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Citation: Batool SF. The Ethics of Empowerment: Mentorship, Autonomy, and Academic Boundaries. *PJE*. 2023;3(1):10-18.

Corresponding Author Email:
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Funding:
The author(s) received no specific funding for this work.

Conflicts of Interests:
The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Received 10/03/2023
Accepted 15/04/2023
First Published 22/05/2023



Original Article

The Ethics of Empowerment: Mentorship, Autonomy, and Academic Boundaries

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Abstract

Background: Academic institutions need to have clear policies, reporting mechanisms, and support systems in place to address boundary violations promptly and effectively. Prevention and education regarding professional boundaries are equally crucial to minimize the likelihood of such violations occurring and to maintain a healthy, respectful academic environment. This research paper aims to contribute to the academic discourse surrounding the professor-student relationship, emphasizing the importance of professional boundaries for the benefit of all stakeholders in higher education.

Methodology: This study employs a qualitative research design to comprehensively investigate professional boundaries in the professor-student relationship. In-depth interviews were conducted with a select group of participants, including professors, students, and academic administrators. These interviews provide rich qualitative data, allowing for a deeper exploration of experiences and insights.

Results: Qualitative results reveal rich insights into the experiences and perceptions of professors, students, and academic administrators regarding professional boundaries. These qualitative results highlight the complexity of the professor-student relationship and the importance of addressing professional boundaries in academia. They also emphasize the need for ongoing dialogue, education, and institutional support to ensure that these boundaries are understood, respected, and maintained to create a safe and conducive learning environment.

Conclusion: The maintenance of professional boundaries in the professor-student relationship is of paramount importance in the academic context. These boundaries have ethical, pedagogical, and practical significance that cannot be overstated. Ethically, they safeguard students' autonomy, protect against exploitation, and prevent harm. Pedagogically, they ensure the focus remains on learning, objectivity in assessment, and positive role modeling.

Keywords

Ethics, Empowerment, Mentorship, Autonomy, Academic Boundaries

Introduction

The professor-student relationship is the cornerstone of academia, playing a pivotal role in shaping the educational experience, personal development, and future success of students. It is a unique and multifaceted relationship that goes beyond the transmission of knowledge. Understanding its significance is essential for educators, institutions, and society as a whole¹.

Professors are the custodians of knowledge and expertise in their respective fields. They have the responsibility to impart this knowledge to students through lectures, discussions, and assignments. Through this relationship, students gain access to specialized information, critical thinking skills, and practical know-how necessary for their academic and professional growth. Beyond academics, professors often serve as mentors and guides. They help students navigate the complexities of their academic journeys and offer advice on career choices and personal development. Mentorship fosters a sense of belonging and support, which is particularly crucial for students transitioning to higher education².

Professors, as experts in their fields, can inspire students to pursue academic excellence and aspire to become leaders in their own right. They serve as role models, showcasing the possibilities of what dedication, knowledge, and expertise can achieve. In the professor-student relationship, critical thinking is cultivated through discussions, debates, and challenging the status quo. Students learn to question, analyze, and form their own opinions, contributing to the development of independent thinkers and informed citizens. Professors often engage students in research projects, encouraging them to explore and contribute to the advancement of knowledge^{3,4}.

This relationship fuels innovation and the generation of new ideas, benefiting both academia and society. Interactions with professors can boost students' self-confidence, helping them overcome academic challenges and develop a sense of self-efficacy. Constructive feedback and mentorship aid in personal growth and character development⁵.

Professors can facilitate networking opportunities for students, connecting them with professionals, researchers, and peers in their field. These connections open doors to internships, research collaborations, and future career prospects. The professor-student relationship is an ethical one, where integrity, respect, and professionalism are emphasized. Students learn not only subject matter but also the importance of ethical conduct and responsibility in their academic and future careers⁶.

