Dealing with Boundary Violations

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INTRODUCTION

This manuscript explores boundary violations and faculty groups who are particularly vulnerable to incivilities. Incivilities can occur between students and faculty because appropriate boundaries are not established between the two. As a result, when boundaries are violated, it becomes very difficult for faculty to use their expert power effectively and teach successfully. The first part of this chapter presents a framework explaining boundary violations as described by Peterson (1). Peterson describes the types of boundary violations that occur in a professional and client relationship, specifically violations of the relationship by the professional. These violations are presented in the first part of this chapter and related to the professor-student relationship. The second part of the manuscript describes violations that students make in the relationship (in and out of the classroom). The final section presents strategies faculty may use to establish boundaries to limit the likelihood of incivilities.

Boundary violations are the misuse of power in the professional-client relationship (1). Boundaries, as defined by Peterson, "are the limits that allow for a safe connection based on the client's needs. When these

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limits are altered, what is allowed in the relationship becomes ambiguous. Such ambiguity is often experienced as an intrusion into the sphere of safety. The pain from a violation is frequently delayed, and the violation itself may not be recognized or felt until harmful consequences emerge" (1). Simply stated, boundary violations invade the relationship between a professional and a client and exploit or destroy the trust that has developed. It involves a process–not just a single event–that grows like a cancer in the relationship and is not acknowledged until the dilemma has become serious (1). Peterson explains that "while violations fall on a continuum from minor mistakes to major transgressions, they all share the same characteristics. Learning to recognize the similarities gives us a map for deciphering potentially risky situations" (1).

Boundaries exist in the professional-client relationship to protect the relationship. It is the professional's responsibility to clearly identify and set these limits, as well as to maintain the limits so that the clients' needs are addressed above all else. When one extrapolates this to a teacher-learner situation, it suggests that teachers need to clearly define the boundaries for students and to recognize that if boundary violations arise, the relationship becomes unclear and may set the stage for incivilities. If a professor places his or her needs above those of the student, a boundary violation may occur, and the result may or may not be a civil situation. For example, the professor who takes credit for the work completed by one of her students violates the trust that has developed. This lays the foundation for erosion of the relationship.

CHARACTERISTICS OF BOUNDARY VIOLATIONS

This section describes Peterson's characteristics of boundary violations and gives examples of incivilities resulting from professor-student violations. All examples presented are based on actual situations involving women and minority professors. However, the situations are disguised to protect the identity of the individuals and the school.

The four characteristics of boundary violations are: (1) *a reversal of roles*, (2) *a secret*, (3) *a double bind*, and (4) *an indulgence of professional privilege*. These characteristics are interrelated in a system that has its own existence. Let's look at each of these characteristics in more detail. First, when the professional and client switch places or the professional places his or her needs above the clients', *a role reversal* has taken place. For instance, when a professor schedules office hours for students and then repeatedly shows up late or not at all, the professor

places the student's needs in a secondary role. Although, this may appear as a minor violation, the professional (teacher) is still responsible for defining the parameters of the relationship and determining whose needs will come first and who will meet them. In another serious situation, the professor befriends the students in a cordial manner and joins them for several "nights on the town." Later, the students perform poorly on an exam given by the same professor and expect some special consideration from the professor. They are shocked when the professor takes a professional role and does not treat them in the friendly way they had come to expect. Clearly, roles have been confused and the students find the circumstances ambiguous. The professor has created a situation in which the students do not receive consistently fair treatment. A definite boundary violation, role reversal, has occurred.

The second characteristic, *the secret*, involves hiding information that is harmful to the client, thus destroying the trust that has been built in the relationship. "In a boundary violation, the presence of secrets functions either (1) to separate the client from the professional while deceitfully maintaining the pretense of a common endeavor or (2) to falsely join the client and professional against those who are on the outside and do not know the secret" (1).

