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# "Did I Just Share Too Much Information?"
# Results of a National Survey on Faculty Self-Disclosure

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How widespread is the use of personal self-disclosure by faculty in the college classroom? Employing a national survey of teaching faculty within liberal arts schools and smaller colleges and universities, the incidence of self-reported faculty self-disclosure was investigated. Teachers (*n* = 430) provided responses reflecting the content and context of self-disclosure in instructional and mentoring roles. Response data revealed few differences in self-reported self-disclosure across several key background characteristics such as teaching discipline, teaching experience, class size, or class level. ANOVAs revealed significant differences on two specific variables: Self-disclosure was less frequently reported by those with the lowest tenure status and more frequently reported to occur during longer class sessions. Implications of these findings for teaching practice and future research are also discussed.

> To chart that (teaching and learning) landscape fully, three important paths must be taken—intellectual, emotional, and spiritual—and none can be ignored. Reduce teaching to intellect, and it becomes a cold abstraction; reduce it to emotions, and it becomes narcissistic; reduce it to the spiritual, and it loses its anchor to the world. Intellect, emotion, and spirit depend on one another for wholeness. They are interwoven in the human self and in education at its best.
> Parker Palmer (1998, p. 4)

The weaving together of the intellectual pursuits of the college classroom with emotional aspects of learning is often limited to specific coursework that requires personal introspection. Although the majority of formal learning typically occurs in the classroom, there are well-documented examples of learning in the socioemotional domain that occur outside of the traditional walls of the academy (Astin, 1992; Liff, 2003), yet still under the rubric of higher education. One example of this type of learning, the interpersonal, enjoys recognition among those who advocate for learning opportunities that create an affective climate of learning that often extends the topical content of a given course (McKeachie, 2002). The task of identifying the elements required to create such a climate is daunting, but a clear pattern has emerged in the literature: Instructor self-disclosure as a tool for eliciting greater student participation shows promise (Fusani, 1994; Goldstein & Benassi, 1994; Sorensen, 1989).

Early research into self-disclosure across numerous types of interpersonal relationships revealed a strong and consistent pattern of reciprocation and mutual trust as foundational elements (Cozby, 1973; Jourard, 1971). More recently, much of the related research has investigated student perceptions of real and simulated teacher statements of self-disclosure (Bjornsen, 2000; Collins & Miller, 1994; Sorensen, 1989) and the relation of these disclosures to student in-class participation and ratings of teacher effectiveness (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994, 1997; Nussbaum, Comadena, & Holladay, 1987). From the perspective of the teacher, the interpersonal encounters that support and augment classroom time are often difficult to quantify.

Studies involving instructor self-disclosure tend to center on the primary intent of clarifying course content. Often, the information revealed through these disclosures also broadly reflects teaching and educational experiences, and information pertaining to family and friends, beliefs and opinions, and personal problems (Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988; Javidi & Long, 1989; Liddle, 1997; Nussbaum, Comadena, & Holladay, 1987). Collins and Miller (1994) acknowledged that although self-disclosure is generally unusual and rare, positive student perceptions of the class and teacher are created when these disclosures do occur.

A number of studies have investigated simulations of teacher self-disclosure in the classroom. Javidi and Long (1989) used broad categories of humor and personal narrative as self-disclosure across a narrow range of teaching experience. Sorensen (1989) identified a checklist of "good teacher" disclosures based on student perceptions of simulated teacher statements. This checklist served to further quantify the depth and breadth of disclosure behaviors but did little to provide examples of real disclosive statements actually used by teachers. More recently, Wilson and Taylor (2001) used the instructor behavior of immediacy as a form of self-disclosure (e.g., sharing with students personal experiences and information) as a dependent variable, finding that student motivation and evaluation of the instructor positively correlated with immediacy behaviors and instructors' attitudes toward students (e.g., genuine concern expressed for students). Taken together, these studies have made good use of analogues of self-disclosure without sufficiently investigating whether the actual self-report of experienced teachers who reveal aspects of their personal selves and experiences is consistent with this body of work. In fact, Goldstein and Benassi (1997) speculated that teacher self-disclosure may also be a function of course content and the specific content of the disclosures shared.

