Maintaining professional relationships with students

The student-teacher relationship is a powerful and unique relationship that needs to be nurtured and protected at all times.

Teachers can be accused of failing to maintain appropriate boundaries in their professional relationships with students. Crossing these boundaries, even innocently or inadvertently, can cost you your job and result in a lengthy VIT/TRB investigation which could see you deregistered. Here is a brief summary of some of the most common issues and a few suggestions to help minimise potential problems.

**Communication and Social Networking**

Modern methods of communication are developing faster than the rules and etiquettes that would normally regulate them. VIT and the TRB provide clear limits around communication and the student teacher relationship. In short VIT states that a teacher will violate their professional relationship with a student if they: ‘hold conversations of a personal nature, or have contact with a student via written or electronic means including email, letters, telephone, text messages or chat lines, without a valid context’. Please note that “a valid context” is code for “above-board and school related communication”.

Similarly, there are procedures in the Tasmanian Teacher Registration Act for the TRB to deal with situations regarding allegations that teachers have behaved inappropriately with students. There are serious consequences, including loss of registration, if disciplinary enquiries result in a finding of inappropriate behaviour.

SMS, facebook and other electronic exchanges are a sure way into trouble so to avoid potential problems set clear boundaries with your students about how and when they can contact you. In almost all cases this should only be during school hours. Don’t provide your mobile number to students as this will make it easy for them to contact you outside of school hours which can blur the student – teacher relationship. If you need to be contactable via mobile then organise to have your school provide you with one. Make sure your communication rules are consistent with the school’s rules. Don’t become friends with your students on social networking sites like Facebook and twitter. If there is a valid purpose for this form of contact then the school should have an approved account/page/address and associated guidelines for its use. Remember that any contact you have with students or recent ex-students on Facebook or by sms is traceable, as internet and phone providers keep logs of your usage.

If any contact or communication you have with a student seems ‘odd’ then it probably is and if it makes you uncomfortable then you need to be wary. You should clearly tell the student not to contact you in this way again and you can also take that opportunity to remind the student of the agreed means of communication. If this happens to you, you need to report it to your employer. Immediately reporting any incident or questionable interaction is the right thing to do for both you and the student as it will offer you greater protection against any allegations of misconduct or inappropriate behaviour. It will also provide the student with the most appropriate support. Reports should be made via email to the year level co-ordinator, vice principal or principal. The employer needs to respond to you and tell you what course of action needs to be taken (i.e. whether the student’s parents need to be informed and if so by whom).

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Night Clubs, Pubs, Parties and Drinking

Older students are likely to start participating in social activities like going to pubs and clubs. This means that you have to be careful to protect the boundaries of teacher – student relationship when you encounter students in these social environments.

You shouldn’t attend student parties or mix with students in social settings like pubs or night clubs outside of official school activities. This can be particularly difficult in regional areas where there may only be one pub or you may play sport for the local team with the students you teach. If it is unavoidable, stay in control and be very careful, otherwise you risk exposing your reputation to potential criticism from your employer, parents and VIT/TRB. This becomes particularly problematic when your public behaviour is inconsistent with the public image of a professional. What seems quite innocent at the time can look very different when your actions are under the microscope.

Your obligation to act professionally when in the company of students exists regardless of the hour, the location and your mental state. If you have had a couple of drinks, you are better off leaving immediately than spending the next two years explaining what you did when your judgement was a little impaired.

Relationships with current students

Maintaining a professional relationship with your students doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t be friendly with your students but it does mean that you shouldn’t be their friend. In some circumstances you may want to provide extra pastoral support to a student, in these instances this should only occur within strict boundaries and with the explicit consent of the employer and parent/s.

Understanding the boundaries of this relationship and staying within them is ultimately the teacher’s responsibility and the potential consequences that can come from blurring of those boundaries, such as a VIT/TRB investigation or losing your job, are too serious for any teacher to ignore.

It is never ok to have a sexual encounter or relationship with a current student. In these situations the relationship will be investigated by the school and the Victorian Institute of Teaching. A teacher who is found to have had an inappropriate relationship with a student will lose their job and will have their registration suspended or permanently cancelled. Allegations about inappropriate relationships are serious and to ensure a fair outcome the VIT investigation and formal hearing process can take many months. The reality of this process is that your reputation will be under a cloud and the matter may attract media attention. Any teacher that loses their job in these circumstances will, even if they keep their registration, have to face telling prospective employers about the investigation.

Relationships with ex-students

Your obligation to maintain the strict boundaries of a professional student - teacher relationship doesn’t last forever. However, it is important to realise that it doesn’t immediately expire on the day the student ceases to be a student at your school. Teachers must be aware that perceptions are important, and that a relationship of any type with at student after they have finished school will not be viewed in isolation from the period when they were a student. Note that relationships also include online friends. In fact any relationship that begins after a student’s time at school will often raise questions about whether any “grooming” took place. In other words, forming the basis for which a relationship can later be established.

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