Peterson asserts, "More important than the content of the secret, though, is its effect on both the professional and the client. A secret splits rather than strengthens the bond of trust. It protects behaviors that are not legitimate to the intent and purpose of the professional-client relationship by restricting the client's access to knowing. Because the professional acts out of the secret rather than out of regard for the client's need, a part of the professional's self is not available to engage with the client." An example of the secret is when the professor dates a student who is in her class, then attempts to maintain a neutral position toward this student during classroom encounters. This puts the student in an ambiguous situation, thus giving rise to the boundary violation, the secret.

The third characteristic, *the double bind*, as described by Peterson places the client in a conflict of interest (1). It involves the professional placing his or her needs above the client's, thus causing the client to lose in the relationship because trust is violated. The client feels that he or she has no choices in handling the situation. The client feels "indebted to the professional for his or her help, they worry that they will betray the relationship if they comment on the violation. The guilt, along with the real fear of possible abandonment by the professional, blocks them from taking action. On the other hand, their continuing participation in a

violation risks their integrity, because they fail to give credence to their inner voice that says something is wrong" (1). Thus, the client feels used and feels that he or she has compromised his or her own needs. The result is a loss of respect for oneself.

Peterson further expounds, "Boundary violations place clients in untenable binds. Since they are highly dependent on the professional, clients feel both trapped inside the relationship and bound by their perceived inability to move independently. They are tied both by what they need from the professional and by their fear of being without the relationship. If they give up the relationship, they lose the professional's needed expertise. If they stay in the relationship, they lose a part of their personhood" (1).

In one situation, a professor attempted to use his close relationship with one student (Student A) to gather information about another student (Student B). Student A was taking an elective course with the professor because she had an interest in this area as a career endeavor. This professor was well known for his expertise in the area, and she was honored that he had agreed to help her develop her interest and possible career focus. After working with him for a complete semester, Student A developed a close relationship with the professor. In another course, this professor had given various writing assignments to the class. The professor noticed that one student in particular appeared to have submitted a paper that he probably had not written (based on previous papers that this student had written). He noticed that Student A had a close relationship with Student B. Because of his relationship with Student A, he asked her to ascertain whether Student B had actually written the paper or had received it from the Internet or another source. Of course, the professor requested that Student A do this in a concealed fashion and report the information back to him so that he had evidence to change the grade. Although Student A felt she was compromising her integrity and loyalty, she also felt compelled to honor this request because she was taking the special elective, needed a good grade, and was depending on the professor's expertise to help her achieve her career goals. In this case the boundary violation involves both the secret and the double bind.

The final characteristic, *the indulgence of personal privilege*, involves the professional taking advantage of the personal information that he or she has obtained from the client during their encounters. Peterson describes this characteristic:

In every boundary violation, there is a fit between the professional's need and the client's vulnerability. This coupling produces the opportunity for the professional to take advantage of the client. Indeed, since the professional has the authority over and the responsibility for the client's situation, he or she is particularly susceptible to extending the privilege of his or her superior position and intruding on the client. The professional's decision to act on this opportunity grows out of his or her presumption that he or she can use his or her privilege to do whatever he or she wants with the client. Once the professional substitutes his or her agenda for the ethos of care, his or her energy is directed toward an illegitimate goal. He or she operates out of a different place internally . . . The indulgence of personal privilege allows the professional to pursue the relationship for his or her own purposes. (1)

In situations where the professional violates this indulgence of personal privilege, he or she often uses language such as, "It is in the best interest of the client that . . ." or this is being "done for the client" (1). The violator rationalizes inappropriate behavior and violation of the professional-client relationship. Further,

Since the purpose of the professional-client relationship is to serve the client, however, professionals who extend their privilege have to establish a legitimate claim to intrude and some reason to explain behavior that is otherwise incongruent with the ethos of care. They have to persuade themselves that their behavior is either inconsequential or helpful and necessary for the client. In effect, they must hide their true impulses. (1)

As these examples illustrate, every boundary violation damages the professional-client relationship. It is imperative, therefore, that professionals keep this in mind and not allow violations to betray the trust that has formed between them and their clients.

