From the Classroom to the Coffee Shop: Graduate Students and Professors Effectively Navigate Interpersonal Boundaries

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Determining and maintaining interpersonal boundaries with students is an ever-present yet rarely-discussed element of teaching graduate students. Where to meet students for advising appointments, how much to self-disclose in the classroom, and whether to collaborate with students on community projects – these are typical of the challenges that graduate school faculty encounter regularly as classroom teachers, and program, thesis, and practicum advisors. This article is based on a grounded theory study of relational practice between master's students and professors; while the study was not designed to explore interpersonal boundaries per se, participants discussed power, position, and boundaries, thus providing significant data to explore this topic. With positive relationship scholarship and relational cultural theory as sensitizing concepts, this study included in-depth interviews of 10 matched pairs of master's alumni and professors wherein each member of the dyad considered the relationship to be meaningful. Grounded theory dimensional analysis methods were used to analyze the data and identified categories including the following: professors' awareness of positionality, professors establishing boundaries, students' awareness of positionality, and students and professors working close to the boundaries. These categories were used to examine extant literature and propose an expanded understanding of interpersonal boundaries between students and teachers.

Questions regarding interpersonal boundaries between graduate students and professors take many forms, from the ethics of romantic or sexual relationships to more common concerns such as the appropriateness of meeting in a coffee shop rather than the office. While intimate relationships between students and professors can be addressed by organizational policy (Fairleigh Dickinson University, 2003; Rhodes College, 2004; University of Michigan, n.d.; University of Queensland, n.d.; Fairleigh Dickinson University Policy on Consensual Relations, 2003) more subtle boundary challenges are rarely part of the institutional dialogue. Yet for most faculty, routine boundary questions are a more present challenge than whether or not to date a student. In the course of an academic year, faculty members set boundaries regarding their availability to students, the locations of their meetings with students, and the degree to which they self-disclose in the classroom. These questions are not only questions of relationship and perimeters, but also of power and positionality; how do we as teachers acknowledge, define, and regulate our authority and position in relationships with students? This article explores questions of interpersonal boundaries between graduate students and faculty.

Barnett (2008), writing about mentoring relationships, provides a definition of boundaries that is relevant not just for mentoring, but also for other teacher/student relationships:

Boundaries are the basic ground rules for the professional relationship. They add a structure to mentorships that provides guidance regarding appropriate actions and interactions for mentors and protégés. . . . Boundaries in professional relationships include dimensions such as touch, location, self-disclosure, gifts, fees, and personal space. Boundaries may be rigidly enforced, crossed, or violated. (p. 5-6)

Higher education researchers and writers who have considered interpersonal boundaries have typically begun by exploring boundary violations. Existing research and theoretical literature has addressed faculty and student perceptions of boundary violations in dual or multiple relationships wherein teachers and students share not only a learning relationship, but also a concurrent employment, financial, or sexual relationship (Barnett, 2008; Kolbert, Morgan, & Brendel, 2002). Elsewhere, seeking to assist professors, several educators have offered guidelines for faculty to assess boundary questions and situations in their relationships with students (Barnett, 2008; Buck, Mast, Latta, & Kaftan, 2009; Johnson, 2008; Sumsion, 2000; Tom, 1997). While existing literature has reviewed boundary violations and prescribed strategies for avoiding such violations, less has been written about professors and students who *successfully* navigate interpersonal boundaries. What do these healthy and ethical relationships look like from the perspective of teachers and students? Drawing from a grounded theory study regarding relational practice between master's students and professors, this article explores alumni and faculty perspectives regarding the effective navigation of positionality and boundaries in teaching relationships. Relevant categories (essentially, the themes that emerged using grounded theory analysis)

include the following: professors' awareness of positionality, professors establishing boundaries, students' awareness of positionality, and students and professors working close to the boundaries. Following the analytical process of grounded theory, these categories are then used to re-examine extant literature regarding teachers, students, and boundaries. In particular, I will revisit the work of Tom (1997), who proposes "The Deliberate Relationship," and Barnett (2008,) who presents a frame for viewing boundaries and suggests relevant strategies.