It could be said that the professor-student relationship is the bedrock of academia, fostering an environment where knowledge, mentorship, and personal growth intersect. It equips students with the tools to become lifelong learners, critical thinkers, and responsible members of society. This unique relationship's significance cannot be overstated, making it a central focus in the realm of higher education but identifying professional boundaries in the professor-student relationship is essential to maintain a respectful and ethical learning environment. Professors should avoid emotional involvement beyond what is necessary for academic support⁷. Emotional support should be empathetic but not cross into personal or intimate territory. Physical contact should be limited to professional gestures like handshakes or a pat on the back when appropriate. Any physical contact that could be misconstrued or invasive should be avoided. Professors and students can engage in social interactions but within limits⁸.

Avoiding dual roles, such as becoming personal friends, is crucial. Communication should primarily occur through official channels like email or office hours. Professors should avoid excessively personal or informal communication. Grading, evaluations, and feedback should be objective and based on academic performance. Avoid any appearance of favoritism or bias⁹.

Professors should be mindful of their position of authority and avoid exploiting it. They should not engage in behavior that could coerce or pressure students. Online interactions should adhere to the same boundaries as in-person interactions. Professors should be cautious about connecting

with students on personal social media accounts. Mentorship is valuable but should stay within professional and academic domains. Guidance on career choices and personal development can be provided while maintaining objectivity¹⁰.

Institutions should have mechanisms for reporting and resolving boundary violations.

- Encouraging students and faculty to report concerns is essential for addressing issues promptly.
- Regular training and awareness programs can help professors and students understand and navigate professional boundaries effectively.

Recognizing and respecting these professional boundaries is vital to ensure that the professor-student relationship remains focused on academic growth, mentorship, and ethical conduct within the academic context¹¹.

Several factors influence the establishment and maintenance of professional boundaries in the professor-student relationship within the academic context. These factors can shape the nature of interactions between professors and students and impact the overall learning environment. The power differential between professors and students is a significant factor. Professors hold authority over students in terms of grading, evaluations, and academic guidance. This power dynamic can influence boundary perceptions and behavior¹². Another factor is cultural norms and expectations regarding teacher-student relationships vary globally. Some cultures emphasize formality and respect for authority, while others may encourage more informal interactions. Cultural backgrounds can influence how boundaries are perceived and navigated¹³. The personal backgrounds and experiences of both professors and students play a role. Personal values, upbringing, and past experiences can shape individual attitudes and comfort levels regarding boundaries. Institutional policies and guidelines define acceptable behavior and set expectations for both professors and students. These policies can vary among institutions and can influence boundary-related decisions¹⁴. The use of technology and various communication tools has

expanded how professors and students interact. Email, social media, and messaging apps can blur traditional boundaries, making it essential to establish guidelines for online communication. Different academic disciplines may have varying norms and expectations regarding the professor-student relationship. For example, the nature of interactions in a research-oriented discipline might differ from those in a humanities field¹⁵.

The age and experience levels of both professors and students can affect boundary perceptions. Younger professors may relate differently to students than more experienced faculty members, and students at different stages of their academic journey may have varying expectations^{14, 15}.

Gender and identity can also influence boundary considerations. Issues related to gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity can impact how individuals perceive and navigate professional boundaries. Peer influence within academic circles can affect boundary decisions. Professors may observe how colleagues interact with students, and students may discuss their experiences with peers, which can shape perceptions of acceptable behavior¹⁶.

Pre-existing personal relationships, such as familial ties or friendships, between professors and students can complicate boundary management and require special attention to maintain professionalism. The level of training and awareness regarding professional boundaries can vary among professors and students. Institutions that offer training programs can positively influence behavior and understanding. Understanding how these factors intersect and influence boundary management is crucial for creating a healthy and ethical professor-student relationship. Educational institutions should promote awareness of these factors and guide navigating professional boundaries effectively¹⁴⁻¹⁶.

Boundary violations in the professor-student relationship within the academic context can have significant consequences for all parties involved, including students, professors, and academic

institutions. These consequences may range from personal, emotional, and academic impacts to legal and institutional repercussions¹⁷⁻¹⁹.

