

# Self-Revelation in the Classroom

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For most of my career, I was a clinical sociologist. I worked with individuals doing what most people would think of as counseling or psychotherapy. It was a very rewarding, very intense, and very emotional period in my life. At the end of the day, moreover, I knew that I had connected with human beings in a way that was real and that made a difference. Not surprisingly, when I made the transition to college

ready be absorbed in the intellectual adventure of their own disciplines, they can invite their students to join them in a shared journey of discovery. Together they can explore vital issues that might be too forbidding to tackle alone.

One of the best means of reaching-out turns out to be self-revelation, but only of a certain kind. Disciplined self-revelation, that is, revelation whose purpose is pertinent to the task at hand,

discussion are controversial and/or are emotionally challenging.

First, stories have a way of attracting attention, particularly when they are about an identifiable personage. Concrete narratives are exciting, especially when they concern a teacher who has a student's fate in his hands. When an anecdote is about someone one knows, it seems real in a way that mere theory never can. Referring as it does to ac-

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teaching, I hoped to recapitulate this experience in the classroom.

But therapy and teaching are not the same. Students do not come to class prepared to bare their souls or to undergo a dramatic change in their personalities. Nor should they. Educating is about learning, not about emotional growth *per se*. As a consequence, the techniques that work in a one-to-one relationship do not always work with a sea of faces. I have found, nevertheless, that one of the methods of the clinician, namely self-revelation, does work. If it is suitably altered to fit the changed circumstances, it can promote excellence in teaching.

As has been observed many times, teaching is a public performance, but it is much more than this. As the title of this publication indicates, teaching can, and should, involve a reaching-out to touch the intellect and the soul of the student. At its best, it can address the intimate recesses of individuals who are seeking to expand their world-views. Since good teachers should al-

is what is required. In the counseling arena, effective self-revelation is not egoistic. If it is indulged because the clinician needs catharsis, or because he or she enjoys basking in the adulation of clients, it tends to be off-putting. Rather, the goal must be to use pieces of one's life to move a client forward. It is the latter's needs, and not the former's, which must be central to the process.

These same considerations apply to college teaching. When a professor tells stories about himself or herself, they must be designed with the student's interests in mind. Self-revelation in these circumstances can promote three vital functions. 1) It can dramatize a point, thereby clarifying its connections with the real-world. 2) It can suffuse the point with emotion, thereby making it more compelling and relevant. 3) It can demonstrate the professor's humanity and vulnerability, thereby fostering identification by the student. Each of these is particularly important when the materials under dis-

tual events, it feels true, even when it has been embroidered upon. It is also small enough to get one's imagination around. Stories similarly tend to leave an indelible mark. They are remembered and correlated with other events. As Joseph Stalin once noted, people are usually more moved by the fate of a single individual than by the death of anonymous millions.

Second, classrooms have historically been preoccupied with conveying cognitive information. Facts and concepts are at the heart of the academic enterprise. As every instructor knows, students are forever wondering about what will be on the test. They instinctively know that discrete information lends itself to discrete questions, whereas emotional lessons do not. The latter are far more amorphous and far more difficult to specify. Moreover, emotions are dangerous, especially when intense. It may thus be difficult to construct lesson plans, or channel classroom interactions, when feelings are involved. Nevertheless, emotions

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are compelling. They can rivet the imagination, and fixate the mind, years after more civilized instruments have vanished. Because stories are usually saturated with emotion, they benefit from this vivacity.

Third, in a situation where power is unequally divided, as it is in the classroom, story-telling can place those involved on the same level. By humanizing the professor, and converting him into more than a talking textbook, they can make him seem worth listening to. People simply care more about individuals who seem to be human. Stories, particularly when they are slightly embarrassing, assure the student that she can safely share her vulnerabilities with someone who is likewise vulnerable. Genghis Khan once observed that he intended to choose as his generals, not superhuman heroes, but real human beings whose own limitations would enable them to fathom the limitations of their troops. College students too want to know that their weaknesses will be respected.

In the social sciences (my field is sociology) these characteristics are all useful. Especially when broaching social problems, they enable an instructor to be dramatic, real, emotional, and vulnerable, which can make the difference between having an impact and having none. As an example, nowadays candor regarding race relations is hard to come by. Laypersons of all backgrounds find that they must be careful lest they say something that offends someone else. When these tensions invade the classroom, they can make students feel uncomfortable. Thus, the very first week I taught a course titled "Race and Ethnicity," a student came to me and in hushed tones revealed that her opinions were such that she did not want to share with her peers. She was afraid, she explained, that they might be interpreted as racist and she did not want to be so labeled.

When confronted with this admission, and a rash of similar reticence, I faced a dilemma. How was I to get my students to honestly discuss, and honestly consider, facts that they found so dangerous? If I became too academic, might not this make the subject so dull that it turned them off? Or if I forced them to express themselves, would this injure the insecure, while driving the rest into hiding? Although I was sorely tempted to avoid questions that might excite conflict, I decided this would be an abdication of responsibility. What would be the point of taking a course on race if it never dealt with precisely those issues where students had the most to learn?

This is when it occurred to me to use self-revelation. As a member of our society, I have been as much a party to racial conflict as anyone. I also have opinions—some of which are not popular—and vulnerabilities, which enable me too, to be injured. I thus decided to assume the mantle of a role model. I, even before I was asked, would reveal some of my history, though I knew full-well not all of it was praiseworthy. In order to elicit candor, I would demonstrate candor, indicating through example that in my classroom it was safe to be human and imperfect.

One of the stories I told was how as a young college graduate I worked for the New York City Welfare Department. Coming, as I did, from a neighborhood in which there were almost no African-Americans, and being assigned to work in Bedford-Stuyvesant, one of the poorest and most dangerous black areas in the city, I felt almost like a representative of "white civilization." It today seems funny, but at the time I felt a calling to save my poor downtrodden clients, whom, I was sure, did not know how to care for themselves. Clearly what they needed was a healthy dose of my intelligence, compassion, and academic success.

It was not until I went into people's homes, and talked with them face to face, that I realized they were not waiting with bated breath to be saved by me. In fact, it was embarrassing to discover that as a newly minted adult, I was less capable of taking care of life's day to day crises than were individuals, who, in many cases, had been struggling, often with remarkable success, with the indignities of both poverty and racism. Only in retrospect did it occur to me that mine was a patronizing attitude born of ignorance and naivete; that while I might have considered myself remarkably enlightened and generous, I was more motivated by a need to feel superior to, rather than to help others.

The point of this story, I hope it is clear, is that when considering subjects like race, we all carry baggage with us. As a consequence, if we are to learn to overcome our initial parochialism, we must be modest, and consider things from perspectives not previously entertained. This, I should further note, applies to both blacks and whites, liberals and conservatives, northerners and Southerners.

The above is only one small application of self-revelation, but it has worked miracles for me. No longer do I enter my "Race" course on the defensive. Nor do I chide students for maintaining a self-protective silence. Putting myself on the line tends to break the ice and to initiate a conversation in which all those present learn from one another. Self-revelation may not be appropriate to every classroom situation, but where it is, it is very powerful. It can get things started without a need to pontificate or to be overly controlling. And, let me reemphasize, it can be real, just where reality is most needed. •