ABSTRACT

        The debate over use of self disclosure in the interpersonal
communication course is an important issue for all instructors, particularly
for those with limited teaching experience. The debate focuses on whether it
is ethical and/or practical to encourage students to engage in highly
personal self disclosure and the uses of self disclosure as participation in
the interpersonal course--that is, how self disclosure should be treated or
maintained within the classroom environment. This paper explores how self
disclosure can be used as a learning tool in the interpersonal communication
course. Specifically, it examines the ways in which personal narration can
enhance the classroom environment, and expounds on an exercise which uses
role play and narration to increase students' understanding of self
disclosure. The paper discusses an example exercise that can be used by
instructors to integrate the discussion and practice of self disclosure in
the classroom, both ethically and responsibly. The paper's example exercise
involves a 4-step procedure spanning a minimum of two class sessions.
According to the paper, the instructor first lectures on relevant theories
regarding the benefits/risks involved in personal disclosure; next, after
discussion, students address their perceptions of self disclosure on the
survey offered by Verderber and Verderber (1995). The paper then explains
that, during the following class meeting, the self disclosure exercise will
be implemented, and, then, students will be asked to write a response to the
exercise, and their current views on self disclosure. The procedures are
discussed in detail in the paper. Includes 2 tables. Contains 30 references.
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Performance and Pedagogy: Exploring Self-Disclosure
in The Interpersonal Communication Course

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The debate over the use of self-disclosure in the Interpersonal Communication course is a vitally important issue for all instructors, particularly for those with limited teaching experience. The debate focuses on whether it is ethical and/or practical to encourage students to engage in highly personal self-disclosure and the uses of self-disclosure as participation in the interpersonal course—that is, how self-disclosure should be treated or maintained within the classroom environment. In such a debate, McCrosky contends, "I object to teaching people that they should self disclose more. To me, that value is wrong. There is no evidence to indicate that if we let it all hang out the world will be better" (In Berger, Knapp, McCrosky, & Miller, 1987, p. 398). Knapp adds, "there is an inherently good form of communication and it happens to be self disclo-sive . . . if you talk about interpersonal communication, you're going to have people disclose. But there is no need for intimate self disclosure because you can understand the concept without it" (In Berger, Knapp, McCrosky, & Miller, 1987, p. 398).

Educators today are faced with new challenges for promoting an interactive classroom environment. Lectures and discussions compete with rapid-growing technology and mediated forms of communication. As we move through the 21st century, instructors must examine current teaching strategies and explore new, creative, and pragmatic devices to increase student interest and learning potential.

In this essay, I explore the question: *How can self-disclosure be used as a useful learning tool in the Interpersonal Communication course?* Specifically, I will examine the ways in which personal narration can enhance the classroom environment, and

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expound on an exercise which uses role-play and narration to increase students' understanding of self-disclosure.

On the first day of my class meetings of the interpersonal course, in addition to describing what the course is, I usually discuss what it is not. I tell the students that "this is not a class which requires that you sit in a circle and tell us your innermost secrets." However, highly personal disclosure often emerges within the class as the semester progresses, and from time to time, I will have students jokingly remind me of my original claim. Interpersonal classroom settings often lend themselves to personal or intimate discussions of what constitutes "appropriate" self-disclosure. The treatment of self-disclosure in the classroom can be rewarding when it is conducted in a non-threatening, non-judgmental atmosphere of trust. This trust takes time and commitment to develop in the teacher-student relationship.

In the following section, I will discuss an example exercise that can be used by instructors to integrate the discussion and practice of self-disclosure in the classroom, both ethically and responsibly. Important issues including moral and ethical concerns to consider before doing the exercise, strategies of accountability to the students, instructors, and the "other," as well as moral obligations are considered. Finally, there will be a discussion of benefits and guidelines of the exercise.

The Exercise

Self-disclosure involves "the conscious decision to share information about oneself" (Dunn, 1989, p. 367). Verderber and Verderber (1995) claim that to determine

"the appropriate amount of self-disclosure in interpersonal encounters," one should invoke the following guidelines: (p. 186).

