

## Perspective Article

# Teacher Self-Disclosure: Why, When and How Do Effective Teachers do it?

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## Introduction

As part of our study of teachers' 'Day One, Class One' practices [1,2], we had the privilege of observing seventeen highly effective teachers introduce themselves to a new class of students. We noted that, while some teachers said little if anything about themselves that might be construed as personal in nature, others did self-disclose to a greater or lesser extent. There seemed to be no obvious 'Rule' governing self-disclosure within this group of teachers. So, what, then, was the thinking that made for such a wide variety of teacher practices when it came to self-disclosure? And what might we learn from it about effective classroom practice?

First, we need to acknowledge that teacher self-disclosure is a somewhat vexed issue, one that sees beginning teachers struggling to balance being 'Approachable' as an empathic individual and being 'Professional' in focusing students' attention on their learning. Some teachers may have found it difficult to resist the temptation to divulge intimate details about themselves that they later come to regret. Alternatively, some may regret their reluctance to self-disclose if their students appear to dismiss them as aloof, uncaring and/or one-dimensional.

There are, of course, notorious examples of teacher self-disclosure to be avoided, like that of the self-absorbed Miss Jean Brodie, a fictional character at a conservative girls' school in the 1930s. In a scene written by [3], Jean Brodie: ...instructs her girls to hold up their books as if doing their history lesson, but tells them instead about her summer holiday in Egypt, among other subjects like skin care. She asks who the greatest Italian painter is, and when one girl responds that it is Leonardo da Vinci, Miss Brodie says, "That is incorrect. The answer is Giotto, he is my favorite." [4].

While Brodie's insistence that her opinion be taken as historical fact betrays her pedagogical style as narcissistic, there are

nuances to teacher self-disclosure that are not so readily identifiable. Practising teachers make judgement calls when it comes to the time and place of self-disclosure in their teaching, and these, in turn, have been subjected to analysis from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Psychologists [5], psychoanalysts [6] and feminist theorists [7] have all found teacher self-disclosure to be a discursive phenomenon worthy of scrutiny as a pedagogical and relational strategy with real effects on the lives of teachers and their students. More recently, Milam and others (2014) [8] draw attention to the relationship between disclosure, student diversity and student engagement. Of particular importance to their discussion is their advocacy of the value of disclosure to teaching for meaningful learning and student growth rather than mere 'Content Transmission'.

Whatever individual teachers make of the challenges around self-disclosure, it is important for teaching as a profession that we know more about the experiences, both professional and personal, that appear most usefully to inform 'Professional Judgement' calls by teachers about this issue. Do teachers learn best about self-disclosure from their own past mistakes? How do gender, age or school context influence such decisions? To what extent are teachers mobilized by the experiences/memories of their own teachers' self-disclosure? And what do students say about the impact of teachers' self-disclosure on their learning experience?

As indicated above, this paper is based on evidence collected through an initial research study into the 'First Day, First Class' signals teachers give their students about the learning culture desired in their classrooms. This work was conducted in the first two weeks of the 2017 school year in an academically high-performing single-sex (male) Australian Secondary School. Data was collected through observation and video-recording of the initial 2-4 lessons of seventeen highly accomplished teachers across a range of disci-

plines and year levels (Years 7-12). Follow-up data for this paper was gathered through an email invitation sent to those teachers, inviting their responses to the opening paragraphs of this paper.

Our exploration of teacher self-disclosure draws on a relatively small number of teachers, as discussed above, so we cannot hope to address the many pressing questions of professional educators. However, as a pilot study, it can and does provide insights into how and why certain individuals in this group of teachers chose to self-disclose in a 'Day One, Class One' context.