- **Emotional Distress:** Boundary violations can lead to emotional distress, discomfort, and even trauma for students. They may experience anxiety, depression, or a sense of powerlessness.
- **Deterioration of Mental Health:** Prolonged boundary violations can negatively affect students' mental health, potentially leading to long-term psychological consequences.
- **Impaired Learning:** Students may find it challenging to focus on their academic work when dealing with inappropriate interactions, leading to a decline in their academic performance.
- **Disrupted Concentration:** Boundary violations can disrupt students' concentration, making it difficult for them to engage effectively in coursework and research.
- **Damage to Students' Reputation:** If boundary violations become public or involve harassment, students may suffer damage to their personal and academic reputation.
- **Damage to Professors' Reputation:** Professors found guilty of boundary violations can experience significant damage to their professional reputation, impacting their career prospects and credibility.
- **Legal Liabilities:** Academic institutions can face legal liabilities if they fail to address boundary violations appropriately. Lawsuits may result from allegations of harassment or misconduct.
- **Damage to Institutional Reputation:** Instances of boundary violations can harm the reputation of the academic institution, deterring potential students and faculty members.
- **Trust Erosion:** Boundary violations erode trust within the academic community. Students may lose trust in their professors and the institution, while faculty members may lose trust in their colleagues.
- **Impact on the Learning Environment:** A loss of trust can create a hostile or

uncomfortable learning environment, hindering the educational experience for all students.

- **Professional Sanctions:** Professors found guilty of boundary violations can face disciplinary actions such as suspension, termination, or loss of professional credentials.
- **Legal Consequences:** In cases of severe boundary violations, legal actions, including civil or criminal charges, may be pursued against the responsible parties.
- **Career Implications:** Students who experience boundary violations may carry emotional scars into their future careers, impacting their relationships and job performance.
- **Professional Ethical Standards:** For professors, boundary violations can lead to long-term damage to their adherence to ethical standards, affecting their ability to mentor students effectively.

Academic institutions need to have clear policies, reporting mechanisms, and support systems in place to address boundary violations promptly and effectively. Prevention and education regarding professional boundaries are equally crucial to minimize the likelihood of such violations occurring and to maintain a healthy, respectful academic environment. This research paper aims to contribute to the academic discourse surrounding the professor-student relationship, emphasizing the importance of professional boundaries for the benefit of all stakeholders in higher education.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to comprehensively investigate professional boundaries in the professor-student relationship. In-depth interviews were conducted with a select group of participants, including professors, students, and academic administrators. These interviews provide rich qualitative data, allowing for a deeper exploration of experiences and insights.

Professors from diverse academic disciplines and institutions were recruited. Efforts were made to include individuals at different stages of their

academic careers. A diverse group of students, representing various academic levels (undergraduate and graduate) and backgrounds, were included to capture a wide range of perspectives. Interviews with academic administrators provided insights into institutional policies and support systems related to professional boundaries.

Interviews and case study narratives were transcribed and analyzed thematically. Themes related to boundary definitions, boundary violations, and boundary management strategies were identified and reported. Data from interviews and case studies were used to validate findings and provide a comprehensive understanding of professional boundaries. Participants were provided with informed consent forms detailing the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. They had the option to participate voluntarily and withdraw at any time.

Participants' identities were kept confidential, and data will be anonymized. Pseudonyms were used in reporting to protect privacy. Ethical clearance was sought from relevant institutional review boards to ensure the study adheres to ethical guidelines and regulations.

Result

Qualitative results reveal rich insights into the experiences and perceptions of professors, students, and academic administrators regarding professional boundaries.

