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## On the border between silence and meaning.

### Existential questions about truth and appearance in academic work

#### Summary

A conversation with Dr Adrianna Sarnat–Ciastko concerns the multidimensional experience of boundaries in the work of an academic teacher. These boundaries manifest themselves on a personal level (sense of competence, emotions, professional role), relational level (contact with students, crossing status boundaries, the meaning of silence), organisational level (teaching workload, pace of work, university culture) and cultural–generational level (clash between different generations of students and teachers). Silence becomes a special analytical category – understood both as an obstacle to dialogue and as a teaching tool, an indicator of maturity and trust, and a space for reflection. The interviewee also offers a critical reflection on the contemporary university, pointing to the tension between the logic of the "regime of speed," productivism and the appearance of quality, and the need for slowness, relationality and authenticity in academic education. The interview reveals the experience of teaching as an ethical and existential practice, rooted in relationships with others and in the constant negotiation of boundaries.

**Keywords:** boundaries in academic teaching, pedagogical silence, intergenerational differences, pace and well-being at university, the ethos of studying

**Jarosław Jendza [JJ]:** Dear Ada, we are meeting today because a few months ago, at a conference on academic teaching organised by the The University of Gdańsk Center for the Development of Teaching and Tutoring, we invited you to a panel discussion on your experiences with boundaries in teaching. As you probably remember, this panel brought together a very diverse group of people who presented different ways of understanding what boundaries can be, where they lie, and how to work with them.

As someone who has a lot of experience in crossing certain boundaries, I would like to start by asking you if you remember a moment in your professional life when you decided that you wanted to work with a particular boundary.

**Adrianna Sarnat–Ciastko [ASC]:** Jarek, first of all, thank you for inviting me to this conversation. Getting straight to the point, although this topic opens many doors for me, I will mention a boundary that I think every teacher sets for themselves. This boundary is the limitations of one's own competence.

I ask myself the question: am I sufficient? When I say this, I remember a moment when I started working as an academic teacher and came face to face with my colleagues, who were only a year younger than me. That was when the question arose: am I good enough? It was the first boundary I had to work through, because in this situation it is not about whether I know more, or even whether I have developed the skills that will enable me to take on the role of a teacher. Rather, it was about whether I saw myself in this role and whether I identified with it. And that is the work on myself as a person who stands in front of a group. It was a boundary that stayed with me for a very long time.

I will tell you honestly that the ethos of being an academic teacher is immediately associated with that of a master. Hence the question: is this now my role? This context invites us to think about the path that a person facing a group of students must take.

I remember teaching one of my first classes at the university that is now called Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa. I started working on a temporary contract basis in 2005, which was basically twenty years ago, which is quite shocking to me.

At that time, I taught a course called, I think, "Contemporary socio-political issues". This course covered many aspects of recent European history, including the creation of the European Union and its significance. At that time, I experienced another boundary that showed me that perhaps I was in the right place. I asked this question to students who a year were or two younger than me, studying pedagogy in their fifth year. I asked them what significance the Second World War had for the creation of the European Union. I wanted to initiate a conversation and was met with silence, which was poignant for me, because, at the end of the day, we are talking about the Second World War.

I asked myself then where this silence came from. I started talking, inviting them to think together. I asked what happened during the Second World War that made Adenauer, and other leaders think about the creation of the European Union.

At one point, a timid voice piped up saying: " maybe , the Second World War caused social discontent?" I remember sitting down then and feeling very strongly that boundary, the limits of accepting other people's ignorance and the need to do something about that ignorance.

I could, for example, have ridiculed this ignorance – how is it that in the fifth year of university studies, no one knows what happened during the Second World War? I felt a kind of inner outrage at the time, and it remained strongly in my memory. I was accompanied by the thought that some discontent could be caused by miners' and nurses' strikes, but the consequences of World War II were a tragedy for millions of people. I was surprised by this boundary, which made realise me the need to be in this particular place.