## Why Self-Disclose?

Feedback we have received from the teachers in our study of 'First Day First Class' pedagogy [9] points to 'Trust-Building' is a key imperative underpinning the rationale for why and what teachers choose to disclose about themselves and when they do so. As one teacher puts it:

**(T3):** I am conscience [sic] of establishing my credibility with the class. I talk about my status with [the local curriculum authority], my knowledge of the syllabus and my status at [this school] - I am explicit about this in a "It is OK, you can trust me, I know what I am doing" way. This meta-theme - 'You can trust me' - also takes the form of revelations that relate to the teacher's own humanity i.e., that they have families and close personal relationships in the same way that their students do:

**(T7):** I am very aware of how much I self-disclose during the crucial relationship-building weeks with a new class. I purposefully embed stories and show photos of my young family in my first lesson, to demonstrate my ability to offer a safe, secure environment where learners feel unconditionally valued. I also deliberately offer this personal information to show that I care and want to listen to them. Personal revelations of this type may also be extended to the 'Real Life' experiences of the teacher in a former 'Non-Educational' life:

**(T7):** I also disclose photos and brief background information about my previous career in Marketing and Public Relations. I deliberately offer this to establish my position as an experienced communicator, who understands the value of English and History skills beyond the classroom. This 'Credibility-Building' rationale for self-disclosure is not limited to teachers in any particular subject area. However, it does seem to be particularly pertinent to more recent additions to the curriculum. A teacher of Design Technology, for example, insists that giving information about his previous 'Non-Educational' life enhances student perceptions of the "Real World" relevance of his subject area:

**(T12):** I am fortunate to have a technical background in design, manufacturing and construction. I use this, particularly with younger students, to discuss relevance of the subject and subject matter. While avoiding too much personal information, I find students engage well and quickly by hearing a few real-world stories. This teacher sees his "Real-World Stories" as filling a gap in

understanding about the nature and purpose of a relatively new subject area, a gap that continues to exist across the school community and beyond:

**(T12):** ..I find some students have little frame of reference when they are first exposed to [Design Technology] ... and may still undervalue or misunderstand its relevance while on the journey.... Persons of influence in their environment may be of little help. Parents especially, are often uninformed or ill-informed; this is quite obvious at parent / teacher interviews. Many mainstream and/or older teachers are sometimes little help, as well. The problem is exacerbated by the lack of a holistic approach to exposure and marketing of such a subject. Even nomenclature varies from school to school. This identity issue is slowly being addressed, particularly by national standardisation.

In summary, then, these teachers make deliberate decisions that inform what they intend to say about themselves of a personal nature, and when they choose to say it. Put another way, their self-disclosure does not happen in a casual or unforeseen way. Given that 'Day One, Class One' is a crucial time when it comes to forging classrooms relationships, it is unsurprising that these teachers plan for, and perform, self-disclosure at that time.

## How it is done: An Exemplar

We were privileged, during the time we spent observing and video recording the 'First Day, First Class' teaching, to see and hear a teacher self-disclose in a deeply personal way. As a pedagogical performance, it was neither self-indulgent nor tangential to the subject matter. On the contrary, it served as a powerful means by which to establish the respectful social relationships expected in the Year 8 Art classroom, while at the same time providing a thoughtful entrée into the subject matter. We have reproduced the text below, with the permission of the teacher, as an illustration how this teacher invited students into a pedagogical contract based on mutual respect, while motivating them to engage with the topic of 'Australian Identity'.

The teacher (T10) begins by explaining routines for entering and leaving. She goes on....

**T10:** On the roll, you would have seen that my name is a very, very long name and it is Yugoslavian, ok, or if you want to be more [politically correct], it's Croatian and Macedonian ... It's pronounced .... or... but I don't want to you to have a brain aneurism trying to pronounce my name, so we just shorten that right down to Miss K...

[She proceeds to talk about the routines she wants .... She then introduces the subject.]

**T10:** The concept that we are going to be exploring...is going to be based on Australian identity.

Now hands up who was not actually born in Australia? (2 boys put hands up) Whose parents were not born in Australia?

(T10 puts her hand up with several others)

Whose parents and their parents were born in Australia... like, you've got like a long history of being here? (Several hands go up). So, you can see you've got a real mix of cultural identity here.