The Complexities of Distance

Seeking to avoid what some consider to be "the slippery slope" wherein boundary crossings more than likely lead to boundary violations, some professors establish an extended distance between themselves and their students (Barnett, 2008; Tom, 1997). However, educators argue that creating excessive distance in relationships with students serves to diminish the relationship (Baker, 1996; Barnett, 2008; Buck, et al., 2009) and increase the professor's power (Tom, 1997). "Avoiding all boundary crossings (and all multiple relationships as a result) also has the effect of withholding from others much of what makes the professional relationship the rich, rewarding, and valuable relationship that all hope it to be" (Barnett, 2008, p. 7). Moreover, Tom (1997) argues that a professor who maintains significant distance from students increases her or his position power and fails to equip students to deal with power differentials in relationships.

Professors, particularly those who work with adult students, have also attempted to deal with boundary issues by reducing their authority and the existing hierarchy, hoping to diminish the power differential and alter the boundary dynamics. Tom (1997) calls this attempt to minimize authority and power a denial response: the professor inherently has an evaluative and institutional role, as well as disciplinary expertise, and thus definitively holds power. Buck et al., (2009) in exploring teaching as a relational process, attempted to replace the teacher role with that of supportive friend or colleague, listening and encouraging rather than instructing. However, the role experimentation between an education professor and her students resulted in conflict. The professor recalled one student's response:

> Her words made me realize that steps I took to eliminate my authority, not sharing my own teaching experiences or acknowledging that I did have expectations, actually meant that I was removing myself as a source of support and was threatening her with covert expectations. (Buck et al., 2009, p. 514)

Elsewhere, a professor teaching a women's studies class opted for a passive role in her classroom (Gardner, Dean, & McKaig, 1989). Her reduced presence led to a destabilization among students, wherein more knowledgeable students took on an authoritative role and exercised power over the others; this event then served to reduce the sharing of ideas.

A review of the literature regarding boundaries in graduate teaching relationships revealed both empirical and theoretical explorations of the topic, primarily pertaining to boundary violations and boundary assessment. In the following study, faculty and alumni provide their perspectives on working close to the conventional boundaries of teacher and student relationships. The study participants were not asked specifically about boundaries; however, as they discussed their relationships, topics such as time, meeting places, and self-disclosure emerged.

Background of the Study

This study, a doctoral dissertation (Schwartz, 2009), utilized grounded theory dimensional analysis to explore the following question: what goes on in relational practice between master's students and professors? This article focuses on data relating to boundaries, positionality, power differentials, and friendship. In shaping this study, I made a conscious decision to explore relationships that students and faculty considered to be positive; this approach is consistent with positive psychology and positive relationship research (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Fredrickson, 2009; Keyes & Haidt, 2003), as well as relational cultural theory (Jordan, 2010; Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Positive relationship research is based on the positive psychology premise that there is value in studying relationships that are essentially affirmative. This research domain does not deny or ignore the existence of conflict and challenge in relationships; in fact, positive psychology includes the study of resilience, which inherently acknowledges the possibility for difficulty in relationships (Cameron, et al., 2003; Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Fredrickson, 2009; Keyes & Haidt, 2003). The last decade has seen an increase in scholars applying positive psychology to understanding workplace relationships. "PRW (positive relationships at work) examines the conditions, processes, and mechanisms in organizational relationships that increase the capacity for growth, learning, generativity, and resilience in individuals, groups, and organizations" (Dutton & Ragins, 2007. p. 3). These same outcomes are central to the ideals of higher education and thus position positive relationship research as a valuable starting point to further our understanding of teaching and learning.

Relational cultural theory is another framework that has rarely been used as a foundation for considering teaching and learning. However, similar to positive psychology, relational cultural theory (RCT) provides a frame that is immediately relevant to effective teaching and learning: increased energy, creativity, productivity and sense of self worth (Jordan, 2010). RCT suggests that people grow and develop through their relationships with others and that this growth-in-relation is mutual (Jordan, 2010; Miller & Stiver, 1997). RCT proposes five elements of healthy growth-fostering relationships: increased zest, increased knowledge, an ability to take action, increased self-esteem, and a desire for more connection (Jordan, 2010; Miller & Stiver, 1997). Similar to positive psychology, RCT acknowledges the importance of "good conflict" (Jordan, 2010, p. 4) and also seeks to replace power-over with power-with (Jordan, 2010; Miller & Stiver, 1997), an idea that mirrors the goal of some adult educators who seek to reduce – though not eliminate – the power differential between graduate students and professors (Tom, 1997).