I also see another boundary that I have to cross. It is an organisational boundary that appears in many places. For example, in July this year, I receive a proposal for additional responsibilities. This proposal shocks me so much that I try to close my laptop and not look at it for a while, because just

looking at it, at this number of new challenges and tasks, is so overwhelming that at some point you don't know what to do with it.

This organisational boundary is also the boundary of my own capabilities, my mental and physical capabilities. My organisation needs commitment that exceeds my mental and physical capabilities, because I am also involved in other things, which allow me to strengthen my teaching skills. These are projects, training courses and other activities that enrich me.

Of course, I give it back later, because these activities are like seeds that I sow. But I cannot escape the question of how much my workplace is conducive to this. To what extent is it also a place of rest and regeneration, to what extent is it a place where I can take care of my personal development, even in the context of the time I have at my disposal for reading various things, for contemplating science, for seeking new scientific and teaching challenges and so on?

Academic education is not a simple transfer of what you have to others. I am a person who has to process this content in my head. I have to construct it until it becomes authentic to me. At this point, the question arises, about organisational filters that make this difficult.

This leads to another boundary – the boundary of my emotions, which is also related to the standards I set for myself. I try to devote myself to my work, I am organised, I plan, I see the next steps, and I see a certain path in teaching.

Sometimes I wonder that maybe I should start conversations with students asking them a question: How much do you want to pass this course? Are you aiming for a “C” or an “A”. Because if I assume that everyone is aiming for an “A”, and there are students who want a “C”, should I respect that student, because they have the right to choose that “C” and it will be enough for them. This is therefore an important issue when thinking about standards.

Am I supposed to be a missionary who carries the torch of education, lighting the way like a lantern, casting for someone beam of light? But I often realise that I am faced with someone who does not need it. For such a person, our meeting is just an episode in their day, and their values lie elsewhere. Perhaps they think: "This is not important to me at all, so why should I make an effort?"

I do think that manoeuvring between these two extremes is incredibly difficult to reach a point where you can say that you have done a good job. On the other hand, what can be done to turn this good job into mastery, even though to become a master, one must be chosen by someone else?

This raises the questions of how to preserve our humanity, how to teach in accordance with the standards of dialogue, how to respect the needs of other people, which is particularly difficult for me in the context of the organisational boundaries I mentioned, but also in a situation where I feel that I am in a constant pursuit of action. In such moments, all that remains is routine and mechanical movement. You could say that this is the limit of flexible finding oneself in reality, and it is incredibly demanding.

As you can see, there are many boundaries, but another boundary is culture. Admittedly, my university is a place where there are very few students from different cultures. I am talking about people who appear for a moment, who are interns or Erasmus programme participants. It is a kind of

challenge to simply be able to “grab” them, “hold” them and show them that there is also space here to build relationships. But what to do when that person is not ready for it at all?

Another boundary is related to generations. Looking at the university, one can see different generations of teaching staff who have, at times, completely different approaches to the way of operating and very the idea of a university.

For some, a university is a corporation. Sometimes I realise this when, for example, my colleague at work says: "I come here to the factory. The university is a factory." And that's a difficult line for me to digest.

But I also experience these generational boundaries among students. We have more students who are in their retirement age, fulfilling their dreams of studying and not going to the University of the Third Age, but to regular, full-time studies. These people say in class: "I have a granddaughter", and they suddenly become the sociometric stars of the whole group and, in a way, fulfil the role of mother or father for others. These people often organise knowledge, take excellent notes, make use the reading rooms and sometimes can explain certain things in an excellent way. It's amazing, to be able to work with such boundaries.

I would also like to add that boundaries change and appear in different places. This happens from semester to semester – what may have been a boundary for me last semester is no longer a boundary today.

