

It's About Relationship (Yes, Even Online)

Gina S. Reynolds



<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5442-5325>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the student-instructor relationship became an even more vital tool to both learning and student engagement. In the online environment, the student-instructor relationship plays a critical role in learning outcomes. Personal experiences, instructor evaluations, students' verbal and written comments, and student evaluations give insight into practical teaching tools and practices during COVID-19. Self-disclosures highlight a positive approach to enhancing the student-instructor relationship explained through the privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002). Furthermore, these self-disclosures lead to improving student engagement. Using written reports as a tool for both non-verbal relationship building and assessing non-verbal student participation allows for alternative methods to accommodate a diversity of students.

Keywords: privacy management theory, pandemic pedagogy, student-instructor relationship, self-disclosure, online pedagogy, non-verbal participation

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Online in the Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the student-instructor relationship became essential to both learning and instructor engagement. Self-disclosures played a crucial role in relational development. Often instructors might believe that sharing information about themselves is discouraged. We may have received such advice from well-meaning mentors, and under the desire not to show bias, we try to be careful with personal information, and there is wisdom in this (Lannutti & Strauman, 2006; Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008). However, much of the literature spoke to the benefits of revealing some information about yourself to your students (Hernandez, 2015; Lannutti & Strauman, 2006; Song et al., 2016). Some instructors have realized this fact and used it to enhance their instructions and learning outcomes in their face-to-face (FtF) classrooms; online, however this seems more difficult (Mick & Middlebrook, 2015).

When instructors self-disclose in positive ways, student engagement increases (Cayanus et al., 2009). Self-disclosures link to relational communication (Cayanus & Martin, 2004), yet as instructors, what do we know about this relationship between the two and how do we leverage it in the classroom? More importantly, at this time in history, how do we practice self-disclosure and relational communication with our students while being flexible to the myriad of methods of instructional delivery rapidly thrust upon us by the COVID-19 pandemic? Exploring these questions informs our pandemic pedagogies.

Supervisor and student evaluation responses from my time teaching during the pandemic restrictions, offered insight into practical teaching tools and practices that support self-disclosures and enhance student relational communication. Evaluating these tools in response to the feedback showed comments highlighting increased student engagement. Drawing from experiential examples, I will explore how using communication privacy management theory (CPM) can guide self-disclosures to facilitate student-instructor relationships (Petronio, 2002). Self-disclosures that build positive student instructor relationship can increase student engagement, though not necessarily increase student verbal output. Engagement and participation do not always have to take the form of verbal participation, and

engagement is a multidimensional concept (Frymier & Houser, 2016). Disclosures can enhance the student/instructor relationship and facilitate participation and engagement.

Using disclosures in the classroom can be guided by communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002). CPM theory focuses on how people manage their private information and how they negotiate rules for their disclosures. Applying CPM to the student-teacher relationship shows that the ways instructors use disclosures can create relationships and engage students in course material (Hosek & Thompson, 2009). For instance, using examples from your own life to illustrate class concepts can generate more interest and connection in the course materials. Student engagement and outcomes improve with positive disclosures and increased student-instructor relationships (Sorensen, 1989). When making disclosures in the classroom the content of those disclosures matter for positive student outcomes (Sorensen, 1989). Disclosures of course relevant, non-negative examples facilitate the student-instructor relationship and affect learning outcomes for students (Hosek & Thompson, 2009). Though much of the research on disclosures in learning comes from a FtF environment, much can be applied to online contexts as well.

Online learning has the reputation of being very impersonal, and connections with students seem more challenging. Rapanta et al. (2020) noted that many opportunities in FtF connections for students might disappear when moving online. Mick and Middlebrook (2015), in a discussion of asynchronous versus synchronous learning, pointed out that with asynchronous learning, there is a loss of social presence and immediacy. With these online channels contributing to a loss of relational tools like social presence and immediacy, it becomes critical to capitalize on practical tools to increase student connection.