While relational cultural theory has not been widely applied in higher education, the role of relationships has been explored in undergraduate mentoring (Liang, Tracy, Taylor, & Williams, 2002), graduate education (Buck, et al., 2009; Rossiter, 1999), and faculty work life (Gersick, Barunek, & Dutton, 2000; Pololi, Conrad, Knight, & Carr 2009).

Method

This study utilized grounded theory methods to explore the question, what goes on in relational practice between master's students and professors? It was from that broad question that specific data and theory regarding boundaries emerged. As I constructed this study, I drew methodological guidance from the grounded theory approach developed by Kathy Charmaz (2002, 2006). Building on the founding principles of grounded theory as it was first developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, Charmaz proposed a constructivist approach. Whereas Glaser and Strauss held a post-positivistic view, Charmaz proposed the idea that creating theory is inherently an interpretive act (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory positions the researcher to build "increasingly abstract ideas about research participants' meanings, actions, and worlds" (Charmaz, 2002, p. 508) and this process and interpretation makes grounded theory practical in the analysis of relationships (Charmaz, 2002). Grounded theory has been used to explore graduate advising (Bloom, Cuevas, Hall, & Evans, 2007), undergraduate

mentoring (Pitney & Ehlers, 2004) and authenticity in teaching (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004).

Participants

As a grounded theorist, I began with purposeful sampling (Charmaz, 2006), a grounded theory approach which calls for the researcher to seek participants who are relevant to the research question. Working through my extended network, I sought participants who were able to identify an alumnus or faculty counterpart with whom they "had a meaningful academic relationship." If the counterpart agreed to participate in the study, I arranged interviews. Participants were informed of the parameters of participation and informed consent. After purposeful sampling, I considered theoretical sampling; however, the data did not indicate theoretical propositions that needed to be addressed through more defined sampling, and thus I continued to seek participants using the original parameters.

I interviewed 10 matched pairs of master's professors and recent alumni; professors and alumni were interviewed individually. Master's students were defined as adult students who were at least 25 years old when commencing graduate study. I interviewed recent alumni rather than current students to avoid intervening in ongoing evaluative teaching relationships. Professors were defined as anyone teaching at the master's level. The matched pairs originated from five social science master's programs located in the United States, including the mid-atlantic region and New England. The professors ranged in age from 39 years old to 78 years old. Alumni ranged in age from 27 years old to 52 years old. The matched pairs included all gender combinations. I reached saturation after the twentieth interview which completed the tenth matched pair. Saturation is reached when the recently-gathered data provides no new properties (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 2008). Several times throughout the research process, I confirmed my initial decision that I had reached saturation by revisiting whether data suggested new properties; saturation is reached by "joint collection and analysis of data" (Glaser & Strauss, 2008, p. 61).

Interviewing

Grounded theory requires the interviewer to refrain from relying on an interview guide or list of predetermined questions, but rather to begin the interview with one question and then craft follow-up questions in the moment (Charmaz, 2006, 2002). My opening question was, "How have you come to know professor X?" or "How have you come to know

alumnus Y?" Interviews typically lasted between 40 and 50 minutes.

Coding

In initial coding, I remained close to the language used by the participants, naming words, lines, or segments to begin organizing the data and developing notions of analytic possibilities (Charmaz, 2006). I considered all professor transcripts as a group and all student transcripts as a second group. Thus each transcript was coded only in relation to other transcripts in its group, and the codes that I developed were group-specific. Initial coding generated 1081 descriptors; I then used axial coding to explore relationships in the coded data. Later in the process, I engaged in focused coding in order to "synthesize and explain larger segments of the data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). Additionally, I worked with a coding partner and a coding group; their observations and responses to the data helped to challenge my perspectives and open my thinking to aspects of the data which did not initially strike me as important. This collaborative process created a space wherein I could think out loud as I made my way through the data.

Analyzing the Data

"What 'all' is involved here?" (Schatzman, 1991, p. 310) is the central methodological question of grounded theory dimensional analysis and drove this study: what all is involved in relational practice between master's students and professors?