However, there is another boundary that is quite important to me, and which does not fit into standard academic jargon. I simply have a tendency, or perhaps my head tells me that I should be on first-name terms with my students, and I do so. Generally, they have a problem with switching to informal address with me, but I try very hard to get to know people by name. This is especially true when I conduct activities, such as workshops that are highly engaging and fall within the area of psychoeducation. It is important for me to talk to Eve, Dominice and Cris. At such moments, I try to remember the students' names. It is for me very difficult to address them as "ma'am", "sir" or "ladies and gentlemen". This is a certain boundary that I am constantly attempting to cross.

You know, Jarek, I work with students in a very delicate, psycho-pedagogical, psycho-preventive space, and I feel that more direct contact is important. The relationship that is established shows that later these people approach me and want something more. Of course, this does apply to not everyone, but it often happens.

I remember a situation when I was talking in class about the impact of alcohol on foetal development and how it shapes the brain. Then a girl came up to me and said, that this was probably what had happened to her me when her mum was pregnant with her.

And that's the moment when a teacher becomes something more, when you can trust them. It's a turning point that you have to earn and work for – but it also gives me a sense of purpose and faith that what I'm doing is meaningful. That's the point of teaching, crossing those status boundaries, and I consciously cross that boundary – the boundary of communication patterns with students.

**[JJ]:** If you don't mind, I would like to explore some of your thoughts now. First, I would like to ask you about the issue of silence as a boundary. This is one of the points in your words that I find particularly

inspiring, because, on the one hand, we sometimes perceive our academic work as work in silence. Silence is sometimes a prerequisite for contemplation.

In other words, we are friends with silence, we feel comfortable in it, it allows us to read and write. Silence is an integral part of working at a university. On the other hand, you describe a social situation in which one side is trying to establish dialogue, and then this silence becomes a boundary that needs to be addressed. In your statement, you use the modal verb "must"; You say – I must do something about this boundary.

**[ASC]:** I think that silence is an indicator of maturity at certain moments. If you say that silence is natural for you as an academic, then I have the feeling that it is a choice. I have a feeling that you are maturing into this silence, treating it as a natural state, a state in which creativity arises. There is space for writing, thinking, contemplating, looking out of the window, – then silence is your friend. But there are also other contexts in which silence can be thought of differently.

Professor Teresa Olearczyk from Cracow (Poland) writes about the pedagogy of silence and points out that silence is a pedagogical category<sup>1</sup>. Olearczyk shows that silence can be a remedy for the noise and overstimulation that surrounds us. If, for example, we have a situation where a generation coming to us cannot live without headphones on their ears, cannot stop scrolling Tik Tok, because it is at a stage where it constantly supplies itself with dopamine, then I have the feeling that silence is a huge challenge for them. In this context, I see silence as a space that has many boundaries in itself.

Silence can also be something we fear greatly, because so often in teaching we are in a rush to cover some material. If we have every five minutes planned, which I sometimes encounter with teachers from primary or secondary schools – and there is silence – then it is often treated as a waste of time. If someone asks a question at the blackboard and that person has three seconds to answer, it seems like an eternity, so we have to "fill the silence" with talk.

We feel that we will not be able to cover the material in time, that we will not be able to complete it, and then we treat silence as evil. Silence becomes a boundary we do not want to reach, a signal that we have gone in the wrong direction.

I had the opportunity to do a micro study on silence. To be honest, I found the topic very interesting, especially from the perspective of my tutoring experience. I noticed, for example, that some people are afraid of silence in the tutoring process. If there is silence, it means that they are not fulfilling the relationship properly. But silence can be interpreted in at least two different ways. It does not have to be a curse, but rather a kind of blessing.

Silence is an ideal state for creative work, for thinking about the fact that we feel safe with each other, that if we remain in silence with someone in a relationship, it is an indicator of trust.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Olearczyk, T. (2021). *Między hałasem a ciszą*. Kraków: Vistulana; Olearczyk, T. (2016). *Cisza w edukacji szkolnej*. Oficyna Wydawnicza AFM.