> Self disclose the kind of information you want others to disclose with you . . .self disclose more intimate information only when you believe the disclosure represents an acceptable risk. . Move self disclosure to deeper levels gradually . . . Reserve intimate or very personal self-disclosure for ongoing relationships . . . Continue intimate self-disclosure only if it is reciprocated (p. 186-187).

These precautions represent important theoretical issues for both the instructor and students to consider regarding the "appropriateness" of self-disclosure. These issues are often discussed with students, but, at the same time, the students may not be afforded the same application in the classroom. For example, students may be encouraged to disclose highly personal information by instructors, and consequently, should be given an experiential atmosphere to test and implement the theories discussed. The notion of practicing self-disclosure within the classroom setting can involve risks and consequences. Hence, educators are encouraged to address these issues with their students prior to the exercise.

The exercise described in this essay involves a four-step procedure that spans a minimum of two class sessions in the interpersonal class. To begin, the instructor should lecture on relevant theories regarding the benefits and risks involved in personal disclosure. After the discussion, the students will be asked to address their perceptions of self-disclosure on the survey on Table 1 offered by Verderber and Verderber (1995). During the following class meeting, the actual self-disclosure exercise will be

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implemented. Following the exercise, the students will be asked to write a response to the exercise, and their current views on self-disclosure. These procedures are discussed in greater detail in the pages that follow.

Table 1 _____

Determining Self Disclosure Guidelines

BY YOURSELF

The following exercise will help you to recognize the variations in what people see as appropriate self-disclosure and provide you with a useful base of information from which to work. Label each of the following statements L (low risk), meaning you believe it is appropriate to disclose this information to almost any person; M (moderate risk), meaning you believe it is appropriate to disclose this information with persons you know fairly well and with whom you have already established a friendship; H (high risk), meaning you would disclose such information only to the few friends you have great trust in or to your most intimate friends; or X (unacceptable risk), meaning you would disclose it to no one.

_____ a. Your hobbies, how you like best to spend you spare time
_____ b. Your preferences and dislikes in music
_____ c. Your educational background
_____ d. Your personal views on politics, the presidency; and foreign and domestic policy
_____ e. Your personal religious views and the nature of your religious participation
_____ f. Habits and reactions of yours that bother you at the moment
_____ g. Characteristics of yours that give you pride and satisfaction
_____ h. The unhappiest moments of your life—in detail
_____ i. The occasions in your life when you were happiest—in detail
_____ j. The actions you have most regretted taking in your life and why
_____ k. The main unfulfilled wishes and dreams in your life
_____ l. Your guiltiest secrets
_____ m. Your views on the way a husband and wife should live their marriage
_____ n. What to do, if anything, to stay fit
_____ o. The aspects of your body you are most pleased with
_____ p. The features of your appearance you are most displeased with and wish to change
_____ q. The person in your life whom you most resent and why
_____ r. Your use or abuse of alcohol and illegal drugs
_____ s. The people with whom you have been sexually intimate and the circumstances of your relationship with each

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IN GROUPS (OPTIONAL)

Working in a group, discuss your labeling of the statements. The goal of the discussion is not to make any of the disclosures, only to discuss why you would make them and under what circumstances, or why not. The purpose of the discussion is to see how people differ in what they view as acceptable disclosure.

(Verderber and Verderber, 1995, pps. 187-188).

Upon completion of the above survey, students will be asked to discuss their views (which are likely to vary considerably). Issues of appropriate topics, appropriate settings, and appropriate relationships (according to student responses) should stimulate a healthy discussion on important ethical considerations. The discussion should be framed to empower the voices of the students as authoritative. It may be beneficial to summarize the students' perceptions on the chalk board, and compare and contrast their views with the theoretical material discussed earlier in the session.

Depending on the length of the discussions, the activity may spill over into the second-class meeting session. The exercise is designed to offer temporal flexibility to the instructor who may need to make adjustments according to student interest and participation. During the second-class period, exercise 2 will be implemented (as summarized in Table 2).