Personal Experience Drives Practical Application

As the educational response to the COVID-19 restrictions began to unfold, I was in the position of being at a large university embracing all three methods of instruction (synchronous, asynchronous, and in-person.) In the fall and spring of the 2020-2021 school year, my teaching assignments included FtF (or mask-to-mask, as many began to coin it), asynchronous, and synchronous online classrooms. Many of these were considered "hybrid," meaning they were using FtF and online elements (Hall et al., 2020). Our FtF classrooms were "de-densified," meaning fewer students in each classroom, the desks were six feet apart and my students had only one class meeting a week instead of three. Online courses were done either over Zoom for the synchronous and hybrid options or handled over our e-learning platform (D2L) in discussion boards, announcements, written assignments, and posted instructor materials, as well as email and Zoom personal contacts.

I found the both the online and offline students eager to meet, talk, and share; they were craving the contact, and honestly, I probably was too. Students came to class early, talked often, and did not balk at group work; absences were few and far between. In synchronous Zoom classes, I employed several strategies to increase opportunities for engagement and found that students were eager to speak and participate. As I arrived for our online class a few minutes early, many students often joined early and easily shared something about their day.

During the class, I focused on engagement and interaction in several ways. My discussion questions focused on some personal elements. I often asked students to give examples in their life that applied to a theory we were discussing. These life examples allowed students to get to know each other better through classroom discussion and helped them find commonalities. Using the break-out room feature of Zoom, I split the class into smaller groups and allowed for smaller group discussions. I added two things that led to more engagement and relationships in these groups.

First, in break-out groups, I added the expectation that students must play a role in the discussion. They would decide among themselves on a leader/facilitator and a reporter. This decision gave at least two individuals focused roles and increased their ownership and self-direction of the activity. The leader would guide the small group discussion, and the reporter would represent the group, in the main session, sharing a point of their conversation. While this expectation highlighted a role in the discussion, it allowed that role to be non-verbal through a written report.

The second element implemented was a report that the student needed to upload after their breakout room experience, which allowed them to get participation points and connect with me. It consisted of a paragraph where the student shared the online role they played and the participation grade they felt they deserved, and why they earned that grade. I encouraged students to develop other "roles" and give specifics of how they contributed. Several times students would mention non-verbal activities they did in the breakout like "make connections" or "thought out conflicting opinions." One student noted they felt their participation did not warrant a high grade because their English was poor, and they lacked understanding of the conversation. This admission allowed me to dialogue with the student and made me aware of a problem that I otherwise might not have known about. This written assessment allowed other forms of participation to be reflected on and acknowledged. Using a written tool can be a way to support a student who may have cultural or personality differences in the way they participate.

Many students also used this report to correspond with me. Students would often give me more details about something they mentioned about their life, make comments, and offer encouragement on something I had said in class, and even send me photos of pets or travels in their report. In the written reports, students would often self-disclose in response to my self-disclosure, as predicted by CPM theory (Hosek & Thompson, 2009). For example, when I mentioned deadlines I had coming up for some projects, some students wished me luck or shared that they too had a busy week ahead. These correspondences created a connection and a positive student-instructor relationship.

Synchronous and non-synchronous class relationships were created in primarily three ways. The first way was through weekly video announcements. By posting a weekly video announcement, students could see and get to know me. This allowed students to see things about me that they otherwise would not know. I would say things about where I was recording and mention things like my cat walking by. These videos showed a real life, not perfect or polished. They gave reminders and instruction for the coming week's assignments and encouragement or recap of feedback on past assignments while allowing the students a glimpse of me. This glimpse allowed them to make personal connections and find commonalities (Sorenson, 1989).

Secondly, I offered a weekly time to "be there" for them. Though only a few students took advantage of this, it gave those who wanted to connect a time and place to count on interacting with me in live Zoom office hours. When students did come, I not only answered their questions but conversed with them about where they were, life in general, and how the course was going for them. It only took me a few minutes, and it made a difference for those who showed up. I received verbal, email, and survey feedback about how helpful this was for them.