Studies that have attempted to use more objective measures of self-disclosure in the college setting are few in number and present mixed findings. Wambach and Brothen (1997), using direct observation of teacher self-disclosure, found no relationship to student participation, except in two specific instances: providing students with tips on completion of an assignment and academic acculturation. Goldstein and Benassi (1997) countered that this contradictory finding may represent a gap in the literature whereby instructor self-disclosure may be more a function of variables such as the content of the self-disclosure itself and related course content areas. Myers (1998) recommended that future research involving the use of self-disclosure in the classroom should consider class size, course subject, and instructor variables as influences on the breadth and depth of in-class self-disclosures elicited by student and professor alike. Others have recognized the practical importance of the timing, amount, and tone of self-disclosures in the teaching role, while acknowledging that little is known beyond student perceptions of the value of these disclosures to course information, rates of participation, and teacher effectiveness (Cayanus, 2004; Downs et al., 1988; Knox & Hill, 2003; Liddle, 1997; Sorensen, 1989). Thus, how to determine the appropriate level, content, and depth of self-disclosure in the role of instructor remains an empirical question.

This study extends the work of Goldstein and Benassi (1994, 1997) and others (Javidi & Long, 1989; Sorensen, 1989) by delving more deeply into respondent background characteristics which may have a bearing on the use of self-disclosure as an instructional tool (Cayanus, 2004). Additional inquiry is also needed regarding the type of student contact the faculty member has encountered while revealing either personal or professional self-referent information and whether the nature of a teacher's self-disclosures is planned or spontaneous. In an attempt to measure the impact of these instructor interpersonal behaviors, I gathered normative and inferential data regarding college faculty members' self-disclosure behaviors in the professional role of teacher. For the present study, self-disclosure is defined as the personal and professional revelations made by a teacher while in the teaching and mentoring roles. I also examined the associations between the self-reported self-disclosure behaviors of teaching college faculty members and select background characteristics such as sex, age, faculty rank, professional discipline (general and specific), teaching experience, and degree and tenure statuses. Lastly, I examined the associations between the nature of these same role-specific self-disclosure behaviors and institutional and class factors (i.e., school classification, class size, course level, and typical session length).

## Method

### *Participant Schools*

A random selection of 112 colleges and universities in the United States from a comprehensive listing of 629 schools categorized through the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2000) provided the initial study selection group. Using a stratified sampling technique (with computer-generated numbers), I selected schools in proportion to their relative representation among the three categories of interest to the researcher (17.8% of total). These categories included the following Carnegie classifications: Masters II ($n$ = 19; fewer than 20 master's degrees awarded annually), Baccalaureate-General ($n$ = 40), and Baccalaureate-Liberal Arts ($n$ = 53). I excluded from the sample institutions that grant the doctoral degree, award more than 20 master's degrees annually, those that reside outside of the United States, and for-profit schools (e.g., Carnegie Research I and II institutions), as the primary focus of this study centered on investigating teaching faculty self-disclosures in smaller colleges and universities where student-faculty interaction is greatest (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005)

### *Questionnaire*

Previous research on teacher self-disclosure and accepted classification taxonomy guided the creation of specific questionnaire items and methods for data collection (Downs et al., 1988; Goldstein & Benassi, 1994; Javidi & Long, 1989). An important point of departure involved the use of a survey items intentionally designed to capture the broad range of possible experiences and demographic characteristics contained in the national target sample. Specific variables of interest included respondent characteristics such as faculty rank, tenure status, institutional size, class size, and time spent in the teaching role (among others); content of the self-disclosures (i.e., personal and professional); and types of student contact compared against the nature of the disclosures (i.e., planned vs. spontaneous). Faculty responded to a total of 21 items pertaining to the personal and professional content of their self-disclosures and 9 items asking about the timing and type of student contact the faculty member has encountered while revealing either personal or professional self-referent information (see Table 2 for specific self-disclosure items). Except for questions designed to measure background characteristics, one categorical item pertaining to the planned nature of one's self-disclosure behaviors, and one open-ended question about the relative "usefulness" of self-disclosure in the teaching role, all items were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 7 (*very likely*).

