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What if I am the story? Using self-disclosure as a teaching tool

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Abstract

Self-disclosure (SD) in teaching helps students link theory to practice, scaffold learning, show our human side (Rasmussen and Mishna, 2008), and encourage student−teacher interaction (Jebbour, 2018). Teachers must weigh the pedagogical risks versus rewards (Tobin, 2010), as negative SD can raise incivility in the classroom (Miller et al., 2013). Self-disclosures can be about ourselves or our practice experience (Rasmussen and Mishna, 2008). In nurse education, we frequently share stories from clinical practice. But what if I am the story?

After teaching neurodiversity to nursing students, I wanted to tell my own story of being autistic and having ADHD. I did not find the permission that I was looking for from the literature. Would this be ethical? Would my students see this as self-indulgent? Would self-disclosure allow neurodivergent students to feel included when their experience is often one of exclusion (Griffin and Pollack, 2009)? The idea of self-disclosure made me feel vulnerable. Following the disclosure, my students were shocked, but this led to discussions of harmful stereotypes and masking. Since my self-disclosure, my students see me as authentic, imperfect, and credible. Neurodivergent students seek me out for support. More importantly, my students understand more about autism and ADHD through my lived experience to apply this to clinical practice.

This presentation told my story of self-disclosure, how it felt, how the literature guided me, and how self-disclosure can be an effective teaching tool. I used objects as metaphors to tell my story like I did in my teaching.

Keywords: self-disclosure; teaching; neurodiversity; autism; storytelling.

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Community response

As the presenter notes in the abstract, self-disclosure in the classroom can be a challenge for all involved, including the teacher and the students. At the same time, it has a powerful potential to open up spaces that were not available before and start conversations that seem impossible in less vulnerable academic contexts. As the responses to the presentation demonstrate, the proposition of self-disclosure resonated with the session's participants.

Carina Buckley was particularly fascinated by the link between self-disclosure and storytelling:

> Storytelling is an important and universal way that we connect as people, in all sorts of contexts. But Sarah's presentation made me wonder, do we leave ourselves out of our own stories? It made me think about what is important to me as an educator in who I am in the classroom, and what I am happy to disclose to students. What is the value of sharing something about me as a person, a fellow human? And what is the cost of concealment? As anyone who has to actively come out every time they meet someone new will know, there is a cognitive and emotional cost to the constant decision making involved. But perhaps this kind of sharing really can be useful for learning.

> In our teaching practices, we aim to take our students on a journey of discovery and exploration, and this presentation was itself a story of discovery, a journey of the self, told through metaphor and props. It showed us another means of demonstrating empathy to others, and provoking it in return, by allowing us to relate to each other, maybe more authentically, and acknowledge all the different layers we might bring to a learning context. This goes just as much for students, too. I have been increasingly drawn to the idea of 'bandwidth', and how if a student is spending energy worrying about whether they fit in, whether they will be accepted, and whether they can succeed, then that is energy they cannot spend on their learning (Verschelden, 2022). If we can all bring our own stories into the classroom, then will it not it become a better place for everyone?

The presentation also provoked emotion and introspection. As Kiu Sum commented:

> I was very touched by how this session was presented to highlight the power of storytelling. It was a simple yet very effective approach to conveying a topic by placing oneself into the story. I admire how Sarah was confident to do so by showcasing that this can be done to reach and engage students in an alternative way when done appropriately. A lot to learn from this session.

Finally, Linda Riches pointed out the complexity of self-disclosure, drawing attention to considerations around how and why it is done, and what conditions need to be met in

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order for it to become a productive aspect of teaching and classroom conversations. In her words:

> Context is crucial in self-disclosure. In this case, I could see why it was useful and relevant to take what must have been a daunting step. However, I have witnessed situations where disclosure was unhelpful and negatively changed the power dynamic between learning developer and student. Therefore, I think it is vital to always check self-disclosure is being done for the right reasons (to show empathy, to give students a particular insight) as there is a danger that it can be self-indulgent.

