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Making it about me: does self-disclosure enhance students' learning or is it too much information?

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Presentation abstract

This session discussed the controversial topic of self-disclosure in teaching in higher education. When discussing certain historic events, political positionings, and potentially traumatic situations, it is important to ensure our education remains accessible to students to support mental health and support student success. This session asked the question of how supporting self-disclosure differs from traditional pedagogies and queries whether such practice is self-indulgent oversharing or whether it can help students dive deeper into a topic, scaffold learning, and build empathy. Many teaching staff who research and teach in disciplines where controversial topics are discussed are asking themselves, is it okay or not okay to disclose? What are the risks and benefits to teacher and student? Would you be comfortable using your own lived experience in your teaching, and under what circumstances? This session held a discussion at the ALDinHE Conference for delegates to share perspectives from their individual institutions, their disciplines, and their personal practice.

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

Session themes: teacher-student relationship; role modelling; mentorship; pedagogy; empowering students.

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Prompt questions

The session asked the below questions: these are my reflections of the discussions, outlining the complexity and individual, situation-specific nature of the occasions where self-disclosure is used in higher education.

How could you use self-disclosure in your own teaching?

Thoughts on this varied. Learning Developers found it helpful to disclose their own challenges and failures in higher education, and found this gave the student hope. However, this can also feel a 'bit cringe' with younger generations, so careful choices need to be made. There was value seen in deeper disclosure, such as sharing life experiences or being autistic, but not everyone was comfortable with that. It was obvious that there isn't a clear boundary about what you should and shouldn't tell your students. However, there should always be a value to the student, otherwise it is 'making it all about me'.

One delegate had used self-disclosure in the classroom for reflective writing. In Healthcare, reflective practice is crucial and self-disclosure could be used thoughtfully to allow students to reflect on their clinical placements.

My own experience of self-disclosure was that I used it in order to break stereotypes of autistic people, and to improve their experience of healthcare. It felt very 'clinical' to just talk about autism and ADHD as diagnoses and about barriers to healthcare and health inequalities. Bringing myself into the classroom made the teaching more real, although I also felt vulnerable in the process.

In Nurse Education, we often have service users or those with lived experience speak to students. There is always a danger of them being 'othered'. I hoped that by sharing my lived experience, this would be avoided.

How would you make this decision?

It was felt that this depended on context. Some found this easier in one-to-one sessions, such as tutorials, rather than in a group setting. The potential impact on mental health was

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raised, as one attendee had seen a colleague feeling pressure from students after they had 'given too much away'.

In some areas of teaching, self-disclosure might expose weaknesses, such as disclosing a disability. However, in other areas, showing vulnerability brings your authentic self into the classroom and can help students to feel safe to be vulnerable in the classroom. Delegates felt it also depended on the topic, nature of the teaching, and whether self-disclosure aligned to the goals of the session or learning outcomes.

What could go wrong?

There were concerns that self-disclosure could lead to an educator being the 'go to' person. I did experience this to an extent and had to put boundaries in place and empower my colleagues with the information to support their own Personal Tutor students, otherwise my workload would have increased. I don't align with most people's worldview of an autistic person, and this led to some of my students seeking a diagnosis themselves. Boundary issues were raised by a few delegates. Without clear guidance and limited research focusing on superficial self-disclosure such as travel or food, it is difficult to know where the boundaries are; what should I or shouldn't I share and does the boundary between educator and student shift following self-disclosure.

Self-disclosure can impact your mental health, as one delegate discussed, giving an example of a colleague who unintentionally self-disclosed. I believe that self-disclosure should always be intentional and serve a purpose.

It is important to feel supported if you do self-disclose.

Community response

'It prompted me to reflect on my own areas of practice and approaches to disclosure and sharing. As a coach, I am alert to any thoughts about sharing about myself in sessions – usually it is something to reflect on and consider but disclosure is generally to be avoided. In contrast, where we have been facilitating inclusive online spaces, we have been open in

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sharing our experiences with the students. Sharing our experiences and preferences seems to show there is a diversity of experience in learning – one size doesn't fit all.'

'This session raised a really useful question and some very thoughtful discussion. I do reflect very carefully when disclosing my own experiences – there is the very real risk that I just centre myself and stop really hearing the student as I project onto them. And as someone who was a student some time ago now, are my experiences still relevant (ouch…)? As I occupy a socially privileged position, I cannot assume that my experiences are universal, and where I am working with students 'like me' I do question whether I can offer students with differing experiences a similar quality of work, or if those like me are getting 'a better service', which may be exclusive. That said, those who are minoritised for various reasons do deserve role models and people who can demonstrate common understanding. Is that the LDer's role? Or that of a peer mentor? Or both? There are certainly instances in which I think it is useful to the student – will it help normalise or validate their experience in a positive way, will it build trust in what I am suggesting if I can offer my own experience as proof, will it offer a model of how they might succeed that they've not seen before? I might also offer my experience of working with other students too, of course, rather than just my own experience as a student. There's something really valuable about authenticity and congruence, as the counsellors call it, if it's used well and skilfully.'

Next steps and additional questions

There needs to be more research on educator self-disclosure beyond talking about food or practice experience, and I hope to do some research myself.

I will continue to self-disclose in my neurodiversity teaching, as it brings the topic to life. I've started using sensory overload simulations on virtual reality headsets in our simulation-based education programme, as this is quite a difficult autistic trait to understand. By experiencing this, they can make small changes to their practice to support autistic patients and service users in their care.

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Questions to consider:

- What support is available to me if I self-disclose?

- What are the risks versus the rewards?

- How will self-disclosure support the students' learning?

- What could go wrong and what contingency plans can I put in place?

Author's reflection

Self-disclosure can be a minefield! Sharing our own struggles as educators could be seen as patronising if not done carefully. As a mental health nurse, it's like building a therapeutic relationship. Self-disclosure can make the teacher more credible to students and help to show the teacher's human side (Raza, Khan and Rafi, 2020).

There is a difference between self-disclosure in group settings and in one-to-one sessions, and the discussions around this were interesting. Some participants felt that disclosing their own academic struggles meant students related to them and saw them as human; this could help students with specific learning differences to feel more confident and less alone.

Self-disclosure can level power dynamics in the classroom (Rasmussen and Mishna, 2008). In some teaching, we might expect students to show vulnerabilities, and it may be helpful to show ours too. In Nurse Education, students often reflect on practice experience which may include sharing their emotions about incidents.

The importance of knowing your students and considering the purpose of the self-disclosure is key. If used correctly it can show camaraderie with students.

I really enjoyed facilitating these discussions. The discussions indicated that we all self-disclose to an extent in teaching or mentoring of students, but what we are comfortable sharing is individual and it is important that there is a clear purpose to this.

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Acknowledgments

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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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