### *Procedure*

The questionnaire packets were distributed during a two-week window at the close of the Fall 2003 semester using first-class mail. Each packet contained four copies of the study questionnaire, a letter of invitation and consent, a pre-addressed, postage-paid return envelope, and a small address card for requesting study results. All departments in the arts, humanities, social sciences, physical science and the natural sciences listed for each selected school in the survey were included, while excluding two specific departments with professional majors: business and engineering. It was requested that the respective departmental chairpersons distribute the four surveys to corresponding faculty members at their discretion. Although an exact participation rate could not be determined (due to unknown rates of distribution by department chairpersons), the estimated return rate of 12% (*n* = 430) appeared to be within acceptable limits (with a 4.5% sampling error), providing a sample that exceeded a minimum standard based on population size as noted by previous research (Punch, 2003).

## Results

### *Teacher Characteristics*

The sample was restricted to smaller colleges and universities according to the Carnegie Classification System for Institutions of Higher Education (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2000). Respondents included 430 faculty members who returned completed surveys. This procedure resulted in a fairly balanced sample representing typical baccalaureate-liberal arts schools (*n* = 162, 37.7%), general baccalaureate schools (*n* = 160, 37.2%), and master's of arts institutions (*n* = 108, 25.1%). The mean age range for the respondents was between 45 and 54 years with 61.2% of the sample identifying as male (*n* = 263) and 37.9% as female (*n* = 163). "Teaching experience" was dichotomized into two subgroups: "current school" and "overall." These categories included "Fewer than 2 years" (current = 16.7%, overall = 4.4%); "3-5 years" (current = 19.8%, overall = 11.9%); "5-9 years" (current = 17.7%, overall = 20.9%); "10-14 years" (current = 15.1%, overall = 20.0%); and "15+ years experience" (current = 30.7%, overall = 42.6%). Other respondent characteristics such as highest degree attained, faculty rank, tenure status, professional disciplines represented, and institutional size appear in Table 1.

### *Content and Context of Faculty Self-disclosures*

Response data for the faculty respondents according to four specific questions pertaining to the content of the self-disclosures (i.e., personal and professional) appear in Table 2. A fifth and final question pertaining to the nature of a teacher's self-disclosures (i.e., planned vs. spontaneous) revealed a greater tendency among those teaching faculty who self-disclose to do so in a spontaneous, but intentional manner (*n* = 347, 80.7% of sample) rather than an spontaneous/accidental manner (*n* = 38, 8.8%) or in a strictly planned manner (*n* = 34, 7.9%). There also was a tendency for respondents to disclose information related to professional experiences (*M* = 4.63) rather than personal events and experiences (*M* = 4.29).

Between-subjects ANOVAs were calculated for all interaction variables of interest (total = 11, $p < .05$). Reported personal self-disclosure according to tenure status showed significance, $F$ (1, 429) = 5.29, $p < .001$, with the faculty rank of "instructor" (non-tenure track) being less likely to report self-disclosure than all other full-time ranks. The reported personal self-disclosure according to class length also showed significance, $F$ (1, 429) = 2.31, $p < .03$, with faculty reported self-disclosure being more likely to occur during a longer class session. No other associations were found between reported personal self-disclosure and the following background characteristics: teaching discipline, school type, class level (upper vs. lower division course), teaching experience, and class size.

## Discussion

The survey results presented here represent a highly representative sample of teaching faculty, across a broad range of disciplines, teaching experience, and teaching rank. Teaching faculty members who responded to the survey appear to freely share of themselves, most often in a spontaneous, but intentional manner, with a tendency to disclose information related to professional rather than personal life. Further, these self-reported disclosures are most likely to be during a one-on-one academic contact; be reflective of one's educational and prior teaching experiences; involve elements of humor (often self-deprecating); contain positive and personally satisfying data; and be consistent with a liking of the class and student present in the exchange. Conversely, the self-disclosures of these teaching faculty tend not to be pressured (by student or department), reflect one's parenting practices and beliefs, be negative or dissatisfying in tone, nor reflect one's colleagues as the content of the disclosure. In contrast, this latter finding describes well student perceptions of a "poor teacher" profile identified in earlier research (Sorensen, 1989) where instructors rated as "poor" by students tended to reveal inappropriate information about themselves and others, often at inopportune times. It appears that the current respondents tend to shy away from such disclosures, on average.