Table 2_____

Establishing Appropriate guidelines for Self Disclosure: Implications for the Self and Other

Objectives:

1. to enhance the student's ability to communicate highly disclosive information to others.

2. to increase the student's ability to receive and empathize with "other" orientation when listening to highly disclosive information.

3. to enhance the student's ability to assess the appropriate levels of self-disclosure to engage in, in varying contexts and relationships.

Procedures:

This exercise involves the use of role-play situations, to simulate the act of personal self-disclosure. Students should be asked to participate in the role-plays on a volunteer basis. Students should be assured that their participation in this event will not be graded. The instructor may choose from either version 1 or 2 described below.

Version 1:
Students will be paired in dyads for the role-play simulations which the entire class will observe and comment upon. The two students will represent the "discloser" and the "listener" in a specific relationship assigned by the instructor. Choices may include variations on friendship or familial relationships. Texts of excerpts of actual personal narratives will be used as a stimulus for the role-play interaction. Although the ultimate "performance" could be highly improvisational, the students who are cast as the "disclosers," will be asked to focus their part of the dialogue on the text as written. The student performers will be given 15 minutes to prepare the simulation, while the other students (who are not involved in the role-plays) group and develop criteria to assess and discuss the simulations.

Version 2:
Students will be paired in dyads of the role-play simulations which the entire class will observe and comment upon. The two students will represent the "discloser" and the "listener" in a specific relationship assigned by the instructor. Choices may include variations of friendship or familial relationships. The students will not be given specific texts; instead, they will be given hypothetical situations to enact (see examples below). All student performers will be given 15 minutes to prepare the simulation, while the other students (who have not been cast in one of the role-plays) group and develop criteria to assess and discuss simulations.

Example simulations:

1. The discloser must describe his or her feelings about the recent loss of a significant other.

2. The discloser is seriously ill, and must describe his or her feelings to the listener.

3. The discloser must describe her or his reasons for ending a relationship with the listener.

*For either version #1 or #2, the number of performer-pairs and role-plays will be determined according to class size and session length. Generally, a minimum of simulations is recommended.

Questions for discussion:

1. What were the risks involved in the telling of the highly personal information represented in this simulation?

2. What role does the listener play in the interaction when highly disclosive discourse unfolds?

3. What worked particularly well in the interaction depicted by this simulation?

4. What might have been done differently in this simulation to improve the interaction depicted?

5. How effectively did this simulation represent actual life experience involving highly personal self-disclosure?

After each simulation, the instructor should "debrief" the students by describing the connections between the performed simulation and theory. In addition, the instructor should summarize the student's discussion, and of course, thank the volunteers for their participation.

Following the exercise, the instructor should ask students to write on the following topic as a journal entry (either in class or as a homework assignment): Recall a time when you disclosed or wanted to disclose highly personal information. Consider the role of the listener in your decision. How did the exercise contribute or detract from your understanding of the

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experience? The instructor should assure students that they need not disclose highly personal information in their journal; they should assess the level of disclosure *they* want to include. The instructor should emphasize that their grades for the journal entry will not be based on the level of disclosure, but their discussion of the topic of self-disclosure, opinions, and perceptions.

This exercise involves varying degrees of risk depending upon the individual's predisposition toward self-disclosure. The potential risks and issues of accountability are discussed in the section that follows.

Moral and Ethical Concerns

Any exercise in self-disclosure involves a certain amount of risk, and an exercise such as the one described above, involves a potentially higher level of risk because of the level of self-disclosure which may emerge in the simulations.

Prior to using the exercise, the instructor should consider the potential risks involved and issues of accountability and responsibility that are invoked in such an exercise. Anderson (1990) describes ethics and moral philosophy:

> Ethics, when defined as "moral philosophy" is the systematic study of
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> value concepts such as good, bad, wrong, and right, and the application of
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> such terms to actions, to intentions, and as descriptions of character.
>
> ethical inquiry asks questions about principles of morality (p. 460)

The purpose of the discussion that follows has such an aim, to engage ethical inquiry that can ultimately guide the instructor into a responsible application of the exercise.

