

To Share or Not to Share: Cancer and What Teachers Should Tell Students about It

Bob Eckhart

*Instructor in the School of Teaching and Learning
College of Education and Human Ecology*

*One day you're teaching, the next day you have cancer.
Do you tell your students?*

--Williams, 2008, p.8

I. Introduction

How much personal information to disclose to students is a fundamental question teachers have been asking themselves for decades. In her article "I'm not brave. I have cancer" (2008), Marcie Williams, an ESL teacher from The Ohio State University, addresses this question and gives advice specifically for teachers who have cancer. She encourages them to tell their students about their cancer but warns them about the possibility of negative reactions; in many countries, talking about cancer – especially breast cancer – can be a taboo topic. So how much should teachers tell their students – a lot or a little? How should they tell them – in class, or face-to-face? Should the teacher only tell their students in a limited manner and then not answer questions, or should they be prepared to answer any and all questions the students might have? These are difficult questions, but if the teacher approaches the disclosure in the right way – avoiding irrelevant, overly negative, or offensive disclosures – it can be a positive for both the teacher and the students.

II. Self-Disclosure: Advantage or Disadvantage

a. Definition of terms

The definition of self-disclosure has been evolving over time. A commonly accepted definition however is that teacher self-disclosure is "a teacher's sharing of personal and professional information about himself or herself" (Goldstein, 1994, p. 212). In other words, teacher self-disclosure can be related to both one's personal and professional life. In some cases, such as a marketing professor telling a story about work she did in the private sector before beginning a teaching career, disclosure might be both. According to McBride (2005), some examples of topics of personal self-disclosure are: families, feelings/opinions, daily activities outside the

classroom, and personal history. Teacher self-disclosure can also have many dimensions: the source of it, its relevance to class content, valence (positive/negative), amount, frequency, discretion/selectivity, character (honest/dishonest), intent, and venue (Eckhart & Maynell, 2010).

b. Historical background/context

The seminal research in this field was done by Sidney Jourard (1971), *Self-disclosure: An Experimental Analysis of the Transparent Self*. However, this research was not primarily focused on teacher-student relationships or the classroom. Since then, much of the research on self-disclosure has been done in the context of Communication Studies (e.g., Cayanus & Martin 2004, 2008; Russ, et al., 2002; Mazer, et al. 2007). However, researchers in other fields such as Social Work (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008) and Psychology (Simpson, 2009) have also been studying self-disclosure in the classroom. Whereas original research on self-disclosure sought very generally to describe the nature and impact of teacher self-disclosure, current research has been focused on gay/lesbian teachers coming out in the classroom (Russ, et al., 2002) and computer-mediated communication, such as Facebook (Mazer, et al., 2007).

c. The conversation/other sources

The benefits of teacher self-disclosure are evidenced by the reciprocity effect. It is one of the most consistently-observed findings in communications research (Archer, 1979; Chaikin & Derlega, 1974; and Cozby, 1973, cited in Goldstein & Bernassi, 1994). The reciprocity effect “refers to the finding that self-disclosure by one person will elicit self-disclosure from another” (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994, p. 212). So, as teachers disclose items from their personal or professional lives, students are more likely to disclose to teachers in return. This would be positive because it is widely believed that a classroom wherein teachers and students engage in open and honest communication is a successful classroom. One caveat to this, however, is that teachers need to be aware they are inviting disclosure if they disclose themselves. The best example of this would be a gay or lesbian instructor. If that teacher reveals his/her sexual orientation to students, it can have the positive effect of validating the identity of gay, lesbian, or bisexual students in the class, but it may invite those students to reciprocate by seeking advice or counsel that the instructor is not trained to or willing to provide.

In their article, “The Relation Between Teacher Self-Disclosure and

Student Classroom Participation,” Goldstein and Benassi (1994) report findings that “students’ perceptions of teacher self-disclosure were significantly correlated with...students’ willingness to participate in class” (p. 215). This means that as teachers disclose more, their students will feel more willing to answer questions, volunteer responses, and engage in class activities. These are positive for students as a more active classroom is widely believed to be more interesting and engaging. As student interest and engagement rise, so should their learning.

It is not possible to say, though, that all disclosures are positive. Some disclosures might be irrelevant, and have no value. Cayanus and Martin (2004) claim that “if students do not understand how an instructor’s self-disclosure is related to the current topic, there may be little to no positive value” (p. 257). It is not surprising that students will expect there to be some association between the teacher’s disclosure and what is being talked about in class. This doesn’t mean that disclosures can’t ever be personal. In fact, many disclosures that are personal in nature can be quite on-topic with the content of the course. In a writing class, an instructor can share experiences he or she has with writer’s block, or with submitting stories for publication.

