



Effective Instructional Practice:

Considering Identity Disclosures in Practice

Andrea J. Vickery, SUNY Oswego

Students frequently disclose personal information in the classroom (Myers, 1998), and consider disclosure appropriate when it is related to class discussion or assignments (Frisby & Sidelinger, 2013). Social identity is central to many concepts taught in communication classrooms (McBride et al., 2016), meaning these disclosures often include social identity markers and experiences. Students may then be disclosing experiences including, but not limited to, being a first-generation college student (Orbe, 2004), being a queer or trans student of color (Garvey et al., 2019), past or current mental health diagnoses (Meluch & Starcher, 2020), or experiences as undocumented (Muñoz, 2016). Despite the known benefits of encouraging student disclosure and engaging in instructor disclosure, specific considerations must be made for understanding and responding to student identity disclosures. The purpose of this effective instructional practice is to briefly consider the consequences of student identity disclosures and offer tips for instructors drawn from communication theory, applied research, and inclusive teaching practices.

Some consequences of student identity disclosure reinforce the interpersonal nature of the student-instructor relationship, while other consequences impact the classroom climate. Students report disclosing to instructors to receive social support, particularly in out of classroom settings like office hours (Jones, 2008).

Microaggressions occur with relative frequency in the classroom (Ogunyemi et al., 2020), often targeting students' intersectional identities (Nadal et al., 2015). Even if a

student has not disclosed an aspect of their identity, these microaggressions can still occur in the participatory contributions of their peers and lead to a challenging climate and difficult dialogues for all students.

Instructors may implicitly rely on their syllabus to manage some identity disclosures. One standard syllabus section is the campus policy on accommodations. Students with learning disabilities report they do not always disclose their identity (Johnsen et al., 2017), meaning instructors will still have students in class who qualify but do not receive accommodations. Additionally, a syllabus statement on Title IX may not adequately inform students what happens if they disclose intimate partner violence or sexual assault to their instructors: Many campuses have also identified instructors as mandated reporters who must report sexual misconduct, creating concerns for confidentiality and trust in response to these disclosures (Brown, 2018).

Five Tips for Considering Identity Disclosures in Practice

1. Instructors should develop classroom guidelines related to self-disclosure and incorporate these guidelines into the course syllabus, participation guidelines, and assignment instructions. Griffing (2016) offers a sample syllabus statement about appropriate disclosures in psychology courses which may be adapted for communication courses. Booth (2012) acknowledges that authentic and integrated learning assessments may prompt self-disclosure and recommends developing guidelines related to disclosure in assignment instructions. If assignments are about student identity, then these instructions should offer alternatives to student identity disclosure to respect and manage student privacy and boundaries.

Indeed, many studies investigating student disclosure approach this concept from a communication privacy management perspective (Booth, 2012; Johnsen et al., 2017; Meluch & Starcher, 2020). Inspired by this framework, the written policies developed should note expectations around the privacy of disclosures shared in discussions and identify when and why the instructor may need to share information beyond the boundaries of the interpersonal student-instructor relationship.

2. Instructors may consider encouraging identity disclosures happen first with the instructor before such information is unexpectedly disclosed in classroom discussions. Addy et al. (2021) suggest using a “who’s in class?” form to collect anonymous identity disclosures as part of inclusive teaching practices. Using such a form in the first week(s) of class may help instructors practice inclusive teaching by understanding the identities of those students in class while modeling course policies on identity disclosures. Additionally, instructors may encourage appropriate identity disclosures as students desire in office hours or student meetings to have disclosures take place in an interpersonal setting.

3. Whether these disclosures occur in office hours or in the classroom, instructors should practice active and empathic listening whenever students disclose about their social identities. Students interviewed about past experiences disclosing disabilities to instructors emphasized that competent communication from their instructors involved instructors actively listening with empathy and supportiveness (Worley & Cornett-DeVito, 2007). Similarly, students interviewed about disclosing sexual assault and intimate partner violence to instructors highlighted their desire that their instructors listen and believe their experiences (Branch et al., 2011). Students who

perceive their instructors engage in active and empathic listening also report their classroom has fewer disruptive behaviors (Weger, 2018).

4. Instructors should consider additional educational and training so they can listen, support, and facilitate disclosures and dialogues around social identities. Sue et al. (2009) recommend that educators receive training to identify microaggressions and learn to facilitate difficult dialogues surrounding race. Their recommendations derived from their findings emphasize the importance of this education and training for white educators as white students look to their white educators for guidance during difficult dialogues on race in the classroom (Sue et al., 2009). This education and training can draw directly from intersectional approaches to identity and communication pedagogy (Yep & Lescure, 2019). Additionally, instructors should acknowledge that these difficult dialogues occur on campus outside the classroom. Even if such conversations happen in the larger campus community, communication design elements can be part of this facilitation framework (Ramasubramanian et al., 2017).