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Potential risks: Ethical and Moral Considerations

There are several potential risks involved in this exercise. One risk involves the use of role-play as a simulation of life experience. Miller (1990) claims "communication instructors should be wary of the generalability of the role-play activities in the classroom" (p. 79). Instructors may want to assure students that advances made in the exercise may or may not be applicable to experiences outside the classroom.

Another potential risk is the embedded notion that highly personal self-disclosure represents effective communication. The skills of the teller can influence this effectiveness. Sullivan (1986) suggests, "everyone participates in stories...some people might be classified as better story-tellers, or better story-listeners. People differ in their narrative communication skills" (p. 128). The students in introductory interpersonal classes represent varying degrees of communication competencies, for example, speaking and listening skills. While some may do quite well ion this exercise, some others may be put-off, so-to-speak, and perhaps even threatened at the thought of self-disclosure, and may respond negatively to the exercise. Miller (1990) also cautions instructors not to irresponsibly promote the notion that all self-disclosure is good:

Much advice and counseling centers on the ways that people ought to communicate--that is, on the attitudes and practices that supposedly characterize ethical, morally defensible communicators—rather than on skills that are likely to yield pragmatic communicative returns. This tendency is reflected by expressions of concerns about openness and being an "authentic person," or by singing the praises of indiscriminate unbounded self-disclosure (p. 79)

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Further, Miller (1990) also suggests that, " . . . achieving a desirable ethical posture about the place of self disclosure in daily communicative commerce is not as simple as some learning-by-doing advocates imply. Frequently, the consequences of self-disclosing messages are negative for disclosers, discloses, or both" (p. 79). .

Audience/listener reaction to self-disclosure, as well as the students' reactions to the exercise bring the bear important moral and ethical issues as well. Duranti and Brenneis (1986) contend that "the mere presence of an audience socially constitutes and ratifies the nature of a speech event . . . an unsympathetic or uncooperative audience can deeply affect the performance of a speech act" (pp. 243-244). Duranti and Brenneis's (1986) claim raises concerns for the use of this exercise. One concern is the role of the audience, both in the performance and re-performance of the disclosive discourse. When using Version #1 of the exercise, the performance is governed by the voice of the original discloser, without specific mention of the role of the original listener; hence, the impact of that listener is somewhat lost.

In either version, the impact of the student audience can be significant. If this audience is "unsympathetic or uncooperative," the exercise may fail or the serious nature of the subject may become distorted. In addition, one of the objectives of the exercise is to increase empathy. Yet, as Pelias (1982) explains, the empathy that occurs through performance may be difficult to identify or describe:

It may be that "performer-text" empathy manifests qualities that are quite distinct from "performer-audience" empathy . . . reacting to a text may dictate certain

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empathic skills that responding to an audience's behavior does not. Likewise, an audience's empathic response to a performer may necessitate distinct empathic skills (p. 529)

While one student may achieve increased empathy, the site of the empathy may not promote the objective of the exercise. Hence, the relative value of the exercise for the individual may be questionable. For example, is the student empathizing with the other represented in the performance, or his or her fellow classmate? How does her or his empathy compare to that experienced by the performer who interpreted the text through the performative process?

Choosing material, whether it be transcripts of narratives or improvisational situations, involves moral and ethical concerns. For example, an instructor might choose to invoke the words or experiences of victimization. Robinson (1981) claims:

Experiences of victimization have an ambivalent status as candidates for narration. Criminal assault, racial abuse, sexual harassment, and political or military imprisonment are typical instances of victimization. Characteristically, such experiences produce shame, anger, often guilt in the victim, and are regarded as secrets rather than stories to tell (p. 63)

While experiences of victimization may be disturbing material to use in this exercise, much of self-disclosure involves sensitive or disturbing discourse. Determining the material to include can be problematic for the instructor. With an obvious lack of personal information about the student available to the instructor, the likelihood of using material

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that might be disturbing to one or more of the students is high. In the event that the material becomes disturbing to any students, the instructor should attempt to handle the situation with a great deal of thoughtfulness and sensitivity for the individuals involved.