Following the methods of grounded theory, the codes that emerge from the interview transcripts are organized into clusters of related codes or trees. These trees are then named using abstract conceptual terms called categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These categories are the basis of the dimensions which allow for the conceptual analysis and modeling of the data. It is important to recognize that all dimensions ascended directly from the coding process that began with the participants' own words.

Findings

As noted previously, this study was a doctoral dissertation. Through this research, I created a visual model of relational practice between master's students and professors, and I also developed a composite narrative. In addition, I advanced several theoretical propositions relating to elements of relational practice such as energy, mutuality, identity, boundaries, and connection. A full review of the analysis and findings of this study is beyond the scope of this article but is available   online

(http://etd.ohiolink.edu/view.cgi?acc_num=antioch1247 833338). Instead, the remainder of this article will provide professor and alumni reflections relevant to issues of positionality and boundaries. All of the following reflections were among the data that formed the categories in the analysis. Again, the full model is not reported here in order to allow for the intended focus on boundary-related content. Drawing from the emergent categories, I will explore professors' awareness of positionality, professors establishing boundaries, students' awareness of positionality, and students and professors working close to the boundaries.

Professors' Awareness of Positionality

The professors in this study exhibited an awareness of their positionality as they discussed the following: balance in the relationship; the classroom and more specifically, the front of the classroom, as symbols of position; and transitioning the relationship. Implying a sense of balance, one professor described her wish to be authentic and informal; at the same time she noted that the informality must still be professional. Another professor described maintaining respect for his students while also keeping clear boundaries:

My personal approach, ah, is that I'm dealing with adults. And you need to treat them as adults. I need, as the instructor, to maintain a respect. I cannot and do not try to be part of the cohort in the sense that they are. I can never, ah, and should never even try to become an equal to them. But on the other hand, I have to meet them where they are. (Professor 4)

Professors also referenced the classroom as an indicator of position. One professor noted that she tells her students that although she "stands in front of the classroom" (perhaps a sign of her position and expertise), she recalls the challenges she faced as a student. Other professors discussed meeting with students outside of the classroom to get to know them better and deepen the academic relationship. Finally, one professor indicated his sense of teacher-student boundaries and position, as he discussed the potential evolution of a relationship: "I guess once somebody graduates and they become your colleague, they can also become a good friend down the line. We talk long term" (Professor 3).

Professors' Establishment of Boundaries

The professors in this study set boundaries by remaining conscious of the evaluative component of the relationship. They articulated clarifications of role, that

even among all the other aspects of the relationship, each remained a teacher in the life of a student. Several professors identified limits to the relationship, clarifying what does *not* go on in the relationship. Professors indicated a variety of limits with students: not venting, not gossiping, not talking about other professors, not inviting the student to the professor's house individually, and not moving in each other's social circles.

At least a few of these professors acknowledged that close relationships with students present boundary challenges. None of these professors described struggling with boundaries. Moreover, the professors' descriptions of elements of friendship indicate that these professors are able to expand or at least push against more conventional ideas about boundaries and student/teacher relationships.

Variations on friendship were present in several of the pairs who participated in this study. Often for these professors, the notion of friendship meant that the professor and student or alum would share personal as well as academic and professional matters. In one case, a professor stated that her friendship with the alumnus was no different than friendships she has with other people who were not her students. However, in most cases there was still a different boundary in these friendships than in friendships between these professors and non-students:

I wouldn't talk with her about relation – my own relationship issues in detail. [I: Okay.] I'm recently divorced, and will joke about, you know, there aren't any good men out there. But I wouldn't necessarily talk to her in detail about things. (Professor 3)

Students' Awareness of Positionality

Students described an awareness of positionality, acknowledging that student and professor were neither peers nor equal in power. Yet this awareness also reflected a connection and mutuality that reduced, but did not disintegrate hierarchy and distance. The image of the professor in front of the classroom sometimes served as a metaphor for distance to be maintained and sometimes overcome:

[This seminar] was very – a very different experience. It's like – I mean, it's the difference between like somebody who's sort of sitting above you, and telling you what you don't know yet, and somebody sitting down with you and you're having a discussion. (Student 7)

