

# Establishing & Maintaining Boundaries

# **A Guide for Staff**



# **Aim:** In this guide, the intention is to give general information regarding professional boundaries in the CDETB Adult Education Service. The information has been collated from a number of sources and is produced in collaboration with the CDETB Adult Education Guidance Service, Dublin South West. We have done our best to make sure the information is accurate and up to date, but it is not legal advice, please refer to the appropriate policies, ethical and legal documents provided by the organisation.

**Definitions:** For the purposes of these guidelines, the term staff member includes all paid and volunteer staff involved in the delivery of Adult Education in CDETB. The term learner refers to any adult receiving tuition in any respect from a CDETB staff member.

**What are Professional Boundaries?**

There are many types of boundaries including personal, emotional and professional. With reference to ‘Professional Boundaries’, it can be helpful to view these in categories; people boundaries, place boundaries and time boundaries. One can also view boundaries on a spectrum, a scale from no boundaries, to loose boundaries, enmeshed or collapsed boundaries, to emotionally detached or rigid boundaries. When you view boundaries in totality finding the balance can be tricky, however, the wonderful thing about professional boundaries is we can learn to introduce the people, places and time boundaries as a set of skills.

Modern professional boundaries in the context of a work environment are derived from a number of sources, they are informed by government policies, law, quality standards, ethics for your profession, your professional practice and your organisations policies and procedures. The motivation to uphold professional boundaries is driven by many factors; Health & Safety, therapeutic processes, practical considerations, adult learner safety and practitioner self-care.

While the word *boundary* can conjure up images of physical structures, walls and clearly marked lines, there is a nice analogy that goes ‘*walls keep everybody out, but boundaries show people where the door is and when they can open it’.* Professional boundaries can also be viewed as a scaffold and a safe holding space for the adult learner. Maintaining a professional boundary within Adult Education does not mean that your relationship with learners should be cold and detached. Rather, you can remain helpful, empathetic, kind and responsive while upholding the professional guidelines, and by establishing professional boundaries, you are focusing on the learners’ needs within the remit of your role.

Professional boundaries are also associated with maintaining self-care within your role. While boundaries can be difficult to put into practice, and uncomfortable in some instances, it is worth investing some time and learning some of the skills to help you navigate the staff/adult learner relationship. These guidelines do not cover all possible scenarios, they are also not a rule book and it is important to use in conjunction with the organisational policies. The noted ‘guide’ section acts as an invitation to incorporate professional boundaries into your practice. To enhance your professionalism, place the focus on the adult learner and assist with your own self-care.



**Keeping it professional not personal**

* **Guide** - Boundaries are not only about how you work and interact with learners, but also extend to how you manage yourself and your emotions in the professional space. By keeping your private life private, by not over-disclosing, or over-sharing personal information, you are protecting yourself and clearly communicating to the adult learner that this is a professional relationship. We can be friendly professionals without befriending. In this respect, using a healthy conscious discipline ensures our role as an empathic and helpful professional is never blurred with that of friend or confidante. It is also not appropriate to give, or receive gifts from students/clients as that would blur those professional lines.
* **Common Danger Zone** – Social contact outside professional context, over-familiarity, becoming friends with clients.
* **Requirement** – Important to consult with and familiarise yourself with the Code of Conduct and Hospitality & Gifts policy in the organisation.

**Respecting learners’/students’ privacy, while being clear on the limits of confidentiality**

* **Guide -**The right to privacy is fundamental and it is not appropriate to discuss learners' disclosures made to you with others inside, or outside, of your organisation without their explicit consent.  While there are ethical considerations to uphold with regards to privacy, one cannot promise absolute confidentiality if there is a strong belief or evidence that a serious risk, or danger, exists for that individual or towards someone else.
* **Common Danger Zone –** Discussing learner personal information with other staff members without a learner’s permission. Seeking, or disclosing, information that is not relevant to the learner participation, either internally or externally. Role confusion; becoming rescuer and promising confidentiality without knowing the remits of your role and not being familiar with the policies.
* **Requirement** - It is important to familiarise yourself with your organisation’s GDPR policy, Child Protection Policy, Vulnerable Person’s Policy and Code of Conduct/Ethics for your profession.



**Be clear on your job role and stay on task**

* **Guide** -  Working within your own competencies is an important boundary, while the professional relationship can create a therapeutic space in the classroom, unless you have a dual role in your professional capacity, teachers/tutors, are not employed in the role of Psychotherapists, Counsellor's, or Clinical Psychologists. We may have all seen the bumper sticker ‘*Teachers are superheroes*’ - while nice on a sticker, it is important we don't assume a superhero role and become a rescuer, doing so can overburden you in a personal and professional capacity.
* **Common Danger Zone** - Becoming emotionally involved or identifying too strongly with a client’s distress, difficulties or life experience. Taking too much responsibility to ‘fix’ the issue without consulting with other professionals.
* **Requirement** - Learners can at times disclose difficult or complex life experiences, or be facing crisis situations in some instances. It is important to become familiar with the policies in your organisation for crisis management and refer appropriately to other professional services.

**Setting and clearly explaining the rules of engagement/communication**

* **Guide** – Technology and social media can certainly open a wonderful space to learn and engage, especially during times of social/physical distance. However, if you do use Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Tiktok in a personal capacity, it is important to keep one’s personal social media profiles private. Do not add or accept learners as ‘friends’ on personal accounts. It is important to communicate that to learners if they ask, and explain the appropriate way to contact you is within business hours and supply an appropriate work telephone or work e-mail contact.  Understanding and clearly explaining the hours of contact to learners at the beginning of each course or new session will help.
* **Common Danger Zone** – Not keeping to scheduled contact time, place of business and using social media to contact and answer learners outside of working hours.
* **Requirement** – Refer to your organisation Code of Conduct and ICT Usage policies

**Note on Common Danger Zones:** Some reasons we might find it hard to establish and maintain boundaries are: our altruistic instincts to ‘help’, role confusion, maybe gap filling for other services, lack of awareness of policies. These are all common reasons why boundaries can be difficult to manage, alongside our personal emotional needs and negative thought associations. It can be helpful to ask for help from other professionals, familiarise yourself with the organisational policies, understand your duty of care to others and yourself, if necessary clarify your role with learners at the beginnings and at the endings.