The present study also ruled out differences in self-disclosure across numerous discipline areas, ranking levels among tenured and tenure-track faculty, class size, and course levels (e.g., upper vs. lower-division courses). This finding suggests that the reported self-disclosure of teaching faculty may not be limited to a few professional disciplines where self-exploration may be more likely encouraged (i.e., psychology, humanities) nor to courses that may include greater numbers of students more intimately familiar to the small-college teacher.

Because teaching experience necessitates an increased familiarity with course content, it is not surprising to find teaching faculty identifying as "instructor" as less likely to self-disclose. In fact, such disclosures may present a perceived risk to a teacher

Table 1
Teacher Characteristics (N =430)

| Variable | *M* | *% of Sample* |
|---|---|---|
| **Highest Degree Attained** | | |
| PhD | 302 | 70.2 |
| Master's Degree | 74 | 17.2 |
| "Other" | 31 | 7.2 |
| EdD | 13 | 3.0 |
| JD/MD or PsyD | 10 | 2.3 |
| **Faculty Rank** | | |
| Professor | 132 | 30.7 |
| Associate Professor | 132 | 30.7 |
| Assistant Professor | 140 | 32.6 |
| Instructor | 15 | 3.5 |
| Lecturer/Other | 11 | 2.5 |
| **Tenure Status** | | |
| Full Tenure | 199 | 46.3 |
| Tenure-track, Not Tenured | 120 | 27.9 |
| Not Tenure-track, School Has Tenure | 32 | 7.4 |
| No Tenure System | 79 | 18.4 |
| **Professional Disciplines** | | |
| Arts and Humanities | 183 | 42.6 |
| Biological Sciences | 37 | 8.6 |
| Physical Sciences | 62 | 14.4 |
| Social Sciences | 122 | 28.4 |
| "Other" | 26 | 6.0 |
| **Institutional Size** | | |
| 2000 or Fewer Students | 330 | 76.7 |
| 2001 to 6000 Students | 83 | 19.3 |
| 6001 to 10,000 Students | 2 | 0.5 |
| 10,000 or Greater | 13 | 3.0 |
| "None" Identified | 2 | 0.5 |

Table 2
Context and Content of Faculty Self-disclosures (N =430)

| Statement | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|
| **A. I am more likely to reveal information about myself during:** | | |
| A one-on-one academic contact with a student. | 5.11 | 1.43 |
| A one-on-one social contact with a student. | 4.59 | 1.70 |
| A group contact (primarily teaching/academic). | 4.51 | 1.41 |
| A group contact (outside-of-class contact). | 3.99 | 1.56 |
| **B. I am likely to reveal aspects of my PERSONAL life that entail or involve:** | | |
| Lifestyle choices (i.e. personal habits and practices). | 4.26 | 1.70 |
| Personal values and beliefs. | 4.82 | 1.77 |
| Hobbies and leisure pursuits. | 4.90 | 1.57 |
| Religious values and practices. | 4.03 | 2.12 |
| Political preferences and ideologies. | 3.54 | 1.73 |
| Current family information (e.g., marriage, children). | 4.89 | 1.70 |
| Family of origin information (past events/people). | 4.49 | 1.64 |
| Personal friendships. | 3.63 | 1.63 |
| Parenting beliefs and practices (if applicable). | 2.94 | 2.48 |
| My sense of humor (with self-as-object). | 5.64 | 1.32 |
| My sense of humor (“other”-directed). | 4.33 | 1.61 |
| Positive and personally-satisfying information. | 5.00 | 1.42 |
| Negative and personally-unsatisfying information. | 3.32 | 1.57 |
| **C. I am likely to reveal aspects of my PROFESSIONAL life that entail or involve:** | | |
| Professional successes. | 4.87 | 1.53 |
| Professional failures. | 4.06 | 1.61 |
| Professional goals. | 4.73 | 1.61 |
| Educational experiences. | 5.90 | 1.21 |
| Teaching experiences. | 5.71 | 1.30 |
| Colleagues. | 3.15 | 1.55 |
| Positive and professionally-satisfying information. | 5.13 | 1.39 |
| Negative and professionally-unsatisfying information. | 3.55 | 1.57 |
| **D. I am more likely to self-disclose when:** | | |
| I like the student I am interacting with. | 5.26 | 1.44 |
| I like the class I am teaching. | 5.29 | 1.36 |
| I feel pressure to do so by students (in-the-moment). | 3.03 | 1.58 |
| I feel pressure to do so from an on-going departmental expectation. | 2.45 | 1.43 |
| I feel pressure to do so because of specific course themes/expectations. | 3.59 | 1.92 |