In transactional analysis, there is a term called transactional intimacy, which refers to a situation where we feel very comfortable in a relationship with another person and can remain in silence. To conclude this topic, I would say that silence is a kind of indicator of maturity.

In my teaching practice, I have stopped being afraid of silence. Also, in relationships, I do not expect an immediate response. If someone is in control of their time and knows what their tasks are, and at the same time "remains" in silence, it simply means that they need it, and for me it is a kind of message about the relationship.

I like to think of silence as a task, then I don't feel that silence wastes anything, silence becomes a tool that allows us to choose something, but silence is also necessary so that at some point we can familiarise ourselves with a place that is not entirely familiar to us.

If I am dealing with a situation in which I consciously choose silence as a tool for my work, then it can also be an important didactic message, for example, that someone does not want to talk about a given topic, or that I have entered an area of life that is not a topic for a tutorial. Or maybe the person just needs time and silence, and then we enjoy that time together because it allows us to see something important. Silence is therefore an indicator, a tool, a space and a boundary for me. However, what it becomes at a given moment depends on the context in which we find ourselves.

**[JJ]:** I like silence. I cycle hundreds of kilometres and recently I have realised that I cycle in search of the sounds of nature and, at the same time, silence.

**[ASC]:** Note that your experience of silence is a choice. You need this silence. For me, silence is also a point of reference that allows me to show my students a certain path. I think silence can be a friend that leads us to well-being, and then we can draw our students' attention to listening and practising silence as part of workshop activities – then it will be a task to be done.

Being in silence is an exercise in mindfulness. Such interpersonal contact with students, which we practise in various types of workshops, can strengthen certain soft skills. Silence can therefore be part of the programme, a kind of experience, just like your cycling.

In silence, we can create structures that we then describe, for example in the form of an inner dialogue. Silence is then a very personal experience and a moment of recognising my relationship with the world, but silence in a relationship can also mean its breakdown. A complete breakdown, where there is nothing left. There is nothing on the other side.

In a relationship, silence can mean a longing for contact, and when that person does not speak, such silence will no longer be comfortable. It was during our conversation that I realised that silence itself hides boundaries and, besides, it is a very interesting category for further exploration.

**[JJ]:** Indeed. I also did not realise that it could be so ambiguous and undefined. One could say, that we are now learning about silence and what it becomes at a given moment and in a given context, and what to do with it. But now I would like to return to another thread, which you described as the intergenerational boundary. I have the impression that literature dealing with such differences is growing very rapidly, which may indicate that this is an important topic in terms of culture and research. Why do you think we are emphasising intergenerational differences so much at this particular moment?

**[ASC]:** Intergenerational differences are something I encounter every day at the University, because we meet different generations here. I think the differences are huge, but I also believe that transferring and learning from each other is of great value.

Two years ago, I had a student who was a bit older than my mum. It was her next degree, which she treated as a place for self-improvement, not necessarily thinking about another field of study, as a path to work in this area. With a great deal of freedom and awareness of her abilities, but also with a willingness to explore, and with an adult child, she decided to study. She had a certain approach to studying, which I would describe as reliability, which is also very close to my heart.

I am an organised person, and I live by the principle that if we have a set of readings, I read them, prepare myself and participate in class. This student did exactly the same. For her classmates, it was something extremely interesting and revealing. Suddenly, it turned out that this was also a way to study. This example showed them a new perspective.

On the other hand, there are meta-analyses, terms such as „snowflakes" are inundated with a real abundance of various concepts. This abundance creates apparent chaos, but it also shows that we are confronted with different patterns of thinking. I am from the millennial generation, for whom meeting the Generation Z is something phenomenal<sup>2</sup>.

I think that the more such transfers there are, the better. These apparent boundaries can cause us to learn from each other, but the key element is that we must have a common space to work in<sup>3</sup>. This transfer and learning from each other applies to very different aspects of life, from the idea of well-being to the stimuli that surround us, such as the silence that was much more prevalent in the past than it today.