Interestingly, the valence of the disclosure has an impact as well – students react differently whether the disclosure is positive or negative. Naturally, although students may not want to listen to a teacher who consistently self-aggrandizes his or her professional career, they also do not want to hear too much negativity. “When students reported their teachers self-disclosed more often with less negativity, they reported greater learning and motivation” (Cayanus, 2008). It should be no surprise that if a teacher discloses too much negative information, this can have a negative impact on both learning and motivation.

In addition to disclosures that might be irrelevant or negative, it is possible that some disclosures might actually offend the students. On the topic of privacy boundaries in the classroom, Kearney, et al. (1991) point out that “the inappropriate use of self-disclosure, however, can negatively effect the classroom environment” (cited in McBride & Wahl, 2005, p. 8). Therefore, teachers need to be aware that some disclosures can offend students or decrease their interest in the class. Examples of offensive disclosures might concern topics outside the standard ones mentioned earlier; this might mean disclosing information about topics such as illegal or immoral activities, activities that belittle or demean students’

deeply-held religious beliefs, or disclosures that are sexual in nature.

d. My voice in the conversation

In order to avoid negative aspects of self-disclosure, teachers should consider the following dimensions and make decisions accordingly (See Figure 1). The categories might seem straight-forward, but the consideration of them is certainly very fluid; these are not by any means binary pairs.

Relevant	-----Relevance-----	Not Relevant
Positive	-----Valence-----	Negative
High	-----Amount-----	Low
Necessary	-----Discretion-----	Voluntary
Honest	-----Character-----	Dishonest
Deliberate	-----Intent-----	Accidental
Classroom	-----Venue-----	One-on-One

Figure 1. The dimensions of teacher self-disclosure

Some of the dimensions in Figure 1 are easy enough to understand, but all of them deserve consideration – they might not be as obvious as they seem. For instance, the dimension of Relevance is an interesting one to consider. On the surface, it seems simple enough – does the disclosure relate to the course content? With that in mind, in a mathematics class, one could say the only relevant disclosure is something pertaining to math, solving math problems, or general mathematical theories. A disclosure from a math teacher that he will be missing class for a month for chemotherapy is obviously not relevant to math. Does this mean the teacher shouldn't disclose it? Just because it isn't relevant to math certainly doesn't suggest the teacher facing chemotherapy shouldn't tell his students about it if he is comfortable doing so. This dimension might be more broadly construed: relevance to the learning that needs to take place in that room with those students and that teacher. Hence, a teacher should not make the calculation that because a disclosure is not relevant to the course content, it should not be revealed.

Another interesting dimension is Amount. On the surface it might seem more disclosures would be more powerful. If a teacher wants to achieve the impact that Cayanus (2008) wrote about, s/he might disclose something every day. However, every student will have a limit, and even though their limits may vary, eventually students will become less interested in the disclosures and they will not have their desired effect.

Students may think teachers are too self-centered or self-absorbed, and begin to have negative associations with teacher disclosures. So, it is not possible to make the blanket statement that where disclosures are concerned, more is always better.

Perhaps the most interesting dimension though is Venue. What makes this dimension so fascinating is that teachers need to not only consider how venue impacts their comfort level, but also the way it impacts their students. For example, a teacher might think it is way too intimidating to announce she has breast cancer in front of a roomful of students. But, for the students, this is probably the easiest way they can receive the information. Many teachers might find it far less intimidating to reveal deeply personal information in a one-on-one situation with a student, but they have to realize that doing so puts a tremendous amount of pressure on the student to provide an immediate response. As Williams (2008) reports in her article, a teacher disclosing private information in one-on-one situations needs to be prepared for “wildly inappropriate” (p. 9) responses. In her situation, these responses were often things like “at least it isn’t brain cancer,” “[breast cancer] is the most curable kind of cancer,” or “my [blank] died of that” (p.10). Also, Williams reports that after telling a few people and having to actually reassure them, she appointed someone else to tell people for her.

e. Case study on self-disclosure

None of this is designed to discourage teachers from self-disclosing. I will now present my own case study of self-disclosure. As a caregiver for a breast cancer patient who died during the academic year, I was faced with many decisions about how and when to disclose this to my students. I was teaching four separate classes to undergraduate, graduate, and professional students; I was teaching American students and international students.

At the beginning of the term, my girlfriend was in the James Cancer Clinic at The Ohio State University. She had been in chemotherapy treatment for metastatic breast cancer for seven months. She was rapidly declining and it was apparent at the beginning of the term that she did not have long to live. My mornings started with a visit to her at the clinic, then I would teach my first class. After class, I returned to the clinic until my next class. I would then teach it, return to the clinic, and this went on all-day, Monday-Friday. I would stay at the cancer clinic until 10 p.m., go home to sleep in my own bed, then return in the morning.