STUDENT VIOLATIONS OF BOUNDARIES

Students also violate boundaries in the professor-student relationship. These violations may lead to minor or major incivilities. This section presents examples of real-life situations where students have violated boundaries. Suggestions for handling these situations are offered.

The Grade or Exam Challenger

Some students use their own poor performance to attack professors by arguing that the teaching was inadequate or the grading was unfair, thus contributing to their poor performance on the exam. In my early years as a professor, I allowed students to challenge grades on exams. Often these challenges were almost belligerent. When I returned the exams, I explained my detailed grading policy and the item analysis of each question (even the open-ended questions), but I still had these less-than-respectful challenges. I would become quite defensive. Finally, I developed a grade challenge policy, which was also detailed in my course syllabus. This policy required students to write a challenge letter within 24 hours after an exam was returned if they wished to dispute a grade. Whenever they challenged an exam, they had to write a letter indicating why they believed that their answer was graded inappropriately, they had to provide evidence in the letter that clearly justified their response, and they were not to disturb the teaching assistants or me about the matter because they would receive a written response from me. After implementing this policy, I not only received fewer complaints, but the level of civility regarding exams changed. Students became more civil and I became less defensive through the setting of boundaries.

The Flatterer or Con Man (or Woman)

Some students like to "sweet talk" professors by giving them compliments such as "you're the best professor I ever had"; "you always dress so nice and better than other professors"; or "I am impressed with the depth of your expertise." For some faculty, these compliments overshadow their ability to sense that the student is really seeking to enhance his or her grades, get deadline extensions on assignments, or receive favoritism. Faculty must tread carefully and be cautious in these situations while remembering to consider possible hidden agendas.

The Overtly Hostile Student

Some students are known for attacking the professor's point of view publicly in class. It is not the disagreement that is the problem, but the lack of respect. Others violate boundaries by becoming confrontational, disrespectful, or angry. In these cases, a faculty member would be wise to listen carefully, to acknowledge the student's feelings, to state the

faculty member's position clearly and rationally, and to avoid becoming defensive. If necessary, meet with the student in the presence of another (possibly senior) faculty member outside of class.

The Expertise Challenger

You may come across those students who will challenge the expertise of the professor, a guest, or other lecturer. Unfortunately, the literature states that students challenge the expertise of women faculty more often than male faculty. A situation cited to me involved a female course coordinator who arranged various speakers in her class on a variety of subjects. She asked the class to evaluate each presenter at the end of the presentations. During one particular class, she invited a male presenter and a female presenter to the same session. During this session, the male presenter was unprepared, was unorganized, and had difficulty relating the material to the objectives in the course. However, the students stated that they enjoyed his humor and unrelated stories. On the other hand, the female presenter was more professional, was better organized, used stories that related to the material, and summarized the main issues throughout the session. Upon reviewing the evaluations, it was evident to the professor that there was a major difference between the student's evaluations of the male presenter versus the female presenter. The male presenter received a reasonably high to moderate evaluation in this situation; however, unless the female lecturer "did a song and dance and had incredible content and a great personality," she was more likely to receive critical remarks on her evaluation no matter how well prepared or qualified she was. In fact, students were more likely to treat female presenters in a more uncivil manner than male presenters.

As these situations imply, when faculty fail to provide clear boundaries, it is apparent that problems may arise. Such problems can lead to incivilities and, if they persist, to frustration on the part of students and faculty.

According to Richardson, student incivility in higher education is appearing more often in news reports and popular literature (2). What are the implications for faculty? Who are the most vulnerable faculty? What can faculty do to prevent incivilities? Faculty who receive uncivil student behavior can become stressed, discontented, and burned out. Faculty who have previously faced uncivil actions may begin devoting time and energy to planning coping strategies and not focus on content and class material. The faculty member may go to class and become defensive even before any inappropriate behavior occurs. In fact, some

faculty become so frustrated that they may dread going to class altogether and become demoralized and disillusioned with teaching.

Appleby asserts that uncivil behavior on the part of faculty or students can also jeopardize the learning process for those students not involved in the irritating or inappropriate behavior (3). Inappropriate behaviors can create a stressed environment for the other students, and learning becomes counterproductive when incivilities obstruct learning opportunities (4).