Choosing material represents yet another risk, that is, providing the student with an interesting and meaningful exercise. Langellier (1989) claims that often "personally interesting stories have the narrowest appeal and their tellers risk being misunderstood, personally disliked, or socially ostracized" (p. 257). Once again, the instructor should respond accordingly if a negative or unanticipated reaction to the exercise occurs.

Lastly, issues of empowerment and appropriation are valid concerns. Benton (1993) claims that "empowering and 'giving voice' to another is not always different than appropriating the other's text. Just because an act is empowering does not necessarily mean that it is ethical" (p. 102).

Appropriating narrative discourse for an exercise in self-disclosure that's the narrative, out of its original setting and uses it for different purposes than it was originally intended. Langellier (1989) contends, "the question of the existential import of personal narratives—what it means and whose interest it serves—cannot be answered outside of its performance where text and context, story and discourse, are given together in their concrete embodiment" (p. 270).

Hence, issues of the usefulness of role-play, promoting self-disclosure as always "good," audience reaction, empathy, and appropriations are some of the important concerns for the instructor prior to engaging an exercise in self-disclosure. Anderson (1990) asserts, "the key to success in dealing with ethical issues is a sensitivity to the

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ethical dimension so that its presence is felt in course planning, and preparation of in-class presentations of material, in discussions, and in evaluation" (p. 468).

Issues of Accountability

The instructor's use of a self-disclosure exercise in the classroom and the use of disclosive material of others, raise significant issues of accountability which resides in the instructor's accountability to the student, the student's accountability to the instructor and other students, and accountability of all to the other.

One area of accountability resides in the instructor's responsibility to the students. McKeachie (1986) cites a partial list of the code of ethics for psychology teachers as applicable to *all* teachers. McKeachie's selection includes the following excerpt; "a teacher should respect the student's right to privacy and not require students to give information which they wish to withhold" (p. 254). This is an important point for the instructor. Issues of self-disclosure are quite personal, and the student should not be forced to self-disclose in the discussion, exercise, or journal entry during this exercise. Another issue of teacher accountability is providing the student with meaningful interaction. Nisbett (1977) claims "education is only meaningful and worthwhile if it makes a positive difference in conduct" (p. 126). Nisbett (1977) suggests that we should view teaching as art which raises intrinsic ethical dimensions, "the ethics of teaching is quite clearly, then, the effort to understand and implement these actions that stimulate individual growth through cooperative effort" (p. 126).

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Both the instructor and student are accountable to the other, whether it is through the representation of the other in the text, or in improvisational scenario which represents a fictional other.

Schuman's (1982) work on disputes raises questions of entitlement—who tells stories, who listens, what bears telling, and when it is appropriate to tell a story (In Langellier, 1989, p. 263). These issues reside in that accountability to the other. Stahl (1983) contends that "stories 'belong' to the tellers because they are the one's responsible for recognizing in them an experience, something that is 'storyworthy' and for bringing their perception of those experiences together" (p. 268). If stories do indeed belong to their original tellers, when one appropriates the stories or life experiences, they are naturally accountable to the other. The instructor, as well as the student should engage the voice of the other responsibly, so not to distort or misrepresent their story.

In his account of the "moral map," Conquergood (1985) warns of unethical performance stances toward the other. These pitfalls should be avoided in the exercise. The four unethical stances include "the custodian's rip off" which approaches the other for selfish purposes. In this approach, a "strong attraction to the other coupled with extreme detachment results in acquisitiveness instead of genuine inquiry" (p. 5). The second negative stance is the "enthusiasts infatuation," where "too facile an identification with the other" (p. 6) occurs and leads to a superficial account of the other. The "curator's exhibitionism" invokes sensationalism of the other; "the performer wants to astonish rather than understand" (p. 7). Lastly, is the "skeptic's copout," which is marked by cynicism that other orientation is inaccessible and results in a refusal to perform the other" (p. 8).