Another element of positionality is the students' awareness of boundaries. Students voiced a clear sense of boundary, often articulated by what *would not* happen between student and professor, such as "I wouldn't ask

him to get a beer," or "I wouldn't have him over for a cook-out." Students also mentioned an awareness that the professor exists in the campus community of other professors and an awareness of potential political issues among faculty. One student described how boundaries strengthen the relationship:

I've never thought of it this way, but the boundaries that sort of – I think maintain that safety for taking risk. We're not best friends, you know what I mean? We're – I am here to learn. I'm paying a tuition, and there is an expected outcome of that. You're expected to support me through this process, and I'm expected to do my papers, and get my stuff in on time, and do my work, and work hard. (Student 9)

Students also recognized boundaries implied by physical space. Students and professors met in a variety of spaces including, of course, the classroom and the professor's office. Students also reported meeting with professors off campus, typically "for coffee." Other students described visiting a professor's home as well as gathering around a campfire at a summer program. While it seems obvious that different settings create different tones, I think it is worth noting ways in which these spaces helped shape students' experiences with their professors. The classroom and office convey a feeling of formality and seriousness: "She's always made me feel like she is that – she is sort of in charge of my destiny in a way, in that, in that office" (Student 3). Connecting outside of the office shifts the mood and allows for a more personal connection:

The other thing that he did, um – sometimes we would have a – we did this (class)on a Friday night/Saturday, and we would have a Saturday lunch. Not always, but periodically we would like all walk together down to Panera or something for lunch, and he would walk with different people and chat – chitchat, and then, you know, walk back and chitchat. So, just that – not just the classroom relationship, but the outside end of class. (Student 10)

In addition, visiting a professor in her or his home extends the personal nature of the relationship:

And I mean she has sometimes had some dinner parties and things at her house and I would go to those, and then I got to know her and I would see her interact with her family and things like that. (Student 6)

These three examples are not presented to imply that settings create definitive climates or boundaries. Clearly, a student and professor can connect on a personal level even in the classroom or office, and an

off-campus meeting might feel just as formal as one in the classroom. Nonetheless, these students reveal ways in which space adds to the context of the relationship.

Students and Professors Working Close to the Boundaries

A subset of professors in this study told powerful stories about relationships with students that expanded these professors' individual worldviews. In these cases, the professor and student came from significantly different backgrounds and communities. The student revealed aspects of her or his culture and community initially through papers and class discussion. This work led to deeper dyadic conversations in which the student shared even more deeply and the professor acquired greater insight. In two cases, the professor and student eventually arranged to meet in the community. In this first case, the student was part of an underground alternative community. She was exploring approaches to help this community vis-à-vis mental health issues. She invited the professor to attend a community meeting with her. The professor recounts that meeting:

> I knew when I first met her that I had a lot to learn from her. And so, umm, that was a real gift that she gave me, to even invite me. It meant a lot to me that she trusted me to do that, to go there with her, and to open that up. Umm, so it was role reversal. I felt like, umm, umm, I didn't want to embarrass her, you know, that kind of thing. [I: Yeah.] Umm, I just wanted mainly to be quiet and observe and listen and if anybody had any questions or comments that they could ask me, but I didn't want to go in as the expert. I wanted just to be somebody who was there, as her guest. You know, that's – and I was real comfortable. I did not want to be like a speaker or anything like that. I really was going as her guest, as her invited guest. (Professor 3)

The professor and student later discussed the student's interest in community mental health. The professor clarified that while she was willing to serve in an advisory role, she declined to stay directly involved with the project, seeing it as the student's domain. Elsewhere, another professor and student also connected around the student's community work and the professor's involvement within his church:

> We have a men's group here at the church that meets once a month and it's Saturday morning. I asked him to come over and talk to the guys 'cause I just thought there was a message that, ah, he could carry on the marriage of love and concern, the marriage of – a message of growth and, ah, it

> just worked out very, very well. And in fact, umm, and it's helped his ministry because our pastor, umm, has been able to put him in contact with some people and some situations that have been very helpful to growing his youth ministry, or young men's ministry. So it's been very rewarding. (Professor 8)

