



## Effective Instructional Practice:

### Using Self-Disclosure

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In the traditional classroom, instructors typically spend more time talking than students do. Although they spend most of class time covering course content, instructors also willingly tell personal stories, relay information related to their beliefs and values, and share personal content about their families, friends, personal lives, and professional lives. In doing so, instructors are engaging in self-disclosure, which consists of “any message about the self that a person communicates to another” (Wheless & Grotz, 1976, p. 47) that students are unable to glean from sources other than the instructor (Sorensen, 1989).

Instructor self-disclosure is one mechanism that can be used to facilitate positive and productive communication with students (Fusani, 1994). Generally, instructor self-disclosure consists of three dimensions: amount, relevance, and negativity (Cayanus & Martin, 2008). The *amount* of self-disclosure refers to how frequently an instructor engages in self-disclosure, *relevance* refers to the relationship of the disclosure to the course content (e.g., telling a personal story about speech anxiety when preparing students for their first major speech), and *negativity* refers to conveying personal information that some students might view as unsettling (e.g., telling students that you regularly lie to your significant other).

Using self-disclosure in the classroom is important for three reasons. First, instructor self-disclosure influences positively student motivation, engagement, and learning. When students and instructors are engaged in the classroom, they often

incorporate their life experiences in class discussions. Students tend to take a more active role in the classroom when instructors talk about themselves compared to those students enrolled in courses where instructors do not talk about themselves (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994). Other instructional communication research suggests that computer-mediated instructor self-disclosure via Facebook leads students to be more motivated, report greater affective learning, and perceive the classroom climate more positively (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007).

Second, computer-mediated forms of instructor self-disclosure present opportunities for, as well as barriers to, facilitating the instructor-student relationship. Instructors who self-disclose via Facebook and Twitter are generally perceived by their students as more credible (i.e., competent, trustworthy, and caring) than instructors who do not self-disclose via Facebook (DeGroot, Young, & VanSlette, 2015; Mazer et al., 2007; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009). Students also consider instructors' online self-disclosure via Facebook as a way to (1) make instructors appear more "human" as it reveals their lives outside of the classroom and (2) reduce communication and relational barriers because students view them as "friends" (DiVerniero & Hosek, 2011). Yet, instructors who engage in self-disclosure through social networking sites, but not in class, may fuel students' curiosity and prompt them to speculate about, and potentially inaccurately confirm, aspects of instructors' identities such as their relational status, political affiliation, and sexual identity (DiVerniero & Hosek).

Third, instructor self-disclosure is related positively to students' perceptions of clear and effective teaching. Students are more likely to perceive a self-disclosing instructor as clear when the instructor shares stories and personal information related to

the course content because these stories and personal information help to clarify course material (Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988; Javidi, Downs, & Nussbaum, 1988; Wambach & Brothen, 1997). Instructors who make positive statements about themselves and do not promote their own personal agenda are viewed by students as more effective than teachers who make negative statements about themselves (Sorensen, 1989).

### **Five Tips on Using Self-Disclosure in the Classroom**

1. Remember that when you self-disclose with your students, it is a reciprocal process. That is, when we share information with students, those students are more likely to share information with us. In the classroom, it is primarily your responsibility to begin this reciprocal process. If you are willing to share personal information about yourself with your students, they will be more open to sharing their lives with you as well (Hosek & Thompson, 2009). This reciprocity leads to effective communication, produces a more positive classroom atmosphere, and facilitates effective instructor-student relationships.

2. Engaging in self-disclosure with your students is generally a voluntary and intentional act. Therefore, you can make choices that increase communication effectiveness when you use this classroom behavior. Because research has established that self-disclosure should be relevant to the course content (Javidi et al., 1988; Javidi & Long, 1989), plan and organize your lectures ahead of time and identify opportunities to share your personal experiences and stories. At the same time, your self-disclosure should be honest and, unless the situation requires it, positive in nature. Overall, instructors who engage in positive self-disclosure are viewed more positively by their

students than instructors who engage in negative self-disclosure (Lannutti & Strauman, 2006; Sorensen, 1989). Positive self-disclosure fosters a positive learning environment by creating a friendly and warm classroom climate (Cyanus, 2004).

3. When deciding to engage in self-disclosure, consider the amount and types of information you choose to share with your students. Although students expect their instructors to self-disclose, a curvilinear relationship exists between how much instructors disclose and how much students like them (Sorensen, 1989). If self-disclosure occurs too often or if topics are viewed by students as too intimate, students may begin to perceive their instructors negatively.

4. Your students expect you to use traditional and contemporary forms of technology to communicate with them. Some instructors use Facebook and Twitter in their classrooms, which represents a new arena for students to receive instructor self-disclosure. The research conducted to date in this area suggests that the ways in which self-disclosure is used on these sites have important implications for relational building and students' perceptions of instructors (DeGroot et al., 2015; DiVerniero & Hosek, 2011; Mazer et al., 2007, 2009). If you plan to use these technologies, consider revisiting the aforementioned three tips when engaging in online self-disclosure because students can unintentionally stumble upon information that was not intended for them to read.

5. Be cautious about engaging in too much self-disclosure, particularly negative self-disclosure. Recent research suggests that the amount and negativity of your self-disclosure could lead to classroom incivility; negative self-disclosures in particular could lead students to perceive you as less competent and trustworthy (Klebig, Goldonowicz,

Mendes, Miller, & Katt, 2016).

### **Assessing Your Self-Disclosure**

To assess your self-disclosure, do so by asking your students to complete the 14-item Teacher Self-Disclosure Measure to assess their perceptions of the amount, relevance, and negativity of your self-disclosure (Cayanus & Martin, 2008).

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