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These stances serve as examples to unethical approaches to the other, and can be applied not only to performance of the other, but representations of the other such as those manifested through the exercise. Both the instructor and the student should guard against trivializing or sensationalizing the other through this exercise. Hence, the instructor is required to assess the approaches that are undertaken, and if necessary, bring the stances to a more accurate, more ethical representation of the other.

Lastly, the student is accountable to other students and the instructor. Through the audience's actions and reactions to the performance, the simulation can be meaningful or meaningless. Duranti and Brenneis (1986) claim, "the form and content of talk is continually re-shaped by co-participants through their ability to create certain interpretations" (p. 242). Similarly, Mandelbaum (1989) claims that "recipients participation as 'co-author of the storytelling is integral to working out what the event recounted is 'about'" (p. 124).

The aforementioned assertions indicate that the student who participates and observes must be willing to engage in attempt to understand self-disclosure. The instructor might try to foster such cooperation, through thoughtful explanation of the objectives and uses of the exercise.

Benefits of the Exercise

Despite the importance of the moral and ethical concerns described in the previous section, there are many benefits that accompany the use of an exercise in self-disclosure.

<u>The Exercise and Discussion can Stimulate a Positive Classroom Ineraction</u>

Use of the self-disclosure exercise can stimulate a positive classroom interaction. The experience can be positive when the instructor assures the student of his or her interest in the topic and commitment to student learning, the potential for the student to develop important skills through the exercise, and the use of relevant information for consideration.

In two studies, which were a part of a program for the Center for Research and Development in Higher Education at the University of California, various aspects of the college experience were assessed, including the relationship between students and teachers. Wilson, Gaff, Dienst, Wood, and Bavry (1975) describe the results of the studies in their book, *College Professors and Their Impact on Students*. Wilson et al (1975) explain, those faculty that were considered most effective were those who helped students pursue their goals and demonstrated a "willingness to listen, to discuss, and if possible to help" (p. 193). In addition, the faculty related "their learning to other fields of study, to realities in the larger world, and to the personal lives of the students" (Wilson et al, 1975, p. 198).

The self-disclosure exercise, if pursued by the instructor in a considerate manner, can generate an atmosphere of teacher-student cooperation regarding issues that do impact the lives of students, and consequently, are of value to the students outside of class.

The exercise strengthens the student's development of interpersonal skills. Robinson (1981) claims that "telling stories about personal experience is a prominent part of everyday discourse, and competence in such narration is an essential skill for members of a speech community" (p. 58).

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The exercise enhances the classroom in two ways, according to Robinson's (1981) claim. First, because personal experience stories are part of everyday life, most students are familiar with this type of discourse, and can probably assume a certain sense of understanding, and a certain level of competency in the medium. Secondly, because of the importance of narration in everyday life, this exercise adds to the student's repertoire of discourse. The exercise allows students to experiment with this important communicative mode.

The Exercise Uses Common and Relevant Sources of Material for the Benefit of the Learner

Once again, the code of ethics offered by the A.P.A. includes relevant information for the discussion of the exercise:

> The teacher should encourage students in their quest for knowledge, giving them every assistance in the free exploration of ideas . . .disturbing concepts should not be withheld from students simply because some individuals may be distressed by them. When issues are relevant, they should be given full and objective discussion so that students can make intelligent decisions with regard to them (In McKeachie, 1986, p. 254) .

The self-disclosure exercise uses relevant material to increase the student's understanding of self-disclosure. The material may at times be somewhat disturbing to students, yet the benefits of increased understanding are worth pursuit. The use of stories in general, can add to the student's grasp of self-disclosive discourses.

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Stories, sometimes labeled personal narratives, serve important functions in everyday life. Norton (1989) claims that stories hold life together, "we learn who we are, where we some from, and where we have been by sharing stories. They form the building blocks of life, helping us lay foundations for our identity" (p. 182). Similarly, Polkinghorne (1988) contends, "narrative is one of the forms of expressiveness through which life events are conjoined into coherent, meaningful, unified themes" (p. 126).

