

Words of Caution

The American Heritage Dictionary provides this meaning for the word *confidential*: entrusted with the confidence of another. Each of us as tutors are entrusted with the confidence of our students who as time goes by become more and more comfortable about sharing part of their lives with us. Some of that information can be about children, marriages, addictions, finances, medical histories, etc. We learn the joys and difficulties in their lives. It is up to us to honor that confidence and keep those personal revelations sacred and private. We are entrusted not to share those personal insights with our own friends and coworkers. What we learn should remain in the library or classroom where or teaching takes place.

Carol A. Lyons writes in Teaching Struggling Readers, “We know that virtually all forms of learning take place within the context of a relationship with another and that learning won’t happen unless the child feels safe – safe enough to listen and share herself with the teacher.” The same holds absolutely true for our adult learners. In order to progress with our student, we have to develop a bond, which I believe contains elements of both trust and friendship. Carol A. Lyons goes on to say, “The extent to which students feel connected to teachers and the extent to which they feel teachers are fair and care about them is significant to their progress.”

We work with fragile learners, many of whom struggle day to day with a myriad of issues. It is our responsibility to honor the trust that is bestowed upon us. I am reminded of a conversation I once overheard between two teachers: *maybe it’s an Egyptian thing, I mean at least her cousin was pretty, she’s far from pretty, and wasn’t her cousin promised to someone? isn’t that how it works? girls aren’t so important so they let them fail* (New Jersey English Journal 2006). I know the teachers were talking about a student in a very public place and that without thinking, they were breaking the confidence placed in them by a student who was struggling with difficult issues both at home and at school. I carry the lesson of that moment with me still and those words act as words of caution. I remind myself to honor the words of my students and not toss them into every day conversations.

My wife Joan tutors a student from China and they have become good friends. They laugh, learn, and share moments from their lives together. Joan feels that confidence is a privilege and that it deserves your respect. She says that when your student talks to you about her life, those words should stay between the two of you and that is an honor when someone respects you enough to tell you sensitive things. As tutors we also become advocates for our students and try to help them over hurdles they face. Our words hold great importance in their lives and become something our students look forward to each week. In return, it is up to us to treat our student’s own words with trust and reverence. As my wife says, we are given a privilege and it is important not to betray that trust.

Works Cited:

1. Lyons, Carol A. Teaching Struggling Readers. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann 2003.
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