

Walking the Fine Line: The Opposing Forces of Professional and Personal Relationships

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In psychology, we spend a considerable amount of time teaching our students about opposing forces. We teach of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, of depolarization and polarization, and of tolerance and withdrawal, to name a few. We teach our students how the body and mind use these mechanisms to survive and adapt to changing conditions. For many instructors, these “opposition” lectures become favorites that provide a link across the many subfields of our science. In the paragraphs that follow, I would like to consider an analogy between these oppositional forces and good teaching practices.

As a former high school guidance counselor, I believe students enter the classroom with the same fears, hopes, and expectations they have prior to meeting with a counselor. In both cases, students are seeking a relationship with a professional who can help them grow in a desired area. From my experiences, I have reached the following conclusion: Teachers can benefit greatly from monitoring the progress of their students just as counselors monitor the progress of their clients, sometimes aware of professional responsibilities and sometimes aware of personal considerations.

In the counseling of high school students, there is a “line” of which we often speak. On one side are those who become too close to the students, creating overdependence and enabling the student never to confront the issue at hand. On the other side are those who create distance and separation, and who students view as unapproachable. Somewhere in the middle are the counselors whom their peers regard as excellent. These are faculty held in high standing because they recognize the importance of professionalism as well as the importance of meaningful student relationships. They are able to walk the fine line that students come to enjoy and respect. As we strive to become better teachers, we might want to remind ourselves of the following five lines, and a few practical tips for staying “online.”

The Fine Line Between Teacher and Learner

As teachers, we must remind ourselves that students are human beings first, learners second. We can gain much respect by identifying with our students and informing them that we too are human. I have found it effective on the first day of class to tell students that I am a learner first, a teacher second. I talk to my students about the great pleasure my work brings and how I consider it both a privilege and an honor to teach and learn with them throughout the semester. Certainly we need to establish ourselves as “experts” in the classroom—after all,

students expect us to provide insight they might not have on their own. However, they appreciate knowing that we are students as well and also wish to be challenged.

The Fine Line Between Challenge and Novelty

Certainly students often enjoy being challenged. In addition, they enjoy novel demonstrations that help clarify a challenging concept. Thus, a second fine line we must walk involves the balance between challenge and novelty. Too much challenge could leave our students feeling frustrated; too much novelty could leave students with a misunderstanding of the science that lies behind the fun. Ask yourself, “Are the novel activities I use in my class meaningful to the concepts of psychology, or are they just being used for a cheap laugh and good times?” Those who can walk this line have the ability to take the most challenging concepts in psychology and make them seem simple through the use of novel demonstrations.

The Fine Line Between “Professional” Presence and “Personal” Presence

Informal conversations with students have led me to believe that they often select career paths, choose favorite subjects, or become interested in a content area primarily because of the instructor. More specifically, the instructors’ excitement about psychology and genuine concern for their students serve as a spark that ignites a lifelong interest in psychology. It seems apparent that students will often follow good leaders before they follow good subjects or contents. Therefore, we must ask ourselves, “What do students see when they enter our classrooms?” Are we dressed in a way that tells our students psychology and teaching are important to us? Do we use language that is respectful and reflects our professional approach to the discipline?

Creating a professional atmosphere is perhaps “old hat” for many readers of this essay. However, a question that might be of interest is “How can I temper this professionalism with pieces of personalization?” First, start by learning the names of each student in your classroom. Whether you have a class of 25 or 100, learning names is always possible with some effort. Second, take the opportunity to speak with students outside of the classroom. Ask them about their hobbies or other activities in which they might be involved. Let the students know you are available to them and will make every effort to help them become successful learners. If they sense you have a genuine interest in them, they will make every effort to perform better in class, not only because they want to learn, but also because they appreciate you as a person and teacher. Finally, be yourself. As we all know, students are tremendously perceptive and will spot a fake a mile away. Be up front with them. Allow them to laugh every now and then at your expense. If the students see that you are not above self-deprecation, they will gain a sense of trust and respect for you. As a result, they will feel safe taking risks in the classroom. In sum, use your actions to build rapport, not power.

The Fine Line Between Structure and Flexibility

Teachers who walk the line have not only designed a clear sequence of lectures and projects for the class as a whole, they have also mastered individualizing these items when necessary.

At many points during the semester, students will come to us with special needs or circumstances. These are critical moments that may be “make or break” points. For example, imagine a course where attendance is mandatory. What do you tell a student who approaches you before the semester begins and tells you she will have to miss two class periods? Do you deliver a stern “no,” or do you “flex”? What do you tell a student who asks if she can modify the classical conditioning project slightly to fit in with her job at the local zoo? Do you stick with your structure, or do you flex for the student? Teachers who walk the line seem to have an ability to use flex situations to capture the student and gain their respect.

The Fine Line Between Course Tradition and Class Identity

Is it possible to form professionally meaningful relationships with our students before we ever meet them? As strange as it may sound, this question can be answered with a resounding “Yes!” Whether we work at the college or high school level, most teachers of psychology are likely to agree that specific instructors and their courses are a regular topic of discussion on campus. Certainly, each instructor and course seems to earn some sort of reputation, or tradition, if you will. Assuming your tradition is one of relative favor and positive energy, the question of how to use this tradition to establish better relationships still remains.

As a starting point, give students something about which to talk. Consider it your major responsibility to “turn students on” to the science of psychology. Present the complexities of human behavior in a way that is relevant to everyday life. Students will talk about those things that seem most applicable to their lives.

Allow students to promote your course. Tell your students there are probably other students who would also enjoy the course. Because you are always interested in working with people who have a sincere interest in learning, you would appreciate if they would tell others about the course. Here, you pay a compliment to your students (showing you trust them) and promote your course in one fell swoop. If you’ve done your job as a teacher, you need not worry—your students will more than sell the course.

Make students aware of the success of the program. If you are at the high school level, tell stories of alumni who are pursuing post-secondary degrees in the field or of the percentage of students who easily passed the Advanced Placement exam. If you are at the post-secondary level, tell stories of those who have found meaningful work or gone on to graduate school. Make it obvious to your current students that past students have excelled and that you take extreme pride in the success of your students. Soon, your current students will want to be a part of this cycle of success.

It is important, however, to balance tradition with some specialized class identity. Although you can establish tradition with your students before they ever step foot in the classroom, a specialized class identity is necessary each and every class period. This task can be done with minimal effort. It might be as simple as a quirky phrase or saying that you use with one group. It might be a joke or personal story that you share with another group. It might mean a special outdoor lecture for one class, or a special field trip for another. As instructors, we tend to think that every course must receive the same educational experience. However, if we do not

take steps to personalize every class, we have done our students a greater disservice than inequality could ever produce.

Summary

Students who come from a classroom where a teacher has “walked the line” will always hold a special place in their heart for psychology. As a result, they will feel a special connection to the science of psychology as well as loyalty to the group of which they were a part. And who knows, perhaps one by-product of our willingness to walk the line might be that students will become more excited about the educational process.