In several cases wherein either the professor or student remembered experiences that indicate working close to the boundaries, such as the examples above, the professor or student also recalled the continuing evaluative or mentoring role played by the professor. In one pair, the professor had invited the student to attend dinner parties at her house, and she continues to do so now that he is an alumnus. The following quote from this professor does not seem particularly noteworthy in its content: the professor recalls speaking with the alum who has in turn become a college professor, pushing him to be more active professionally. However, the tone conveyed by her words is telling. Note the last sentence of the quote:

> And I still think he needs – he needs to do some publication now, to keep his academic job. And that's one of the things we talk about when I meet with him as well, what are you working on? Get to work on it. (Professor 6)

Alumni from other pairs spoke of friendships with their former professors, and in discussing friendship, they revealed an interesting tension between wanting to expand the boundaries of the relationship while also wanting to preserve its essence:

> You know, I guess I'd say, it is more of a professional friendship, you know. It isn't that I can call him up and say hey, let's go have a beer. You know, it hasn't developed that, you know, into that. Or hey, let's go to the football game, or umm, hey, I'm cooking out – can you come over? It hasn't developed into that. Yet. Would I like – would I like that? Heck, yeah. You know, every opportunity that I have, you know, to sit and talk to him, you know, I would love to have that opportunity. (Student 8)

While some students yearned for a more personal or casual relationship, at the same time they regard it as having something extra that purely social friendships do not contain:

> I guess that, that it's no – notably different than the other relationships I have with that connection because those are more like friends. And this feels like a friendship but much more. (Student 3)

Discussion

The relevant categories or concepts that emerged from the data in this study connect to several ideas found in the theoretical literature regarding teachers, students, and interpersonal boundaries. Specifically, findings in this study provide illustrative support for boundary strategies suggested previously in the theoretical literature by Tom (1997), Sumsion (2000) and Barnett (2008). In addition, a theoretical proposition which emerges from this study also serves to challenge assertions made by Johnson (2008) and to expand Barnett's (2008) view of boundaries in teacher/student relationships.

First, the findings in the professors establish boundaries category reveal awareness and intentionality that support Tom's call for presence and authenticity. The professors in this study were clear about their boundaries with students, stating for example that they would not vent, gossip, or talk about other professors with students. Also recall the professor quoted earlier who said she would joke about "looking for a man" but wouldn't discuss her relationships in detail with her students. This intentionality echoes Tom (1997):

> In the deliberate relationship, there is a pause between the experience of an impulse and its expression. In that pause, however brief, we interrogate the impulse: Does it serve the long-term obligations of the relationship? If the answer is No, we refrain. In this way, the thoughts and feelings expressed in the deliberate relationship are both genuine and controlled. (p. 12)

These findings also affirm the approach taken by Sumsion (2000) who, building on Tom's (1997) work, sought to find an appropriate level of caring and engagement vis-a-vis students and their problems while also maintaining her role as a teacher evaluating student work. The current study revealed examples of professors who cared deeply for their students while also maintaining their roles as evaluators. Relatedly, the current findings challenge Johnson's (2008) suggestion that as mentors and proteges develop increasing mutuality and collegiality, mentors may be less able to objectively evaluate students' work. This study did not explore that question per se; however, students in the study reported feeling challenged by their professors, and professors reported a clear awareness of their roles.

Elsewhere, Barnett (2008) suggests that professionals draw upon the virtues of beneficence, non-malfeasance, fidelity, autonomy, and justice when considering boundary questions. Barnett later offers specific recommendations for both faculty and academic administrators regarding boundaries in mentoring and multiple relationships. The stories told by the professors who engaged with their students in the community serve to illustrate Barnet's proposed strategy. For example, the professor who attended a community mental health meeting with her student was careful to maintain her position as a guest at the meeting and not take on her professor role. Further, she clarified that she would be willing to advise her student in the future regarding the community work, but that she would limit her involvement, thus respecting the student's autonomy.