The work ethics is probably completely different too. I have an alpha generation at home, my son who is about to turn seven, and I ask myself what responsibilities I should give him so that it is reasonable, interesting for him and necessary for all of us.

The presence of different generations in one space complements us all very well and adds a lot of value. I really like all kinds of situations where, for example, students go to volunteer, for example with a group of the elderly or become assistants to people with disabilities. In these situations, these people also transcend their generational boundaries.

Reaching out to another person just to get to know them, regardless of who they are and what generation they belong to, is valuable. Of course, at this stage, the question arises as to what kind of university should be created in order to provide a space that invites different generations to learn from each other. There are various solutions in this area.

Sometimes the university “goes down” to the secondary school level and creates academic high schools, sometimes we have nurseries at universities, but I must admit that I feel an inner turmoil

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Finn, K., Ingram, N., & Allen, K. (2021). Student millennials/Millennial students. *Reimagining the higher education student*, 187.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Hannay, M., & Fretwell, C. (2011). The higher education workplace: Meeting the needs of multiple generations. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 10, 1.

here. I have a problem with the modern university and with the fact that the academic world has gone in a certain direction.

Let me give you an example. When I was a student, from my first year I was involved in student life, which consisted, for example, of creating a student newspaper for five years. I was in a research club, which was an incredible experience for me. I wondered whether I should promote cheese in supermarkets on weekends, work as a sales hostess, because everyone has financial needs.

At that time, however, I felt a strong drive towards creative work, which is often voluntary work. I was always happy when I saw that I had, for example, a four-hour break and could use that time to do an interview, put together a newspaper, or take some photos. I waited for those moments when we published the newspaper, first as a monthly and then as a bimonthly. The newspaper was called *Częstochowski Magazyn Sportowo-Akademicki* (Częstochowa Sports and Academic Magazine)<sup>4</sup>.

To this day, I can still feel the energy of that creative moment, but I can also feel the fruits it bore. I remember exactly how I would pick up the latest issues of the newspaper from the printers and run to class, sometimes to an exam, and in a rush, apologising to the professor that we had just published the newspaper and I had to pick it up. I was in a creative flow at the time.

Today, I sometimes observe students who have one free hour, because it was difficult for the planner to arrange a schedule so that they could have these classes in a row, and they have a problem with that. I feel an inner resistance to this, although I try to tell them that it can be a resource. You can spend time together, you can talk, you can go for coffee or ice cream, read, prepare for classes, think about some activity, instead of sitting in a call centre and talking about energy bills.

The work ethics takes away from the study ethic. Studying becomes an add-on.

For me, it was a different experience, enriching in many ways. Moments like these really motivate me. I talk to students and say, "Gosh, through your studies, you are prolonging your youth, you have the opportunity to experience things. Give yourselves time for this experience, give yourselves a shared space to get to know each other.

I do think that volunteering is a good space for different generations to meet at the University. It involves a student going to a person in need, finding them and supporting each other. I also like the idea of a "living library", where we have the opportunity to meet different generations, but this requires a certain amount of commitment. This is where the educational and formative functions of the University come in. After all, we are not only concerned with presenting knowledge, but also with shaping attitudes, especially if we demonstrate this through our own behaviours.

I am the supervisor of a research club – the Student Research Club of Therapists, where students who get involved, develop and are exposed to various opportunities and invest time in our meetings. This gives me the feeling that this is the right path. For me, this is the correct understanding of the ethos of studying. This gives meaning to the university as such, as a place of growth, and not

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<sup>4</sup> The history of the journal is linked to the Jan Długosz University Sports Association. For more information, see: <http://www.azs-ujd.czest.pl/historia/>.

just a place of knowledge transfer or e-learning courses. Only then is it a place to experience something more.

If it is indeed true that we live in a culture of immediacy, an "instant" culture, then perhaps the university is the place where we give ourselves permission not to be instant. This is an important element of the broader understanding of academia – here, slow rather than fast is part of growth<sup>5</sup>.

