

Should academics avoid friendships with students?

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Friendships can blossom naturally between scholars and students, but are they always problematic? Nina Kelly navigates the boundaries

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- By [Nina Kelly](#)

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“One of my best friends is the teacher I met when I was 18 years old,” says John Kaag, associate professor in philosophy at the University of



Massachusetts Lowell. Every morning at 6 o'clock, they would go jogging together, and the two would “talk about all sorts of things”.

Kaag felt that the scholar “welcomed me into philosophy and watched me grow up as an undergraduate. He became an adviser when I was a graduate student, and now we’re properly good friends. He is probably the single most important factor in my going into philosophy.”

For Kaag, the “exclusivity” of those early morning excursions was beneficial, and “having a friend at that level” boosted his confidence. But he is well aware that replicating those runs with one of his own students would be “pedagogically problematic” because of the potential for real or perceived conflicts of interest and accusations of favouritism.

Such dilemmas are likely to be particularly acute at a time when students, at least in the UK, are paying far higher fees than their predecessors, and so are understandably sensitive to any signs of preferential treatment. So how should academics manage the boundaries?

Some take a firm view that scholars and students shouldn’t be friends. Victoria Bateman, fellow and director of

studies in economics at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, believes that “the relationship between a student and an academic needs to be a professional one, rather than something more informal. I don’t think a student wants you to be a friend anyway – they have their peers for that.” Students want good teaching and careers advice, and while it is important that academics “keep a watch on their welfare...that does not mean being a ‘friend’”.

During term-time, Bateman lives part-time in her college, where it is “normal” for students and fellows to dine in the same hall – “albeit at separate tables”. However, “living in college certainly doesn’t mean that you should expect or encourage students to knock on your door whenever they have a problem. I always communicate with them by email and expect them to do the same with me.”

Friendships may even be detrimental to the learning process, [argues Shahidha Bari](#), lecturer in Romanticism at [Queen Mary University of London](#). As a student, she produced her best work for “teachers whose admiration and praise” she cared about, and she wants her own students, in turn, to strive for her praise. But “friendship isn’t necessarily conducive to that...you need a degree of formality [in the staff-student relationship], and friendship doesn’t permit that”. This perhaps explains why Bari refuses to join the ranks of scholars who bake for their students at Christmas: “I know that’s a friendly thing to do, but I don’t [do it] because I think, I’m not your friend and I’m not your mother, and we’re going to read!”

Gerald Moore, lecturer in the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at [Durham University](#), thinks that it is “becoming harder for academics and students to be friends”, in part because staff “tend to be a lot more wary of what could go wrong”. Worries about staff-student friendships are probably linked to the re-evaluation of sexual and romantic relationships between faculty and students that has taken place over the past few decades. The social mores of 1960s academia, where such liaisons were largely tolerated, have given way to a climate of concern over abuses of power.

Illustrating how different things could be back then, Moore says that he “wouldn’t exist if it weren’t for university lecturers sleeping with their students”: his mother was taught by his father in the 1960s, and the couple married about a month after she graduated. But for “anyone who was stupid enough to sleep with a student nowadays, it would be career suicide”. While sexual attraction between staff and students is unavoidable, acting on it these days could have grave repercussions, potentially exposing academics to accusations of sexual harassment. Many institutions have policies relating to “intimate” relationships with students – and several prominent US universities have banned sexual or romantic relationships between undergraduates and faculty altogether (see 'Policing the boundaries: rules on student-staff relationships' box, below).

The explosive growth of social media has added another dimension to the issue, as students fire off “friend” requests to their lecturers on Facebook, and Twitter feeds blur the lines between professional and personal lives. According to a [2015 survey of 500 students by Jisc](#), a quarter of UK students now rely on social media to contact their teachers. Among students, the most popular channel for this is Facebook (which 85 per cent of students use), but just over a third (36 per cent) use Twitter for this purpose, and nearly a quarter (23 per cent) employ WhatsApp.

Like many academics, Emma Rees, professor of literature and gender studies at the [University of Chester](#), follows a policy of not accepting undergraduates as “friends” on Facebook. However, once their studies are over, “former students sometimes ask to ‘friend’ me, and I feel as though I have to say ‘yes’ to all of them so that no one feels left out”.

Steelier scholars have found ways to avoid potentially acquiring every former student as a “friend”. According to Bari, some have adopted “pseudonyms or alternative online identities to secure a degree of privacy”.

There are some academics who believe that genuine friendship can help non-traditional learners adapt to the alien environment of the university (see 'Sharing stories: enriching lives' box, below). Yet Moore remembers when he was teaching at the [University of Oxford](#) and some colleagues there got “very worked up” because a female student from

a “working-class Northern town”, who was struggling to settle in, sent him a “friend” request on Facebook and he accepted. He believes that the student identified with him because of his Sheffield roots and his “vaguely Northern accent” and points out that “we knew each other better than I knew a couple of hundred Facebook ‘friends’ I’d met once at a conference or hadn’t spoken to in 20 years”. But he also understood his colleagues’ objections and subsequently “unfriended” the student over concerns about privacy – although he reinstated her after she graduated.

PhD students who take on a teaching role face perhaps the biggest challenge when it comes to maintaining professional distance because those in their classes are often very close to them in age. Rees, who started lecturing while she was working on her PhD and was only two or three years older than her students, “had to work hard to set boundaries so as to maintain authority. Those boundaries are far easier to draw once you’re what many undergrads would consider to be positively ancient (ie, over 30),” she says.