> Equally, I think revealing a little of yourself to students is a very human thing to do and, as Sarah found, can help students be their more authentic selves.

> The other consideration has to be the consequences and pressure self-disclosure can bring as you can become the 'go-to' person because you have been more honest than others. That is a consequence which can feel rewarding but also adds huge pressure for the individual so consideration of how to deal with this is key.

> Finally, Sarah's use of objects to illustrate disclosure was an interesting way of making the story more powerful and personal — an innovative and subtle way of demonstrating to students (and us at the conference) that disclosure is a significant step which deserves our attention and respect.

In sharing their journey of self-disclosure as a neurodivergent educator, the presenter explored the complexities, fears, and ultimately the profound impact of bringing one's whole self to the classroom. It is clear that this experience has not only transformed the educator's relationship with their students but has also contributed to a richer, more inclusive learning environment where neurodiversity is understood and celebrated. There seems to be a range of positive outcomes from it, including deeper classroom discussions and increased support for neurodivergent students. If that is what we can achieve through self-disclosure, we can agree that personal storytelling can be a powerful pedagogical tool.

Figure 1. Leaf print on a pavement in autumn.

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The image above was shared by Sarah, who thus reflected on its significance:

> This image is one that I use in my session on autism with my students. It represents noticing small details in things, and often beauty. This was a leaf print on a pavement in London. There were quite a few from the autumn leaves and nobody else really noticed. I can often find beauty in things like this, even drain covers at times!

Next steps and additional questions

While there is a sense of powerful potential in self-disclosure, it is also clear that it underscores the need for more comprehensive guidelines and support systems for educators considering such disclosures. A range of questions remains:

- How do we balance the potential benefits of self-disclosure with the risks to professional boundaries and student perceptions? Can increased authenticity and vulnerability lead to more effective teaching, or does it potentially undermine the instructor's authority?
- How can we develop more comprehensive guidelines for those considering self-disclosure? What criteria should we use to decide when self-disclosure is appropriate and beneficial?
- How do we prepare ourselves for the emotional vulnerability that comes with self-disclosure? What support systems should be in place for those who choose to disclose personal information?

Author's reflection

Self-disclosure can be powerful if used appropriately but there should never be pressure to do so. It is important to set boundaries. I get queries from students seeking a diagnosis of autism and ADHD so I have to draw a line somewhere between teacher and supporter (although as we probably all know these two do overlap). I think self-disclosure depends on context. In nursing, we want students to show empathy towards different groups of people with different needs. I felt that my self-disclosure helped to break down stereotypes of autistic people that are still widely held. In nursing, we often get people with lived experience to take part in teaching students. However, this can often be a token gesture

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and there is a danger that the person with the lived experience ends up being 'othered'. I am not suggesting that everyone should use themselves as a living case study and there are different levels of self-disclosure. It is important to balance being seen as a human and maintaining professional boundaries.

In the reflections, the context of self-disclosure seems to be key. There were concerns that self-disclosure could make you the 'go-to person' and the emotional cost this could have. However, in the reflections and discussions, it was clear that it can be a tool to help students feel included. It shows that we as educators are not perfect and have often experienced the same struggles as students have. However, it can become a balancing act between being supportive and making it all about ourselves. During the round table discussions, many found self-disclosure came naturally and could be useful in 1:1 sessions with students. For example, disclosing a failed essay at university helped the student relate and built rapport.

It would be helpful to have further research and guidance on using self-disclosure, as well as robust support systems in place should we choose to tell students something about ourselves. In an increasingly technological world, self-disclosure is a low-tech pedagogical tool and a very human way to teach.

Acknowledgements

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Author details

Sarah Thompson-Cook is a Mental Health Nurse, Lecturer in Mental Health Nursing, and writer. They were diagnosed as autistic and with ADHD as an adult, and they introduced Neurodiversity to the nursing curriculum at Manchester Metropolitan University. Sarah is passionate about supporting neurodivergent students in higher education. They publish opinion and editorial pieces regularly on Medium and are working on finishing a novel.

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