Note: Ratings were based on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from v*ery unlikely* (1) to *very likely* (7).

who does not likely have a clear role or position with the academic department. Conversely, there may be a great number of instructors who have functioned in this role for long periods of time. Though the present study did not identify a more precise definition for “instructor” which would link faculty status to experience, it is possible that such teachers might bring a wealth of experience to the classroom, yet choose not to self-reveal for other reasons. Regardless, if there is some uncertainty in one’s place within a discipline or institution, the instructor might not want to reveal too much personal or professional information if they are only teaching on an adjunct or infrequent basis. Such a teaching arrangement may also represent some unfamiliarity and psychological distance to students if this instructor is not a full-time member of the particular academic department or may even be new to the teaching profession (i.e., a graduate teaching assistant assigned the rank of instructor). This general conclusion is also consistent with earlier related work where more experienced college teachers more frequently report self-disclosure (Javidi & Long, 1989).

These findings invite further exploration and at present, represent a solid baseline understanding of faculty self-disclosure. Although I sampled only small colleges and universities, it cannot be assumed that self-disclosure does not occur between faculty and students within larger private and state-affiliated institutions. Future work should also extend this inquiry into the actual self-revelations of these teachers. Refinement of the methods and instruments used here is also in order. The current survey would benefit from additional open-ended questions that would allow faculty to include broader detail of response and possibly a critical incident example to further illustrate their experiences. Future research could use more experimental methods, employing multiple perspectives of self-disclosure in the classroom, including direct observation of in-class self-disclosure behavior as it occurs. Comparisons of such in-class revelations could also include control conditions where self-disclosure is either absent or minimally evident.

Most notable in the present study is a strong non-response bias with the possibility that my sample included only faculty who tend to self-disclose. Providing a greater number of follow-up contacts to the potential respondents would reduce this bias and bolster the response rate. Although recognized as a recommended survey procedure (Punch, 2003), additional contacts were not conducted due to financial and logistical limitations. While sampling procedure have missed sampling faculty who are less likely to self-disclose, the concern of this bias is lessened given the sample size obtained (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002).

Faculty can make use of these findings in the following ways. First, the information presented here may provide a sense of reassurance to teachers who intentionally reveal themselves as a way to illustrate a concept or elicit greater student involvement, particularly through attempts to increase positive student affect (Collins & Miller, 1994; Palmer, 1998). These results also underscore the importance of maintaining clear professional boundaries in the many duties inherent to the teaching profession, a point echoed in recent guidelines for employing student self-disclosure as an instructional tool (Haney, 2004). The fact that most of the disclosures listed here do not appear to stray into ethically challenging areas also should be an encouragement. Lastly, as self-disclosure appears to be widely used by faculty across many discipline areas, empirically-informed pedagogy that directly addresses the effective use and modeling of self-revelation is recommended, especially as this topic specifically appears to be outside of the purview of several widely-used pedagogical resources (McKeachie, 2002; Perlman, McCann, & McFadden, 1999; Rheingold, 1997).

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## Author Notes

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