

## Keeping Confidences

At first blush, the imperative to confidentiality seems obvious and simple. We might say that, as people engaged with the impacts of violence on learning and teaching, working in a variety of institutions that include adult literacy programs and colleges, we all deal with heavy issues. Heavy issues are private. Trustworthy people can be relied on to honour people's privacy.

Most institutions have elaborate rules around confidentiality, which range in tone from the legal/government-mandated to the sacred, and which are taken very seriously, for good reason. In order to cope with and address violence in learning environments, people must feel safe in these environments. Everyone must feel confident that they can disclose what and when they choose, with a guarantee that this information will neither stigmatize nor be used against them, and will remain confidential. The importance of such confidence is highlighted when we consider that often if we have experienced violence we have not felt in charge of our own lives, have not had our autonomy respected, have been infantilized by how our experiences—and the meanings of those experiences—were taken out of our hands.

The confidentiality practices of institutions are also meant to protect in both directions. Disclosures involving immediate personal safety, the risk of suicide, and the harming of children, cannot remain private. People often must report things, in some cases to enforcement bodies that in turn must intervene. Great care must be taken with these processes. Sometimes it costs the individual doing the disclosing a great deal to speak, due to a painful/problematic history with secrecy. The person hearing the disclosure has a duty to articulate, unequivocally and straightforwardly, a refusal to keep a secret, if that is the case, or, in the other case, willingness to keep confidentiality. There are times when creative ways can be found to negotiate the transfer of information, so as to put the one disclosing in the driver's seat as much as possible. But when we need to pass on some information, we need to communicate that very clearly with the person whose information it is. Always, always let someone know if you need to share their disclosure with third parties. We all must offer—and demand—clarity and consistency.

However, sometimes we follow rules without thinking, or sometimes we follow them in letter but not in spirit. For example, a tutor working with a learner who recently had an abortion knows she is “not allowed” to reveal it, but manages to do so through leading questions, innuendo, and the facial expressions she makes to her colleagues—and later claims she “didn't say anything.” What is really happening, and what should really be happening with confidentiality, ends up being much more complicated than it seemed. In the words of Toronto educator and writer Jo Petite (email correspondence):

*Confidentiality is an ethical issue, and ethical issues are never what they seem. They seem to end up being important for different reasons than I expect them to...but important, nonetheless. Confidentiality is something I go over with students in classrooms when creating group guidelines, by saying “people's personal information is their own to share where they chose.” In counselling, it's “your information is*

*confidential unless you disclose harm to yourself and others.” These are reminding, disclaiming and trust building one liners. It is almost more important that it is said than that it is adhered to. Who knows how much it is adhered to; maybe, in some cases, it’s not the point...*

*Then there are organizations, and institutions and “professionals,” exchanging people’s information...that’s when it becomes serious policy. It’s really important to be able to rely on confidentiality in this case, because of the potential harm to a person involved in unethical exchange of information. So there are different levels of confidentiality, and different contexts. Confidentiality at a small community-based organization looks very different from confidentiality in a medicalized environment. In community, relationships are less linear and more complex. Education is love. Ethics are not universal. Boundaries cross and uncross in a million conversations. Maybe the limits of rules and protocols are felt more when trying, within mainstream institutions, to build community. I do think that when our relationships are mediated by professional and institutional power they are less transformative.*

The protocols of the institutions we work within dictate and set limits on our roles, and so in the real world are sometimes followed rather loosely. Many of the hallmarks of "professionalism" are a lot messier on the ground than they are in the textbook. For instance, though it is not seen as professional to disclose too much personal information if you are a tutor or teacher, it is sometimes exactly the path to more and better learning. Coming out to a queer learner, or letting a student know that you too were kicked out of high school, are potentially deeply transformative moments. We do not want to miss these chances because we are too busy articulating ethical principles. We do not want to be so hung up by professional boundaries that we can’t be challenged by critical deliberation involving living relationships.

These relationships demand that decisions around confidentiality are made on a case-by-case basis, if we are to stay alive to all possibilities in the moment. The one basic principle that obtains, however, is that all disclosure is for the benefit of the learner. That must be the fundamental guide or standard. From the highly medicalized environment to the organic, highly personal relationships in a community organization, exchange of information is unethical if it has some other meaning or purpose than the benefit of the learner.

Perhaps this messy theme does return, in the end, to the simple and obvious. Maintain a tender and honest awareness of the complexity of power dynamics. Set and honour boundaries while remaining open to shifting them if the need of the other human being in front of you calls you to do so.

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