

## What We're Talking About: Boundaries and Lesson Rates

by Cynthia Vaughn, Associate Editor, "Independent Voices"

Type the word "boundaries" in the search feature of any of the social media forums for independent voice teachers [see sidebar] and you will find more results than you could possibly read in an evening. Some of the most common boundary issues deal with:



### STUDIO

- Students who arrive early
- Students who arrive late
- Students who don't show up at all
- Students who don't like the rep
- Students who don't practice
- Siblings who disrupt lessons
- Parents who critique and micromanage lessons

### BILLING

- Students/Parents who don't pay on time
- Students/Parents who are confrontational about paying for missed lessons

### COMMUNICATION

- Students/Parents who don't communicate or respond to emails, voice messages, or texts
- Students/Parents who text or call at all hours and expect an immediate response

### STUDIO OWNERS

- Studio owners who don't appreciate, compensate fairly, or respect contractor/employee teachers

### COLLEAGUES

- Teachers who recruit students from other studios
- Teachers who undermine your teaching and reputation

If you teach long enough, you will have encountered most of these issues and many more. When you vent about valid transgressions in not-very-private online

forums, the responses will range from outrage ("How dare they!") to complacency ("Cut them some slack. It's not a big deal") and from sympathy ("I hear you!") to punitive action ("Kick them out!"). We, as independent voice teachers, desire a sounding board, and misery often does love commiseration. It is up to YOU, however, the teacher and business owner, to establish your own ground rules, what you will and will not tolerate, where the gray areas lie, and what are hard and fast rules.

Here are some comments from popular forums, shared with permission from the OP (original posters.)

**Brian Lee** writes, "Why do so many of us not give ourselves permission to operate our studios in a peaceful, orderly manner? Life is so short. We all will die. Did you willingly audition for the play you are in? Do what is right and don't let people (clients, children, partners, anyone) coerce you into doing wrong. Whether you deserve it or it's 'hard' or unpopular or there will be pushback, DOES NOT MATTER IN THE BIG PICTURE. Do what's right according to you."

**Kathy O'Donnell** offers simple, but wise, advice: "It is ok to ask. It is ok to say no."

**Jamie Fair's** practical advice may save some future headaches: "I like to keep a paper trail on these sorts of things, so if I have to say no, it is in writing. I can also then attach a copy of my studio policy and cite the page for the rule in question."

Having trouble saying "No"? **Diane Latham's** tongue-in-cheek suggestion is to "Stand in front of the mirror and repeat the word "no" in a sweet, but firm voice 10 times. Get the inflection just right. Feel the "o" roll off your tongue. Savor it. Then pick out a pleasing note to begin on, and go up and down the scale singing 'No, no, no, no...' Then hold the last 'no' for at least 4 beats, but as many as 8. Then dissolve into hysterical giggles as you say 'Happy NO-el!'"

Some of the best advice on boundaries comes from **Michelle Markwart Deveaux**: "Boundaries are vital to being a thriving teacher. Knowing our boundaries and then choosing where we are flexible is relational capital with our clients."

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If you are a 'hard liner,' ask yourself why. Same though, if you're a "wishy-washy." Boundaries are good only when they SERVE you, not SHOULD you. If we ever find ourselves doing something because we 'should' and not because we 'want,' that's a good thing to dissect and think on."

Another ubiquitous and often contentious topic is...

### "So, how much do you charge?"

Some discussions never die, they just recycle. I'm going to attempt to stifle this one, though, because it really isn't anyone's business what you charge for lessons. 'Too bold?' Maybe, but it's true. I understand that it's helpful to learn the local rates in your area. However, it's unethical and it could even be illegal for you to suggest to someone else that they charge too much or too little. NATS specifically does not allow discussion of rates in any of its forums because such discussion could be viewed from a legal standpoint as collusion and open the association to legal action and fines from the federal government. If specific comments appear they are deleted by the manager of the social media page. Similarly, specific data on rates of instruction are not collected or distributed to avoid any appearance of collusion.

So, here's my opinion from a 2016 discussion thread that recently resurfaced again on a popular voice teachers forum. I still stand by it in 2018:

"No one here is overcharging. No one here is undercharging. Every professional should know the going rate in their city and target market, and then set their fees as they determine based on the teacher's experience and personal

choice. University teachers often charge less because it isn't their primary income source. And that's okay. Less experienced teachers may charge less than someone who has been teaching for decades and has advanced degrees and professional performing credits. And that's okay. No one knows his/her location, students, and worth better than the individual teacher. And that's okay." — *Cynthia Vaughn*

I'll leave the last word to **Jeff Costello**:

"I thought we weren't going to discuss this."

### Popular Facebook Groups for Independent Voice Teachers



If you'd like to join the conversation, here are some popular Facebook groups for independent voice teachers:

**NATS Chats for Voice Teachers**

**Voice Teachers for Young Singers**

**Professional Voice Teachers**

**The New Forum for Professional Voice Teachers**

**self-employed voice teachers discussion group**

**Voice Geek Group**

**Musical Theatre Voice Teachers & Coaches Network**

**Popular & Commercial Music Voice Teachers**

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