Finally, findings of this study present an alternative view of boundaries. Barnett (2008) suggests that boundaries are either observed, crossed, or violated. I propose a fourth position that we, as professionals, can choose regarding boundaries and that is *working close to the boundary*. Meeting in non-traditional settings, allowing meetings to run overtime, and the sharing of a mentor's personal information with a protégé are all boundary crossings, according to Barnett. However, if boundaries indicate appropriateness in professional relationships (Barnett, 2008), I suggest that sharing a story with a protégé regarding one's own graduate school struggles is not crossing the boundary; in the context of the relationship, this can be appropriate ethical behavior. Using Tom's (1997) framework suggests that sharing this kind of story can serve the student and the relationship; the professor does not share this personal information because she needs the student's support, but rather to attempt to validate the student's struggles. The students in this study, who shared stories that would qualify as a professor working close to the boundaries (for example, meeting off campus, sharing personal-professional stories, and working together in the community), indicated that they felt challenged, respected, and encouraged. These students did not describe feeling as if a line had been crossed, but rather that a relationship and their learning had been enriched.

One student reflected on her enhanced view of authority. She entered her master's program having had little meaningful connection with people in authority and doubting the potential positivity of those connections. Her work with her professor shifted her perspective. Reflecting on the relationship, the student commented: "It's changed the way that I think about people. It's changed the way that I think about how – how you can connect when there's a difference in power" (Student 3). This student's comment recalls Tom's (1997) assertion that by resisting the urge to deny or widen the boundary with students, professors help students learn how to navigate power differentials.

Another student remembers believing that her professor knew her and her classmates well and that this knowing facilitated deeper teaching and learning:

> I think definitely the way she operates in the classroom, um, like the no-nonsense approach with the soft hands, and how she pushes her students,

and it's like she knows how far she can push you, and she knows what your limitations are, um, because I think, like, you learn so much more that way. You learn more about yourself, your limitations, and what you can do, and what you can't do. (Student 2)

As professors, we have learned to be cautious about boundaries. There are the obvious boundary concerns, such as engaging in inappropriate relationships, and so being careful to manage these boundaries is vitally important. However, this study helps us explore more subtle boundary issues. To what degree does self-disclosure bring humanity to the relationship and what is the tipping point at which it shifts the focus from the student's needs to the professor's? To what degree can we self-disclose and still maintain our position as the holder of the relationship? When does a change of venue (e.g., meeting off campus) strengthen the bond and when does it confuse the relationship?

While this study focused on graduate students, perhaps the findings can also help us think about boundaries and undergraduate students. While a full exploration of this topic is beyond the scope of this article, a few themes emerge. First, regarding self-disclosure, increased and intentional self-disclosure of our own academic journeys may help our students progress to more mature understandings of the academic process. For example, sharing stories of how we came to hear a professor's feedback as a challenge to be better rather than as a personal affront could help our own students make the same transition. Similarly, sharing stories of those critical moments when we came to see ourselves as co-creators of knowledge rather than receivers of information may help our students start to imagine themselves as active co-learners. Finally, while the stories of adult students in this study contributed to our understanding of working close to the boundaries, traditional-aged undergraduates bring a different set of expectations and worldviews that will challenge our conceptions of boundaries. Undergraduates bring long-standing constructs such as their personal and generational views of power and authority, as well as newer realities such as evolving views on availability and privacy in the 24/7 digital world.

When beginning this study, I did not intend to explore boundaries per se, meaning I did not shape the study with boundaries in mind. Nonetheless, boundary-related categories emerged from the data, providing empirical support for previously-proposed theoretical ideas regarding boundaries (Barnett, 2008; Tom, 1997). Future research might explore student and faculty perceptions and experiences of boundaries more directly. This study took a positive psychology perspective and focused on healthy relationships.

Again, avoiding the obvious boundary violations of inappropriate relationships, future research could explore more subtle experiences of boundary confusion or boundary missteps and adjustments both from teacher and student perspectives. In addition, future studies might seek deeper understandings of students and professors who engage in healthy and ethical relationships in which they work close to the boundary. When pushed to consider this dynamic more directly, how would professors describe their thinking and decision-making? How would students describe their experience of the learning space created when working close to the boundaries in a context of trust and respect?

In conclusion, this study deepens the dialog regarding interpersonal boundaries between teachers and students. While previous studies and writings have considered multiple relationships and boundary violations (Barnett, 2008; Johnson, 2008; Kolbert et al., 2002), this study, emerging from a positive psychology perspective, provides a view of students and professors who effectively and ethically navigate questions regarding interpersonal boundaries. By working close to the boundaries intentionally, these teachers and students enhance the mutuality of their learning relationship and, perhaps more importantly, deepen the potential for the student's intellectual risk-taking and development.

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