1. **Diverse Definitions of Boundaries:** Professors and students have diverse views on what constitutes professional boundaries. While some see it as strictly academic, others consider it to encompass social interactions and mentorship.
2. **Influence of Power Dynamics:** Power dynamics between professors and students play a significant role in defining and navigating boundaries. Students often perceive professors as authority figures, influencing their interactions.
3. **Emotional Engagement:** Emotional boundaries are a common theme. Both professors and students acknowledge the potential for emotional connections in the learning process. However, they stress the importance of maintaining professionalism.
4. **Technology's Impact:** Technology, particularly online communication, blurs traditional boundaries. Many participants mentioned the challenges of maintaining boundaries in the digital age.
5. **Mentorship and Guidance:** Professors often serve as mentors to students. They provide guidance not only in academics but also in career choices and personal development. Students value this mentorship but emphasize the need for it to remain within professional limits.
6. **Impact of Personal Backgrounds:** Cultural and personal backgrounds influence participants' views on boundaries. Some students may come from cultures where a more informal professor-student relationship is the norm, while others prefer a more formal approach.
7. **Ethical Dilemmas:** Participants highlighted ethical dilemmas that can arise when navigating boundaries. For professors, these dilemmas often involve the balance between mentorship and maintaining objectivity in grading and evaluations.
8. **Impact on Well-Being:** Boundary violations can negatively affect the well-being of both professors and students. Students may feel uncomfortable or even harassed, while professors may face emotional stress and professional consequences.
9. **Institutional Policies and Support:** Academic administrators emphasize the importance of institutional policies and support systems for addressing boundary-related issues. Participants stressed the need for clear guidelines.
10. **Strategies for Boundary Maintenance:** Professors and students alike provide insights into strategies for maintaining professional boundaries, including clear communication,

setting expectations, and seeking guidance when conflicts arise.

11. **Personal Growth and Independence:** Many students spoke about how maintaining professional boundaries contributes to their personal growth and independence. It helps them become self-reliant learners and critical thinkers.

These qualitative results highlight the complexity of the professor-student relationship and the importance of addressing professional boundaries in academia. They also emphasize the need for ongoing dialogue, education, and institutional support to ensure that these boundaries are understood, respected, and maintained to create a safe and conducive learning environment.

Discussion

Maintaining professional boundaries in the professor-student relationship holds significant ethical and pedagogical importance in academia^{19, 20}.

Ethical Importance:

- **Respect for Autonomy:** Professional boundaries respect students' autonomy and personal space. They acknowledge that students are adults capable of making their own choices and decisions. Crossing these boundaries can be seen as disrespectful and intrusive²¹.
- **Preventing Exploitation:** Maintaining boundaries prevents the potential exploitation of students' vulnerability. Professors hold positions of authority and influence, making it crucial to avoid any behavior that could be perceived as taking advantage of this power dynamic²².
- **Avoiding Harm:** Ethical boundaries protect students from harm, whether it's emotional, psychological, or physical. Students should feel safe and free from unwanted advances or pressure in their academic environment²³.

Pedagogical Importance:

- **Maintaining Focus on Learning:** Professional boundaries ensure that the primary focus of the professor-student

relationship remains on learning, academic growth, and critical thinking. Without these boundaries, personal issues or emotions could interfere with the educational process²⁴.

- **Objectivity in Assessment:** Boundaries support the objective assessment of students' work. When professors maintain a professional distance, they are more likely to evaluate assignments and exams impartially, without being swayed by personal biases²⁵.
- **Positive Role Modeling:** By adhering to professional boundaries, professors set a positive example for their students. They demonstrate the importance of ethical behavior, integrity, and professionalism, qualities students can carry into their future careers²³⁻²⁵.

The Evolving Nature of Professor-Student Relationships in the Digital Age:

- The digital age has transformed the way professor-student relationships are formed and maintained. Here's a detailed look at this evolving nature:
- **Increased Accessibility:** Digital tools have made professors more accessible to students. Email, virtual office hours, and online learning platforms enable students to connect with their professors more easily, blurring the boundaries of traditional office hours²⁶.
- **Expanded Communication:** Social media, messaging apps, and discussion forums have provided additional channels for communication. While these tools facilitate academic discussions, they also raise questions about the appropriateness of online interactions²⁷.
- **Challenges of Online Learning:** The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of online learning, further altering the professor-student relationship. Virtual classes and remote communication introduced new challenges in maintaining professional boundaries²⁸.
- **Privacy Concerns:** Digital communication can raise privacy concerns. Sharing personal information or engaging in informal discussions through email or social media can lead to boundary violations, as these channels

may lack the formality of face-to-face interactions^{26, 27}.