I did not tell my students about this for two weeks. It was something happening in my private life which I was dealing with privately. It was not anything which prevented me from doing my duties inside or outside the classroom. This changed though during the third week of the quarter. My girlfriend was transferred to a nearby hospice facility and at this point I told my students, mainly, because I wanted them to know that if I was not there for class one day, it was because she was too ill for me to leave or had passed away. I made the initial disclosure at the end of class and then dismissed the students. No one immediately made any effort to ask questions but I didn't offer to answer them either.

When she died, at 3 a.m. on a Wednesday morning, the only class I missed was my 9:30 a.m. class that day. Fortunately, I had arranged for the students to visit the library for a presentation by a librarian about how to do research, and before collapsing into bed after leaving the hospice, I emailed the librarian and gave him a small statement he should read to the class. I taught my class myself at 4:30 p.m. that afternoon. Those students – international MBA students – could tell from the look on my face that she had passed away, which I confirmed, and after talking briefly about this, I conducted class. The following day I had the two other classes and they went much the same way. I told them what happened and proceeded with a lesson.

As I taught the remainder of the term though – seven more weeks – the subject of her death quite often came up. For one thing, three of my classes were writing classes, in which the students often read their writing aloud to discover and fine-tune their voice as a writer. So, after writing a eulogy to be read at the Celebration of Life, I read it aloud to them. I personally made it through these readings emotionally intact, but it was impossible not to notice that some of my students were crying. I didn't think this was a negative thing either – I thought if students who never met my girlfriend could feel such a powerful emotional response, it was a testament to the power of the written word.

At the end of the quarter, I took a survey of my students to gauge their response to my disclosures. I received twenty-seven (27) responses and almost all were incredibly positive. I asked them things such as:

If something is happening in my teacher's life which might impact his/her teaching, I want the teacher to tell me about it.

[26/27 Yes]

Do you think it is a waste of time for a teacher to talk about things from his/her personal life in class?

[27/27 No]

Getting to know my teacher makes it more likely that I will care about the class and try to do the best work possible.

[23/27 Yes]

As is evident from their responses, these students wanted to know what was happening in my life, didn't think it was a waste of time, and may have even been motivated to perform better in class. These are all indicators that teacher self-disclosure can be positive.

III. Conclusion

It is inevitable over the course of every teacher's career that there will be a time when there is something in their personal life – family issues, death, sickness such as cancer – that interferes with their ability to completely focus on their teaching. Teachers should be right to ask questions about what students want to know about these situations. However, if they disclose information in a thoughtful, deliberate, and honest manner, they have every reason to believe that students will be receptive and supportive.

References

Cayanus, J. & Martin, M. (2004). An instructor self-disclosure scale. *Communication Research Reports*. 21(3) 252-263.

Cayanus, J. & Martin, M. (2008). Teacher self-disclosure: Amount, relevance, and negativity. *Communication Quarterly*. 56(3), 325-341.

Eckhart, B. & Maynell, L. (2010). To share or not to share: Cancer and how teachers should talk to their students about it. 30th Annual Lilly Conference on College Teaching. Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, November 18-21. <<http://celt.muohio.edu/lillycon/handouts.php>>

- Goldstein, G. & Bernassi, V. (1994). The relation between teacher self-disclosure and student classroom participation. *Teaching of Psychology*. 21(4), 212-217.
- Jourard, S.M. (1971). *Self-disclosure: An experimental analysis of the transparent self*. New York: Wiley.
- Mazer, J., Murphy, R., & Simonds, C. (2007). I'll see you on "Facebook": The Effects of computer-mediated teacher self-disclosure on student motivation, affective learning, and classroom climate. *Communication Education*. 56(1), January 2007, 1-17.
- McBride, M. & Wahl, S. (2005). "To Say or Not to Say:" Teachers' management of privacy boundaries in the classroom. *Texas Speech Communication*. 30(1), Summer 2005, 8-22.
- Rasmussen, B. & Mishna, F. (2008). A fine balance: Instructor self-disclosure in the classroom. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*. 28(1), 191-207.
- Russ, T., Simonds, C., & Hunt, S. (2002). Coming out in the classroom... An occupational hazard? The impact of sexual orientation on teacher credibility and perceived student learning. *Communication Education*. 51(3), 311-324.
- Simpson, K. (2009). "Did I just share too much information?" Results of a national survey on faculty self-disclosure. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. 20(2), 91-97.
- Williams, M. (2008). I'm not brave. I have cancer. *Ohio TESOL Journal*. 1(2), Spring 2008, 8-10.