Whether the stories related in the exercise are re-performed narratives of an other, or improvisations stories composed by the student in the simulation, the uses of narrative/storytelling as a source of material for the exercise adds to the student's ability to assess and make sense of the self-disclosure which grows out of the exercise (because of the familiarity and accessibility to this type of discourse).

The Exercise Facilitates Learning and Can Lead to Empowerment of the Student

Miller (1990) describes three approaches to teaching interpersonal communication. One method that he refers to as the "learning-by-doing" approach, is facilitated by this exercise:

This method emphasizes experiential activity . . .it is skills oriented. This approach rests on two key assumptions: (a) that through the involvement in communicative activities, students will acquire and sharpen the skills needed to make them more effective communicators in the real world interpersonal and small group encounters, and, (b) that the meaning and significance of important concepts can be gleaned experientially by participating in activities relating to such concepts (Miller, 1990, p. 78)

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The learning-by-doing approach used in this exercise can be helpful to the student. While it should not replace the theoretical grounding the students are given, used with the information, the exercise offers the students a low-risk environment to practice self-disclosure (at least lower risk than outside of class). The setting is non-threatening and encourages a laboratory-type atmosphere where one can try, and then step back and assess the results.

The experience can facilitate a transformation of the student's understanding of narrative possibilities. Sullivan (1986) explains that stories are one part of life over which an individual has control, that "stories give an individual choice. An individual chooses what to tell, what not to tell, and how to tell it" (p. 125).

The student makes or witnesses similar choices in the self-disclosure exercise. Through this practice and/or observation, the student can become empowered through increased awareness of narrative possibilities. Norton (1989) contends that "people become empowered by the narrative ability they posses" (p. 183). This exercise can increase the effectiveness of the student's narrative ability.

Earlier, the possibility of potentially disturbing material was raised. If, for example, a student suffered from victimization or hardship explicated in the exercise, their reaction may be negative to the exercise. However, Richardson (1990) claims, when we hear similar experiences to our own, we often become empowered by our membership in the "collective story" being told. Richardson (1990) explains that the transformative powers of the collective story are significant that "people make sense of their lives through the

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stories that are available to them, and thus attempt to fit their lives into the available

stories . . .collective stories . . .provide new narratives, hearing them legitimates a

replotting of one's own life" (. 129). Consequently, opening up understanding and

awareness of shared narratives can be empowering to the student.

<u>The Exercise Facilitates a Greater Understanding of Ourselves and Others</u>

Perhaps one of the most important benefits offered by the exercise is that the student

can gain an increased understanding of the other through the performance experience

generated by the exercise. Hopkins (1981) claims "performance as a way of knowing is at

the core of humanities" (p. 7). Conquergood (1983) describes "interpretive performance"

as a "pedagogically proven method for developing that sense of the other important for

social and spiritual life" (p. 40). Further, he asserts that performance of personal

narratives allow him to experience the feelings of the other (Conquergood, 1983, p. 154).

Similarly, Richardson (1990) explains that people use narration to understand themselves

and others:

People organize their personal biographies and understand them through stories

they create to explain and justify their life experiences . . .because people can

narrativize their own lives, the possibility of understanding other people's lives

as also biographically organized arises. Social and generational cohesion, as

well as social change depend upon the ability to empathize with the life stories

of others (p. 126-127)

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Therefore, through the use of the interpretive performance process, in addition to the use of biographical narrative, the student who participates and/or observes the self-disclosure exercise may increase their ability to understand, and perhaps empathize with an other or others created in the exercise, those who may represent a much different combination if life experiences than does the participant or observers.

The exercise can generate a better understanding of ourselves as well. Langellier (1986) explains, "by the way of their bodily, emotional, and personal responses to texts, readers learn about themselves" (p. 64). The self-disclosure exercise has the potential to impact the student's understanding of him or herself through the diverse representations of experiences offered in the variations of the exercise. The student may "see" part of their own experience represented in the simulation, or may gain an understanding of why they view self-disclosure the way they do based on the discussion of the simulations. The exercise encourages a certain self-relfexivity that can be beneficial to the student and the instructor.