5. Instructors should learn about campus and community resources available and share resources with students. Branch et al. (2012) found students are often confused about which resources are available on and off campus for victims of sexual assault and want their instructors to share resources. By identifying and sharing information about groups and organizations like support groups for trans students or clubs or organizations centered around shared social identity, instructors are able to acknowledge student desires for social support through informational and network support and reinforce the other tips provided in this effective instructional practice.

References

- Addy, T.M., Dube, D., Mitchell, K. A., & SoRelle, M. E. (2021). *What inclusive instructors do: Principles and practices for excellence in college teaching*. Stylus.
- Branch, K.A., Hayes-Smith, R., & Richards, T.N. (2012). Professors' experiences with student disclosures of sexual assault and intimate partner violence: How "helping" students can inform teaching practices. *Feminist Criminology*, 6 (1), 54-75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1557085110397040>
- Booth, M. (2012). Boundaries and student self-disclosure in authentic, integrated learning activities and assignments. *New Directions for Teaching & Learning*, 131, 5-14. <https://www.doi.org/10.1002/tl.20023>
- Brown, S. (2018, August 17). *Many professors have to report sexual misconduct. How should they tell their students that?* The Chronicle of Higher Education. <http://www.chronicle.com/article/many-professors-have-to-report-sexual-misconduct-how-should-they-tell-their-students-that/>
- Frisby, B. N., & Sidelinger, R. J. (2013). Violating student expectations: Student disclosures and student reactions in the college classroom. *Communication Studies*, 64(3), 241-258. <https://doi.org/10.1080.10510974.2012.755636>
- Garvey, J. C., Mobley, S. D., Summerville, K. S., & Moore, G. T. (2019). Queer and trans* students of color: Navigating identity disclosure and college contexts. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 90(1), 150–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2018.1449081>

- Griffing, Z. (2016, May). *Managing student disclosures in the classroom: Tips on fostering appropriate personal disclosures in class*. Psychological Teacher Network. <https://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/ptn/2016/05/student-disclosures>
- Jaasma, M.A. & Koper, R.J. (2001, May). Talk to me: An examination of the content of out-of-class interaction between students and faculty. Paper presented at the International Communication Association annual conference, Washington, D.C.
- Johnsen, L. J., Robinson, T., & Luckasen, C. (2017). Communication privacy management and learning disabilities in the classroom: Understanding students' rules for disclosure. *Florida Communication Journal*, 45 (2), 13-27.
- Jones, A. C. (2008). The Effects of Out-of-Class Support on Student Satisfaction and Motivation to Learn. *Communication Education*, 57(3), 373–388.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520801968830>
- McBride, M. C., Kirby, E. L., Bergen, K. M., Wahl, S.T., Norander, S., & Robinson, T. (2016). Social identities in the classroom. In P. L. Witt (Ed.), *Handbooks of communication science: Communication and learning* (pp. 339-375). DeGruyter Mouton.
- Meluch, A. L., & Starcher, S. C. (2020). College student concealment and disclosure of mental health issues in the classroom: students' perceptions of risk and use of contextual criteria. *Communication Studies*, 71(5), 768–782.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2020.1771392>
- Muñoz, S. M. (2016). Undocumented and unafraid: Understanding the disclosure management process for undocumented college students and graduates. *Journal*

of College Student Development, 57(6), 715-719.

<https://doi.org/10.1335/csd.2016.0070>

Myers, S. A. (1998). Students' self-disclosure in the college classroom. *Psychological Reports*, 83(3), 1067–1070. <https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.1998.83.3.1067>

Orbe, M. P. (2004). Negotiating multiple identities within multiple frames: An analysis of first-generation college students. *Communication Education*, 53(2), 131–149.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520410001682401>

Ramasubramanian, S., Sousa, A. N., & Vanessa, G. (2017). Facilitated difficult dialogues on racism: A goal-based approach. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 45(5), 537-556. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2017.1382706>

Sue, D. W., Lin, A. I., Torino, G. C., Capodilupo, C. M., & Rivera, D. P. (2009). Racial microaggressions and difficult dialogues on race in the classroom. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 15(2), 183-190.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014191>

Weger, H. (2018). Instructor active empathic listening and classroom incivility. *International Journal of Listening*, 32(1), 49–64.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2017.1289091>

Worley, D. W. & Cornett-DeVito, M. M. (2007). College students with learning disabilities (SWLD) and their responses to teacher power. *Communication Studies*, 58(1), 17-33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510970601168665>

Yep, G.A., & Lescure, R. (2019). A thick intersectional approach to microaggressions. *Southern Communication Journal*, 84(2), 113-126.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2018.1511749>