PhD students may also experience difficulties determining the nature of relationships with their supervisors. A recent *Times Higher Education* article, “[Should you be friends with your PhD students?](#)” (26 November 2015), described a paper based on interviews with 15 PhD supervisors and their students. The study found that “doctoral students... hoped for and expected their supervisors to be concerned about them as persons in both personal and work-related ways”. Yet some academics were crystal clear about the limits of their role. “If someone comes in and cries, for instance, about difficulties in their private life, however cruel it may sound, after a week I have to say that this belongs [elsewhere] and I will not listen to it for years,” one supervisor said.

Despite all the concerns, there are some academics who adopt a more positive view of friendships between staff and students – in some circumstances, at least. Kaag takes the provocative view that “it is much easier to be friends with a student if you’re male, in the sense that it’s easy to be avuncular...but I don’t think it’s necessarily possible for women to do the same”.

“Universities never seem to have policies on [platonic friendships],” observes Benjamin Poore, a teaching fellow in the School of English and Drama at Queen Mary. He finds this “quite weird, given that they have policies on pretty much everything”. Yet he wouldn’t necessarily welcome any official guidance, because “individual disciplines construct relationships with students in certain kinds of ways”. He associates his own field with “a particular moment, the 18th-century coffee house and that whole model of sociability”, while seminar teaching creates “a sort of synthetic form of sociability, something that’s almost like a friendship but is not that as well”.

If the seminar model generates group sociability, then tutorials and field trips are where individual friendships may form. Tim Birkhead, professor of behavioural ecology at the [University of Sheffield](#) and a “staunch defender” of the tutorial system, says that “the verbal interaction between student and tutor is absolutely vital for [undergraduates] development”, adding that under such a system “one does develop a friendship with many of those students”. And while some tutors “treat their PhD students as an extra pair of hands in the lab”, Birkhead prefers to be closely involved with what they are doing, seeing them all every day. “Bird-watching weekends and eating together” all help to “forge friendships”, he adds.

For all the worries about staff-student relationships and “healthy” boundaries, students often express their affection for academics in uncomplicated and creative ways. Kaag remembers some verse that a mature student, who was also a “brilliant poet”, wrote for him and recited to the class. Moore recalls an occasion when he was living close to “the most studenty street” in the city. Having worked out that he was a near neighbour, two students hung from their window a banner with “Good Morning, Gerald” written on it. While his neighbours found the display “a bit weird”, Moore thought that the banner was amusing, although he concedes that the student-artists were “incredibly clever and hard-working” and that his attitude might have been different had it been the handiwork of “lazy, drunken, rugby-playing idiots who didn’t give a shit about work”.

“That kind of thing is nice,” he reflects, “It means that you are having an effect, doesn’t it?”

Policing the boundaries: rules on student-staff relationships

These have sometimes been criticised by students, who claim that it is their right, as adults, to have consensual sex with whoever they want to. But at least such guidelines are clear-cut. When it comes to platonic friendships, academics largely have to fall back on their own judgement.

“People will always develop friendships when they are together for any length of time, and no organisation can legislate against that,” says a spokesman for Universities Human Resources, the organisation that represents HR practitioners in UK and Irish universities.

“Most universities have policies for individuals who form academic/student relationships that go beyond normal friendship, [requiring them] to declare the attachment to the head of school and to avoid having sole responsibility for [the student’s] academic assessment” or other important decisions, the spokesman says. “HR’s role comes in establishing policies that help people maintain boundaries.”

The University and College Union echoes this advice, adding that “declarations [to heads of department] should be treated in confidence”.

In cases where staff are offering personal tutoring and academic support, the [University of Sheffield’s guidance suggests](#) that boundaries “vary between individuals based on the person’s personality, gender and culture”, so that there is “no single right answer” to what is appropriate. The guidance suggests that tutors should explain their role, how they can be contacted and the limits of their availability, and warns staff to “stay within your own role and area of expertise”.

The [University of East London](#), meanwhile, advises staff not to “lend money or offer accommodation” to their students. Acting as a counsellor and dispensing relationship advice is also frowned upon.

Sharing stories: enriching lives

Friendships with academics may play an important role in building non-traditional learners’ confidence and shaping future aspirations, academics have found.

In her 2013 book *Learning Trajectories, Violence and Empowerment amongst Adult Basic Skills Learners*, an [ethnographic study of 16 basic skills learners](#) in the North West of England, Vicky Duckworth says that as well as “knowledge gained in the form of outcomes and findings...relationships formed”.

Duckworth, a senior lecturer in further education and training at [Edge Hill University](#), also lectured on the literacy courses that her research participants were taking and grew up in a neighbouring area. “I consider myself to be a friend of the research group and, for a few, a good friend. These friendships have enriched our lives, enriched me as a person and are an important impact of the research,” she writes in the book.

Duckworth, who appeared on BBC Radio 4’s *Woman’s Hour* in December with a former student who is now a staff nurse, says that when adults who have had negative experiences of compulsory education return to learning, there has to be a “sharing of stories”. Recounting her history to learners “was a way of breaking down barriers and demystifying the process of getting an education”.

She adds: “The idea of friendship in teaching and learning is one that receives very little theoretical and political attention, even though the importance of it in the quality of our lives is enormous.”

POSTSCRIPT:

Print headline: *Why can't we be friends?*