The self-disclosure exercise can offer a positive classroom interaction, promote the use of common and relevant material, facilitate learning and empowerment of the student and a greater understanding of the other and ourselves, but these benefits are significantly contingent upon the instructor's careful attention to the potential risks involved in using such an exercise. In the section that follows, guidelines are offered to the instructor regarding the exercise procedure and precautions.

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Discussion: Strategies and Precautions

for the Ethical Use of the Self-Disclosure Exercise

The following guidelines are presented in an effort to produce a positive experience

for the students and the instructor using the exercise.

Precautions

1. The instructor should facilitate an atmosphere of trust prior to using the exercise.

   This exercise is probably not useful within the first few weeks of class. Such an

   undertaking requires a healthy classroom environment and relationship between the

   students and the instructor. If the students do not feel they can trust the instructor,

   they probably won't cooperate fully.

2. The instructor should offer a serious, but non-threatening approach to the exercise.

   The students should be assured that the exercise is a serious undertaking, so that

   the role-play technique used does not result in trivialized game playing. However,

   the students need to be assured prior to the interaction that they will not be

   required to self-disclose. The instructor might explain that this is an exercise to

   help us learn about self-disclosure—appropriate timing, topics, relationships

   through simulation and discussion.

3. The students should be armed with a clear understanding of the material prior to

   the exercise. The instructor should make sure that the key concepts and

   terminology reading self-disclosure are understood by the students, so that an

   intellectually stimulating discussion can occur.

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4. The instructor should explain the limitations of the exercise. The students should be made aware that the exercise is taking place in a relatively "safe" environment for experimentation, and that they should use caution when implementing the same procedures outside of class.

5. The instructor should prepare a debriefing for the exercise. By carefully watching and listening to the student's actions and comments, the instructor should try to integrate ideas touched on in the exercise and theoretical material about self-disclosure.

Strategies of Accountability and Responsibility

1. Accountability to the student by the instructor should be attempted at all phases of the exercise. The instructor should try to make this an interesting and intellectually stimulating exercise. Lederman (1992) explains:

In order to use experiential activities effectively the instructor must guide the learners in processing the experiences through which they have just come; of leading them through the necessary reflection, which will make of the experience sense for its application to real-life behavior and experiences (p. 34)

2. The student should be encouraged to promote his or her accountability to the other students and the instructor. Once again, if a serious approach is not taken to this exercise, the student's audiencing and participation could result in a sever trivializing of the activity. However, if proper precautions have been taken to encourage trust and responsibility in the classroom, this should not be a problem.

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3. Both the instructor and the students should exercise an accountability toward the other represented in performance and discussion. Unethical stances such as those described by Conquergood (1985) earlier in this essay should be avoided. Conquergood (1985) suggests engaging in a dialogical performance" which he describes as one path " to genuine understanding of others" (p. 9). Further, "dialogical performance is a way of having intimate conversation with other people and cultures. Instead of speaking about them, one speaks to and with them" (p. 10). Turner (1982) claims, "there must be a dialectic between performing and learning. One learns through performing then performs the understanding as gained (p. 97). A responsible approach to the other by the instructor and student can facilitate such understanding.

4. The instructor and students can be accountable to the other through self-reflexive inquiry. "the reflexive angle of approaching the other views the relationship between self and other as omnipresent; thus, knowledge of both self and other can be gained by stepping back and observing how they really relate" (Spry, 1991, p. 36). The instructor can promote such reflexivity throughout the exercise, through a discussion of how we relate to others through self-disclosure, or the absence of self-disclosure in our interactions.

This self-disclosure exercise offers the instructor an example of how to approach the sensitive topic of personal self-disclosure through narrative performance. Kerby (1991) suggests, "the stories we tell are part and parcel of our

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becoming. They are a mode of vision, plotting what is good and what is bad for us, what is possible and what is not—plotting who we may become" (p. 54). The exercise offered in this essay is an attempt to serve some of the same functions described by Kerby. This exercise has the potential to become a "mode of vision" for our students, where personal discovery can occur.

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