



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## THE POWER OF APPROPRIATE INSTRUCTOR SELF-DISCLOSURE

I was participating in the very valuable California Great Teachers' Workshop when I had a conversation about self-disclosure with a community college instructor who had been born and educated in another country. Astonished to hear that I sometimes used personal experiences to illustrate points in my classes, she explained that in her culture, the educator is held in such social esteem that to share personal information might reduce her students' respect for her as the expert. I, on the other hand, born and raised and now teaching in the more informal United States, see revealing myself as a tool for making students more comfortable and my knowledge more accessible. Far from compromising my students' respect, I think it enhances my effectiveness. This conversation motivated me to think about the power of self-disclosure and my own guidelines for using it appropriately in the classroom.

The classes I teach provide ample opportunity for self-disclosure. In my Contemporary Health Issues class, I originally began by having students complete a behavior-change project. Each semester I would confide my own successes and failures with managing weight, sleep, or stress. When I became aware that I had a cholesterol problem, I made transparencies that charted my interventions and test results over several years—clearly showing the effects of diet and exercise in causing good and bad cholesterol to rise or fall. One semester I had a personal trainer and showed my before-and-after measurements for body composition, cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength, and flexibility.

Admittedly, it is at times embarrassing to expose my foibles—a health teacher with less than perfect health! But the students seem to appreciate the real-life examples that help the didactic information make more sense, and they consistently express how much my personal sharing helps them feel more comfortable in talking about their health issues with their classmates and me. Perhaps the most effective self-disclosure I use in this class is a home video that my (then) husband and I

made ourselves, in which I interviewed our 67-year-old fathers. One who had quit smoking many years before talked about his active lifestyle and even shot some basketball; the other, who had not quit, spoke from the confines of an oxygen machine—and three months after we made the video, he died of emphysema. The students sit in shocked silence for a moment at the conclusion of the film, then begin to ask earnest questions. They view my photographs of both of these men when they were young, vital college students. By the end of the semester, at least one student had quit cigarettes—a young man who had been smoking four packs a day when he started class.

My Human Sexuality class, on the other hand, requires a bit more discretion. I would not consider discussing the details of my own sexual activities with my students. However, there are opportunities for me to use self-disclosure to illustrate this most sensitive subject. I confide about the pain of divorce in order to emphasize the importance of couples really knowing each other and striving to be better communicators. I share the challenges of menopause and the health changes I have made in order to remain more youthful and functional. And I was a witness to the risks and benefits of a time my students have only heard about, the famous “sexual revolution.”

But the sharing that I think is most instructional—and most moving—involves my experience with infertility and its treatment. Most people who have not lived it have little idea of how all-consuming it is (the daily shots, ultrasounds, and blood tests); how some go through it not only once but twice, three, six, or even 10 times; and how heartbreaking it is when, as in my case, there still may be no child waiting at the end of the long and arduous road. I have a visual aid in the form of the 100+ needles used for just one in vitro treatment. It is a lesson not only in what people will endure in order to try to fulfill the biological imperative to pass on genes and parent, but a humbling reminder that at times, even though we try, we cannot achieve what we dreamed. We have to look for new ways to find meaning in our lives. I tell my students that they are the little seeds that I am casting into the future. It is rewarding when my young,



somewhat complacent charges become interested in what they can do to preserve their fertility.

Your classes may not lend themselves to the use of personal example quite so readily as mine. But you can find opportunities you had not thought of before—e.g., your grandfather's anecdotes about the Great Depression, photographs of your hippie friends in college, your aunt's old business records, father's sketches, the hospital bill from your daughter's birth, or a letter written by someone from another country during a war. Be brief, and be clear about your pedagogical purpose, guarding against self-indulgence. But be brave as well. Your life and home are full of the documentation that you are a real person who has lived through experiences your students have not yet had and historical times they will never see, except when you draw a picture for them and add the human color that makes it come alive.

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## A SPEECH PROFESSOR'S PLEA

An English colleague recently observed that she easily could identify students in her classes who had taken a course in public speaking. She had noticed that these students were more verbal, were less afraid of asking and answering questions, maintained better eye contact, projected their voices when making presentations, and created more organized oral reports.

I asked her if these students used vocal pauses—e.g., routinely using the word “like,” or the expressions “ah” or “um.” She responded that she did not notice if they did or not—that, after all, she taught English, not speech. Other colleagues made similar responses to my questions about students' speech patterns—asking why they should care about students' vocal pauses, the level and length of eye contact, or whether their voices could be heard equally well by everyone in the room.

In response, I argued that students should develop their professional public selves and that in order to do that, they must develop communication skills to acceptable levels. To accomplish this, they must practice—and that practice should begin and continue in the classrooms across campus, wherever students might find themselves. I further argued that classrooms, where

students are among other students and vigilant professors, provide safe and appropriate places for important repetition and for practice that can help students hone these skills. Moreover, professors—no matter what subject they teach—must make students aware that they expect them to work on their communication skills and styles.

Among other recommendations, I offered these to my colleagues for their consideration. I recommended that they begin by bringing the most obvious communication problems to students' attention by asking important questions about common patterns—e.g., “Where did the word “like” come from? Why has it begun to creep into your speech, almost between every word that comes out of your mouths? [Example—“Like I said why? Like he said why not? Like I said what do you mean why not? Like he said I don't know.] And then ask students to pay attention to their own and others' communication patterns. Help students improve their performance by requiring them to:

- look directly at the person to whom they are speaking and maintain eye contact—look at the professor; look at their classmates.
- project their voices away from themselves and into the room when they are asking and answering questions, and making presentations.
- be aware of their vocal pauses, swallow the unnecessary sound they intended to make, and be silent—a difficult goal to achieve, but one that can be accomplished with practice.

My dear colleagues, this is a great gift you would be giving your students if you expect them to develop these skills in your courses and demonstrate acceptable mastery levels. Those of us who teach speech need your help in offering students critical practice opportunities in interpersonal communication. We thank you for your attention and support!

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