Morrissette argues that:

> Faculty members who are trained in the helping professions may be more prepared to discuss problems that emerge in the classroom due to their experience and familiarity with unexpected client behavior. For example, it is not unusual for helping professionals to experience client resistance, confrontation, or anger within a counseling context. Therefore, faculty with clinical experience who encounter similar behavior in the classroom may be better equipped to employ their clinical skills in handling or diffusing troubling situations. (4)

Although clinical faculty may be used to dealing with client behavior, new clinical faculty are inexperienced as teachers and may not be comfortable handling these types of situations within the classroom.

Several years ago, a pharmacy faculty member shared a situation with me in which a student did not believe in the new pharmaceutical care philosophy of practicing pharmacy. This student verbally and nonverbally discarded the professor's strategies and activities in the class by citing his own experiences in the community pharmacy in which he had worked. The student further conveyed hostility toward the professor, challenged her authority publicly in the classroom, and made it clear that the new faculty member was not only younger but also obviously had not been practicing in the "real world." Unfortunately, the faculty member became so overwhelmed that she failed to set boundaries in the class and lost control for the entire semester. Students started skipping class or were loud and failed to treat her with respect when they were in class. She later became so disillusioned with teaching that she returned to practice. There are several strategies she should have tried before leaving teaching. For example, she could have discussed the situation with a senior faculty member to get ideas for handling the students. Of course, she should have met with this particular student outside of class. Further, she should have set clear expectations

about how she wanted students to behave during her class. Finally, she could have invited practicing professionals into the class to validate the concepts she was teaching.

Which faculty are the most vulnerable? Royce responded in her keynote presentation at a campus forum on academic incivility that the most vulnerable are "[y]oung faculty, women, faculty of color, faculty who do not reside in the 'most favored nation' departments, faculty who invest time in community- rather than individual-building activities. Those faculty need to be supported because we would be the poorer without their voices and their talents. That support has to be consistent, tangible, vocal and visible" (5).

Lieberg stresses that there are differences with women faculty in the classroom (6). "For instance, women faculty members are expected, by students, to act more supportive and motherly than male professors, but if they do, students are less likely to see them as strong and intellectual teachers. If women hold to tough standards, they are viewed as being 'masculine.' Women are more likely to be challenged" (6).

Cannon describes her experience as a new female faculty member:

> When I started, I was reluctant to address the emotionally laden content of the classroom. But over time, I gave more and more attention to classroom interaction, which, like all group interactions, is structured by inequalities of power among the participants. They are not random, haphazard, or out of the control of the teacher. Our behavior as faculty members and the way we structure our courses play major roles in the nature of classroom interactions as they unfold throughout the semester. (7)

FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATION RESPONSE TO INCIVILITIES

How Can Faculty Respond?

What can faculty do to prevent incivilities? Faculty can reduce the chance of incivilities in the classroom by setting boundaries and making students aware of these boundaries. As Cannon suggests, faculty must recognize that the interactions in the class are not random or out of the professor's control. Faculty must set the limits and boundaries. Consider the following strategies.

Set Limits and Explain Rules Clearly. Set boundaries by spelling out the rules for your class in the course syllabus. For example, you might explain the type of courtesy behavior you expect when a guest is visiting the class or lecturing. Describe the consequences of inappropriate behavior such as talking during lectures, arriving late to class, or reading the newspaper during class. Spend time in the very first class period reviewing the syllabus with special attention to these rules and limits. The advantage of a well-written syllabus is to clearly communicate your expectations to students.

Address Problem Behavior Directly and Immediately. Often when problems occur it is easy to ignore them. Although ignoring the problem may avoid class distractions or public confrontation, it does not eliminate the problem. Unresolved conflicts can resurface and cause major problems later.