- **Guidelines for Online Behavior:** Institutions are developing guidelines and policies to address the evolving nature of online interactions. Professors are encouraged to establish clear boundaries for digital communication to ensure professionalism^{27, 28}.

The Balance Between Mentorship and Professionalism:

- Balancing mentorship and professionalism is a central challenge for professors in the academic context. Here's a detailed exploration of this balance:
- **Importance of Mentorship:** Mentorship is a valuable aspect of the professor-student relationship. It involves guiding students not only academically but also in personal development, career choices, and research projects. Effective mentorship can significantly impact students' growth and success²⁹.
- **Avoiding Over-Involvement:** While mentorship is crucial, professors must avoid over-involvement in students' personal lives. Striking the right balance between providing guidance and maintaining a professional distance is essential to prevent boundary violations³⁰.
- **Objectivity in Mentorship:** Professors should aim to provide objective advice and mentorship. This means offering guidance based on academic and career considerations rather than personal feelings or preferences³¹.
- **Setting Expectations:** Clear expectations should be set for mentorship relationships. Both professors and students should understand the scope and boundaries of mentorship interactions to avoid misunderstandings^{29, 30}.
- **Fostering Independence:** Effective mentorship should empower students to become independent thinkers and decision-makers. The goal is to equip them with the skills and knowledge to make informed choices in their academic and professional pursuits^{29, 31}.
- **Seeking Guidance:** Professors facing challenges in navigating the mentorship-

professionalism balance can seek guidance from experienced colleagues, mentors, or institutional resources to ensure they provide effective mentorship while upholding professional boundaries^{30, 31}.

Successfully striking this balance ensures that students receive the guidance and support they need while maintaining the integrity of the professor-student relationship and upholding ethical standards in academia.

Based on the findings and considerations presented in this study, here are recommendations for educators, institutions, and students to effectively establish and maintain professional boundaries. Institutions should provide mandatory training and educational programs for both professors and students on the importance of professional boundaries, ethical conduct, and digital communication etiquette. Professors should communicate their expectations regarding communication channels, office hours, and interaction guidelines to students at the beginning of each course. Institutions should develop and disseminate guidelines for online interactions between professors and students, emphasizing the need for professionalism and respect in digital communication. Professors should be trained to balance mentorship and professionalism effectively, recognizing the fine line between guidance and over-involvement. Academic institutions should establish dedicated support systems, including ethics committees or ombudsman offices, where students and faculty can seek guidance and report concerns related to boundary violations. Both professors and students should engage in regular self-reflection to assess their interactions and ensure they align with professional boundaries. Institutions should educate professors and students about the importance of safeguarding personal information and respecting privacy in digital communication.

Institutions should ensure that their policies and guidelines regarding professional boundaries are consistently enforced and updated to address the evolving nature of professor-student relationships. Encourage students and faculty to report boundary

concerns without fear of reprisal, and ensure that reporting mechanisms are accessible and confidential. Institutions should foster a culture of mentorship that emphasizes best practices, including objectivity, respect, and ethical conduct. By implementing these recommendations, academic institutions and individuals within the academic community can work together to create a respectful, supportive, and ethical learning environment that benefits both students and educators. Maintaining professional boundaries is not just a matter of compliance but a fundamental aspect of promoting ethical conduct and enhancing the quality of education in academia.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the maintenance of professional boundaries in the professor-student relationship is of paramount importance in the academic context. These boundaries have ethical, pedagogical, and practical significance that cannot be overstated. Ethically, they safeguard students' autonomy, protect against exploitation, and prevent harm. Pedagogically, they ensure the focus remains on learning, objectivity in assessment, and positive role modeling.

Furthermore, the digital age has ushered in new challenges and opportunities in how these boundaries are maintained. Increased accessibility and expanded communication channels require thoughtful consideration of how to uphold professionalism in online interactions.

Balancing mentorship and professionalism is a delicate yet critical endeavor. Effective mentorship enhances students' personal and academic development, but it must be conducted within the confines of established boundaries to avoid potential ethical breaches.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Ms Ujala Sajid for technical support

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