

STEM, Autism, and Developing Professional Relationships: Interview with a Mentor, Part Two

by Laura Gilmour, with Dr. Melike Schalomon

Dr. Melike Schalomon is Interim Dean of Arts and Science and Associate Professor at Grant MacEwan University in Canada. Her background is in neuropsychology. In this three-part series, I interview her on her experience mentoring me as an autistic student.

This segment presents the challenge of being a caring mentor to your students, so that students feel liked and respected as a person, while avoiding becoming their peer or buddy, as well as maintaining enough professional difference to not bias grading or other forms of assessment. Dr. Schalomon mentored me during times in my life when I went through some difficulties, such as my struggles with anxiety disorder and panic attacks and the death of my grandmother in 2009. She was able to be supportive of my needs as her student while maintaining boundaries.

Because I continued towards an academic career path and had ongoing research collaborations with Dr. Schalomon post graduation, where we were in more of colleague/collaborator roles than student-teacher roles, we developed a friendship based on common research and career interests. As an emerging academic, I have friends and colleagues at many levels of their journey in academia, and we all help each other to grow. However, it is not appropriate to form a friendship with a current supervisor or instructor, and such a friendship with a former mentor is unlikely for students unless career and research paths overlap after graduation and people are working closely together for several years in a non-student/teacher situation.

Our conversation picks up where we left off at the close of the first interview segment.

Laura Gilmour: This is something I recall from when you were an advisor or a teacher. You would often do things, sort of to guide me, or sort of to show me things were normal, but you would set boundaries when I would bring in something too far [outside of class concerns]. Or [you would] say something like, “you should ask your doctor this,” or something [like that] when I was saying, “Should I be in school this term after my grandmother died?”

Dr. Melike Schalomon: To me, that is part of interacting with students in general. So, this isn’t something I think I would [do] differently for you [than] from any of my honor’s students or independent study students. When you work closely together with any student, you start having a relationship with the student, and it can get to the point [for the student] where it’s more difficult to see this as a supervisor-student relationship as opposed to a “we’re friends, we’re buddies,” kind of thing. And it does not help a student to be buddies with a teacher.

It has to be clear at that point, where—you’re still the person grading the students’ exams, and that, you know, in the end, I am the supervisor. What I say has to be accepted. And if you cross that line and get too friendly, and start talking about too many personal issues, for example, decisions about whether you should be at school or how many courses you might want to take, you’re starting to cross that boundary.

I think, especially when you’re teaching in the area of neuropsychology/psychology, it has to be something that has to be really clear between the faculty member and the student: that I’m not a clinician; I’m not qualified to do that [i.e., diagnose or treat you]. I think it happens maybe more to people teaching psychology, but I do think it happens to people teaching in any kind of

academic discipline—that students think they [teachers] can give them advice on things that they're really not qualified to talk about. We're discipline experts.

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LG: I notice you did show [me] some of your own academic papers from when you were a student to say, “this was my paper when I was in this program and you don't have to get perfect marks.”

MS: Yes, so I can use personal examples, so I can talk about myself personally, but I don't want to get too personal with you. Not if I'm still grading things that you're submitting to me, because you have to maintain that distance: both so I know I'm not biasing myself towards a student by having too much of a personal relationship with a student, and also so that the student is more willing to accept the feedback that they're getting from me, rather than trying to debate it like you would with a friend. So, that, the relationship between you and me changed a fair bit *after you were no longer my student*.

I wouldn't have allowed it to develop too far into a friendship while you were still my student. It is problematic. And I think it is *even more* problematic when you have a student who has some challenges at school—in your case with, sort of, interactive social style, where the student is more in need of help and advice. And you have to make sure that you maintain that distance, where, yes, we're friendly, and, yes, I can give you general advice, but I'm not going to get too personal because I'm not qualified to do that.