Model Appropriate Behavior. If you want students to be prompt, courteous, respectful, organized, etc., model these behaviors. Don't arrive to class late. Don't keep students over the allotted class time and then expect them to act appropriately. Don't yell, embarrass, or use public humiliation if you want students to be courteous and respectful. Don't present material and assignments in a disorderly fashion and expect students to be organized.

Get Mid-Term Feedback. Ask students to give input about the course during the mid-term. This allows you to correct problems, to respond to students' needs, and to defuse potential incivilities. One approach developed by Redmond and Clark at the University of Washington in 1982 involves using small focus groups of students to provide feedback at mid-term (8). Students respond to three questions during the focus group discussion:

- What elements in this course helped you to meet the learning objectives?
- What elements in this course prevented you from meeting the learning objectives?
- What specific suggestions do you have to improve the course?

How Can Administrators Respond?

Administrators have various ways to respond to incivilities, including being supportive; offering advice; listening; and, when necessary, providing strategies to reduce the chance of incivilities occurring. Department heads need to provide the necessary support and resources to

allow faculty to be effective teachers in the classroom. When incivilities occur, the department chair should take time to discuss the matter with the faculty member, listen to both sides of the situation, and offer suggestions as appropriate. The key role for the department head is to reduce the stress and awkwardness that the faculty member feels in these situations.

To prevent incivilities from occurring, department chairs should take a more proactive approach with new and inexperienced faculty. The majority of new faculty have not had any formal preparation on how to be college teachers. Several strategies may help these inexperienced faculty members:

- Assign a senior effective teacher to serve as a teaching mentor to the new faculty member. This individual can offer help with a variety of issues and concerns.
- Assist the faculty member in developing clear expectations and policies for the course.
- Provide peer observation and/or peer reviews for the individual to gain insights from another faculty member. Observations should only be done by invitation.
- Talk with faculty about their behavior in the classroom and their ability to set a good example.
- Offer suggestions to those faculty who indirectly promote uncivil behavior by their own behavior. For instance, some faculty can provoke an unpleasant situation by publicly humiliating or invalidating students or by making snide remarks, and some faculty can be arrogant and blinded to their contribution in the situation.

Lastly, to prevent student-faculty conflicts from escalating, department heads should have a grievance process in place and make sure that students and faculty are familiar with the process.

As a last resource, deans need to be prepared to step in when the situation warrants upper-level action. For example, one minority faculty member described her experience in a predominately nonminority student classroom. When she entered class on several occasions and approached the overhead projector to place her materials for the day, she would come across upsetting racial material or comments that had been written on the projector. Other students told her that several students in the class were leaving these notes, but they refused to identify the individuals. After she reported these incidents to the department head and expressed her feelings about the situation, the department head simply

minimized the situation and indicated that she needed to toughen up. In another situation, the minority female faculty received upsetting racial telephone calls at her home from students. Of course, she was both frightened and uncomfortable. In this case, the dean called a meeting of the entire student body and publicly informed the students that such behavior would not be tolerated in that school.

Administrators must provide the support and resources to allow faculty to be effective teachers. This may involve assisting faculty with uncivil situations and providing guidance to avoid potential problems. It is also important that administrators realize these are very sensitive circumstances. Finally, administrators need to respond quickly and appropriately to make sure that the faculty member feels like a valuable asset to the school.

CONCLUSION

Although incivilities in college classrooms are increasing, we must not lose heart. We must remain vigilant to the reason we became college professors. Parker Palmer expresses it well:

> Many of us became teachers for reasons of the heart, animated by a passion for some subject and for helping people learn . . . We lose heart, in part, because teaching is a daily exercise in vulnerability . . . As we try to connect ourselves and our subjects with our students, we make ourselves, as well as our subjects vulnerable to indifference, judgment, ridicule. To reduce our vulnerability, we disconnect from students, from subjects, and even from ourselves. We build a wall between inner truth and outer performance and we playact the teacher's part. Our words, spoken at remove from our hearts, become the "balloon speech in cartoons" and we become caricatures of ourselves. We distance ourselves from students and subject to minimize the danger–forgetting that distance makes life more dangerous still by isolating the self. (9)

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