Feedback is helpful for all students and is the third way I created connections and relationships. Especially on the first assignment, my feedback was detailed, used the students' names, and pointed out one connection we had. Usually, this first assignment is an introduction of some kind, where the student introduces themselves and connects or elaborates on the experiences they bring to the classroom. Sometimes I might comment that I too loved cooking or traveling and hoped to visit their country someday. In some way, I endeavored to make a personal comment to that student. Again, this created reciprocal disclosures enhancing learning (DiVerniero & Hosek, 2011). These connections, I believe, created an expectation for a more open, personal, and responsive synchronous class.

Critical Outcomes from Relationships and Disclosures

Evidence from student and evaluator comments showed that these techniques achieved positive results. During this time, I had an evaluation from our course director, and she commented that she was surprised by the amount of student engagement I had in class; it was some of the best she had seen. The evidence of relationship came back in student comments at the end of the term with, "she really cares about the students," "she was genuinely excited to see each of us," or "always friendly and energetic, which makes getting engaged much easier." Students often told me I was the only instructor that asked how they were doing. These attempts to connect with students formed relationships.

Though Hernandez (2015) focuses on FtF relationships, his Real Talk pedagogy concept can be employed online. The idea as an instructor is to tell your story in a way, or with a theme, the student can relate to. CPM theory explains that what you disclose makes a difference in how effective the disclosure will be in creating positive connections with students (Hosek & Thompson, 2009; Sorenson, 1989). When facing a societal crisis, we have a built-in theme we are all sharing. This theme might be uncertainty, sickness, or loss of social life. During the fall term of 2020, I contracted the COVID-19 virus. After consideration, I chose to disclose this to my class, which I previously would not have done. Because I was absent for two weeks, I decided to offer my personal information rather than being cryptic about it and leaving the students to make assumptions. This admission led to many disclosing their time having COVID-19 and how they coped. My disclosures led to reciprocal disclosures which is explained by CPM theory (Hosek & Thompson, 2009). One student even offered a tea recipe that helped her get over the illness. Hernandez (2015) notes that these connections through shared experiences, allow you to develop trust, by making you relatable.

These personal disclosures and connections might be even more critical for successful online student connections than in FtF classrooms. Song et al. (2016) found that compared to FtF, self-disclosures online create better perceptions of student satisfaction and learning satisfaction. This phenomenon could be due to the reduced cues environment that an online, especially asynchronous environment, can create (Walther, 1992, 1996). Typical FtF cues of your ethnicity, sex, clothing choices, speaking style, and more no longer exist in an asynchronous environment. Some of the things we disclose just by being present are no longer available to give our students a relatable cue. Therefore, using weekly videos to enhance your students' cues can be crucial for connection in online platforms. These experiences and practical ideas are a good first step.

Final Thoughts

Future studies could further enhance the lessons learned as elaborated in this paper. Connections from this COVID time could extend the literature and expand the ways CPM is used in times of crisis. Do the rules for managing information change or flex in some directions due to the common theme society is sharing? Perhaps privacy is not deemed as necessary as health information is widely shared. Research should examine how times of crisis that impair established relationships impact the value of the student/instructor relationship. Written communication between instructor and student should be examined and measured to test the effects on the student-instructor relationship and, ultimately, student outcomes.

At the time of writing, this winter looks to be similar in some ways to the last. Whether COVID-19 is waning, no one can say, but the probability that online teaching will continue seems fixed no matter the tenacity of the virus. Before COVID-19 online learning already earned its place as an educational option, and the pandemic has only increased, or some would say accelerated the desire and need for the option. As educators, we would do well to hone our skills and be prepared for whatever assignment might come in the future, FtF, synchronous, asynchronous, hybrid, or maybe even something we have not yet developed.

So, if you desire for your students to be engaged, connected, have better learning outcomes, and even give more positive feedback on your evaluations, consider doing things to build instructor-student relationships, especially in challenging times like the COVID-19 pandemic. Take advantage of self-disclosure to make yourself relatable and find things that you and other students can relate to with each other. Use technology affordances like chat boxes and break-out rooms as tools to foster engagement and ownership. Use videos to build instructor immediacy and give cues to who you are in ways that show your style, environment, and even the qualities of your voice. Have fun connecting with your students, put yourself out there a little to reap rich rewards that will satisfy you as an instructor, and build those relationships with your students that will lead to better learning outcomes for them.

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