**[JJ]:** Thinking about time is probably related to the cultural boundaries you mentioned. Perhaps today we really do perceive things according to the maxim "fast is good"?

**[ASC]:** Yes. Let me refer to my tutoring experience again. As a tutor, I associate "fast" with pretending. Of course, there are many moments in my life when I act quickly, especially when I am in the heat of various activities. Then "quickly" is enough, but when we enter into a relationship with someone, when we want to genuinely create space for our development goals, for our own personal goals, it is often the case that the first, quick things that appear are superficial.

If we stop at what is superficial, we will not go deeper. "Quickly" does not always work, and in some areas of life it does not work at all. For example, the materials we prepare for classes. They were not created quickly, but we created them through years of work. We changed them, improved them, worked on them. The same is true in the tutoring process.

**[JJ]:** I think that it's quite difficult in a culture of learning outcomes, where education is subordinated to efficiency. And yet in our conversation, you praise slowness.

**[ASC]:** Yes, you're right. I'm thinking about the fact that we can create enclaves, enclaves from the university, where a young scientist who goes straight from university to doctoral school and has to produce as many papers as possible, and if they don't do it, they won't get in because that's the entry criterion.

**[JJ]:** The speed regime?

**[ASC]:** Of course, a speed regime! I don't want to say that it's not useful at all. On the contrary, sometimes it motivates us, but you certainly can't succumb to it one hundred per cent. Right next to "fast life" we have "slow life", we have "hygge"<sup>6</sup> and other things that allow you to achieve well-being.

Why, do you think, for example, that there is more and more talking about well-being at the moment? Because our hearts cannot keep up with this pace, our brains cannot keep up with this pace. We need to maintain balance at the University and create enclaves for the slowness. A university that would like to work with this boundary would certainly have to plan spaces for functioning in "slow" mode. A university that realises it wants to have employees who are efficient, who write, publish, travel, represent and score points, must create space for regeneration, because this is a key element of creative work and this part of the activity must be planned, even if only in the HR strategy.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Berg, M., & Seeber, B. K. (2025). *The slow professor: Challenging the culture of speed in the academy*. University of Toronto Press.

<sup>6</sup> Hygge – a Danish word meaning comfort, cosiness, used to describe the achievement of inner balance, security and happiness, especially by Scandinavian societies. The concept originated in Denmark in the 19th century. <https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hygge>, accessed on: 25.11.2025.

I really like the situation, which I think is becoming more and more common, where I send someone an email and get a reply saying, "Sorry, I'm on holiday, I'll reply in two days." Implementing this type of culture, where we don't have to act immediately, where at least 10% or 15% of our time is devoted to regeneration, should be planned. This is a specific organisational culture; these are certain standards.

I am not an expert in the history of education, but I remember that there were such ideas and solutions in the past, for example in medieval colleges, where academic teachers and students worked together, lived together, ate together, competed in races together, sang together, discussed together. They rested together and had time to talk together. It would be important for us not to forget this.

Meanwhile, we are moving towards a university that is becoming a corporation that holds you accountable for results. If we collect documentation of learning outcomes, then committees for the quality of education appear, which verify every year how efficiently we are doing this. I keep wondering if this is how it should be.

Twenty years ago, I had one sheet of paper with the entire course programme on it, or maybe even three quarters of that sheet. It was a matter of academic freedom. Today, everything is controlled, and it is a complete illusion that we can create high-quality education at such a pace. Ensuring the quality of education at this pace of work must be an illusion. The situation is similar in other parts of the education system. Yesterday, I spoke to a friend of mine who is a schoolteacher and who says that prevention in schools is only prevention on paper.

Note that this may be an interesting conclusion to our conversation – we have identified the boundary between truth and illusion. What makes something true and what makes something an illusion in the world of academia? We can pretend everything, but where is the place for real education, real teaching, real coexistence at the University?

**[JJ]:** That is the question! That is the perfect pretext for another conversation! Thank you very much.

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