Who would call themselves - now this could be a bit of a contentious point - would something slash Australian? Could be Chinese-slash Australian or Pakistani-Australian Nothing wrong with it. I am just curious...(Some boys raise their hands.)

Who is indigenous? (T10 is the only hand up) I am.

(Surprise murmurs from some boys) Was your hand up?

**Boy 1:** My great grandfather was....

**T10:** Australian - it is the people or the place that make Australia what it is?

A little bit about me so that you know where I am coming from.

I am actually adopted. Does anyone know what that means?

**Boy 2:** Well, for whatever reason your parents gave you up and another family took you in.

T10: Yep, that's right so my Mum and Dad who I call my Mum and Dad are the people who adopted me and I was adopted from the age of two weeks old and so my birth parents. I was an accident - woopsie! - and they realised that for their life situation they weren't able to raise a baby the way they would like to raise a baby, so they gave me up to a family who couldn't have children but were in desperate want of one. And so, my parents adopted me. So even though my last name is Macedonian ok, or European, my blood line is a bit of a mix so I have a blood line that is something and then I have an identity which is something else because of the way that we were raised. So, you've heard the nature versus nurture argument - people are based on nature or the way the DNA is structured or their makeup or is it the way they were raised. So, I'm a bit of both.

(A boy's hand goes up) "What were you going to add?"

**Boy 3:** I was just wondering is your last name your biological name last name or your adopted name or?

**T10:** Adoption parents - so when I was adopted I was nameless and it was my adopted family's privilege to be able to name me what they would like. So, I was raised as a white European Australian and my father is German but they were all born here ok so I've got German and Croatian and I've got bits of everything... Has anyone got an Eastern European background? Have you seen my Big Fat Greek Wedding?

(Affirmative sounds from a number of boys) And you know how the mother is like oh ok, things like, I'm not really hungry 'Oh, ok I will make you lamb or I make you sandwich' - well, that

was my bringing up, like my grandparents' idea of hospitality was constantly sticking food in my face - which is it not a bad thing - my Nana was an amazing cook. [A boy has his hand up.) Do you want to add something?

**Boy 4:** I'm Maltese. Mama is 'Oh, ok then you need lunch' Yes please Mama' 'Don't eat too much you're going to get fat', Oh but then the next day she says, 'You're going to get skinny and die.'

**T10 (laughs):** That sounds exactly like my upbringing. Constantly - it was a way of showing love and hospitality is food. In my adult life, like I knew I was adopted my whole life. It wasn't a secret. Like when I was older and an adult I went searching for my birth parents and I found my birth mother. Now leading up to that point I went to Fraser island every Christmas holidays. Has anyone ever been to Fraser Island? (Lots of hands go up) It's an amazingly beautiful place. OK. And I remember the first time I went there I was sixteen. I went over with my uncle and aunt. Remember I am talking these are my adopted family alright, and my cousin. We've gone over on the barge and we landed over on the island and as soon as we pulled up I screamed at my Uncle Bob 'Stop, stop the car!' and he thinks something has fallen off and I've jumped out and I've buried my feet in the sand. And he's like "What are you doing?" and I'm like, 'I don't know I just have to do this' and he's like 'You're crazy you stupid girl get back in the car'. Alright, now every year I returned there I had this impulse to do the same thing and I would feel like my spirit was re-charged. Every year I went there it just felt like I was at home. Does anyone have a place where, where you go you feel just feel like it's your happy place? (A few hands go up) Yeah? yeah? It could be somewhere really simple. it could be your bedroom just somewhere you feel at peace, you feel your best and you feel your spirit re-charged. Ok, I want you to think of that place. So that feeling is what I get going back to Fraser Island. Now I didn't make the connection, ok, I just would go there and I just loved the place. Ten years later I found my birth parents, ok, and I was talking to my birth Mum and I happened to mention to her this and her face went white. And I was like, 'What?' and she was like, 'Your birth father is indigenous and his mob is from Fraser Island.'

