles. In addition, their next option for support or complaint is the dean.

A second kind of multiple role situation exists when we engage with students outside the educational context. For example, a faculty member might hire a student to house sit or provide child care. Likewise, those who teach adult students may find themselves serving with students on a K-12 parent/teacher group or other community endeavor. Faculty may choose to initiate a clear conversation about role boundaries and expectations. Simply naming the multiple role dynamic may help to navigate the situation with more intention and clarity.

Setting, Maintaining, and Adjusting Boundaries

BEGIN AND CONTINUE WITH REFLECTION. Reflecting on the contextual factors identified previously helps us gain clarity regarding boundaries. How have our views and experiences regarding identity, power, and the teaching role shaped the boundaries we set intentionally and reflexively?

LOOK FOR AND INTERROGATE DEFAULT BOUNDARIES. Have assumptions about teaching, students, or our institutions determined our approach to teaching and interactions with students? Interrogating default boundaries does not always lead to change, but it may enable us to move forward with a greater sense of intention or to adjust frameworks that no longer make sense.

COMMUNICATE CLEARLY. Gone are the days when faculty could communicate availability by posting office hours. Now explicit statements in the syllabus, plus discussion

■ **BEST PRACTICES** > SOCIAL MEDIA

The following strategies may help faculty maintain a line between personal and professional spaces.

MULTIPLE PLATFORMS AND PAGES. Some social media users choose different platforms for different social circles: for example, Facebook and Instagram for family and friends, and LinkedIn and Twitter for professional connec-

tions. Additionally, some platforms allow multiple accounts (Twitter, Instagram). Facebook users can set up group pages that don't grant automatic access to personal pages. This allows faculty to create a page for a class or program that is separate from personal FB account (be sure that privacy settings are set accordingly).

PRIVACY SETTINGS. Judicious use of privacy settings is a worthwhile investment of time. They help regulate who can see and share posts, photos, and other shared information.

MINDFUL PAUSE. Just as the mindful pause helps us think before speaking in class, so too does this strategy help us use social media thoughtfully.
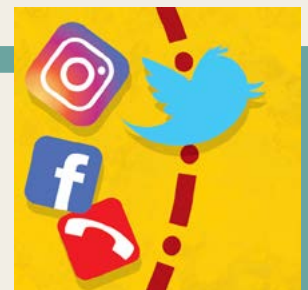
When posting on social media, particularly in spaces that may be viewed or shared by students, ask yourself: "Would I say this out loud in the classroom?"

during the first class, should cover communication channels (including email, LMS messaging, text, and phone) and response intentions.

During the first class, I combine several topics into a discussion regarding respectful communication and use of technology. This is where I clarify that my intention is always to respond within 24 hours. I also ask that they refrain from non-related technology use in the classroom. While many of them, as adult students, may receive texts from work or home, I ask them to step out of the room to respond. This hasn't always worked, but often it does.

THE MINDFUL PAUSE. As much as we try to prepare for boundary-related situations, we still make in-the-moment decisions, in part because everything happens in context and because sometimes we encounter new questions. Tom's mindful pause is a terrific guide (1997). Tom focused on adult learners, but I think her advice is useful in all teaching. She encourages us to pause and ask ourselves: does this thing I am thinking about doing contribute to my long-term goals and responsibilities as a teacher? The answer guides our next move. I use this strategy in a range of situations including when students ask personal questions or for extensions, and when I think about interjecting what I think is a funny story in class. It may sound burdensome, but when built in as a habit, it becomes quick and routine.

Intentional Boundaries Facilitate Connection

For those of us who approach education as a relational practice wherein meaningful interactions and relationships with students are an essential aspect of teaching, an intentional approach to boundaries can help us balance care for students, a commitment to the standards of our disciplines, and self-care. This positions us to remain grounded in our teaching role, foster meaningful connections with students, and remain dedicated to student success.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Barnett, J. E. (2008). Mentoring, boundaries, and multiple relationships: Opportunities and challenges. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning, 16*(1), 3–16.

Booth, M. (2012). Boundaries and student self-disclosure in authentic, integrated learning activities and assignments. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 2012*(131), 5-14.

Booth, M., & Schwartz, H. L. (2012). We're all adults here: Clarifying and maintaining boundaries with adult learners. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 2012*(131), 43-55.

Espinoza, C. (2012). Millennial values and boundaries in the classroom. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 2012*(131), 29-41.

Hua, L. U. (2018). Slow feeling and quiet being: Women of color teaching in urgent times. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 2018*(153), 77–86.

Johnson-Bailey, J. (2015). Academic incivility and bullying as a gendered and racialized phenomena. *Adult Learning, 26*(1), 42–47.

Robertson, D. (2005). Generative paradox in learner-centered college teaching. *Innovative Higher Education, 29*(3), 181–194.

Schwartz, H.L. (2019). *Connected Teaching: Relationship, Power, and Mattering in Higher Education.* Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Tom, A. (1997). The deliberate relationships: A frame for talking about student–faculty relationships. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research, XLIII*(1), 3–21.

Yamashita, M., & Schwartz, H. L. (2012). The coconut and the peach: Understanding, establishing, and maintaining interpersonal boundaries with international students. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 2012*(131), 57-69.