**Boy 5:** His what?

**T10:** His mob. So that was when she told me that I was indigenous and that my people were actually from Fraser. Now I didn't know this so that it was in my own spirit that I had that connection to that land. Anyway, when I found out I went straight to Fraser Island and contacted the Elders of the mob and I went and had a meeting with them and I was having a chat and this young man comes in and he speaks their native language which I don't know (laughs) and he looks at me and goes' You were at Eli Creek yesterday, weren't you?'. And I went, 'Yeah I was'. He goes, 'I saw you, I knew you were one of us - straight away'. So that spiritual connection to land is really important to indigenous people. OK, so we're going to talk a little bit about that.

And considering that yesterday was Australia Day - adds a little bit more fire to the flavour doesn't it. You've probably seen on Facebook on the news there's been lots of different riots and people having arguments about, y'know, Invasion Day and all this sort of conversation ok and you may have even had the same conversations or heard it at home yesterday y'know, for Australia Day, so we are going to look at what that actually means and from different perspectives and people.

So, let's get our One-Notes open...

## Some Reflections

It is unusual, we would suggest, that a teacher might divulge stories so personal on the first day of class. And yet, in this case, the teacher's intensely personal story is at the same time deeply relevant both to the learning the boys are embarking on, and the ethical and respectful comportment that are non-negotiables in this teacher's classroom. It is an impressive illustration of Milam, et al. s' assertion that “[T]eaching and learning ... is a deeply personal, constantly public, and complicated venture” [8]. As a pedagogical performance, this teacher's relating of her story unfolds in stages, not as a 'One-Way' monologue, but as a sequence of interpersonal exchanges. By this means, she sustains her invitation to the students to see themselves in the complex and multi-faceted picture of Australian identity that will be the focus of their learning in art over the coming term.

The teacher's challenge to stereotypic notions of identity is both nuanced and subtle. The personal, even intimate, story she tells avoids moralising or platitudes. It is at once both simple and profound in its insights, opening up the idea of 'Identity' for scrutiny, rather than requiring the students to 'Consume' a ready-made version at the outset. In refusing to adopt a fixed position of advocacy (for example, she names both 'Australia Day' and 'Invasion Day' without endorsing either term), she leaves open possibilities for genuine inquiry - that is, she optimises opportunities for her students' personalised learning.

A further point to be made about this exemplar of teacher self-disclosure is that it is a thoroughly compelling tale. It is clear that the 12-year-oldboys in her class are surprised and engaged by her revelation of herself as both "Adopted" and "Indigenous". Moreover, they remain actively engaged with the 'Plot' throughout, as indeed, were those of us filming the lesson. The intelligence and sensitivity of their inputs is testimony, not just to these students' capacity to focus on the details of her story, but also to their capacity to process it meta-cognitively as a shared knowledge-building endeavour.

It is worth commenting, too, on what the teacher's capacity to hold her audience of more than twenty-five boys says about the power of personal, real-time story-telling in a digital age. We have become used to social commentators [10] bemoaning the inability of young people to be attentive listeners in these times. The stu-

dents' capacity to sustain their focus on the teacher's story speaks back to those who see attention deficit disorder in the young as normalised by the digital environment. While there is little doubt that the digital environment is both disruptive and distracting as an ecology, it is also evident that teachers who are highly skilled in their capacity to engage their students can do so in real time and in the real place of the classroom, even from the very first lesson.

## So, What?

So, what have we learned about teacher self-disclosure from this small sample of teacher thinking and doing?

We do know that some effective teachers are more disposed to self-disclosure than others. We also know that a teacher's past experience and present subject area can both have a bearing on when they disclose personal information, for what purpose, and in what form. It is clear that there are risks involved - ethical as well as pragmatic - and that these must be considered deeply for teacher self-disclosure to be a powerful mobiliser of student learning. This is unlikely to be the case when the pedagogical performance is either naive or populist, or automated through experience, so there is good reason for all teachers to exercise caution. That said, it may be that, in rushing to distribute their first worksheet or to view their first video-clip, many 'day one, class one' teachers may miss a unique opportunity - the opportunity to engage with their students in close encounters of the powerful, inter-personal kind.

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