

“Setting Boundaries: Creating Assignments that Limit Student Self-Disclosures”

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Abstract

Student self-disclosures are the pieces of personal information that students share with instructors either through written work, in-class discussions, or with an instructor during office hours. Student self-disclosures can create an immense amount of care work for the instructor and increases the emotional load required of the instructor over the course of the semester. While instructors care deeply for the well-being of their students, evaluating student work can become increasingly challenging when the work contains personal pieces of information regarding trauma. Slight changes to assignments should be implemented to eliminate student self-disclosures in assignments which require evaluation. Instructors must still be aware of the need to refer students to their institution’s support services when there are troubling pieces of information shared in class or during office hours to protect the emotional and physical well-being of students.

Keywords: student, self-disclosure, boundaries, instructor, personal essay, assignment.

Several years ago, a student-athlete that I had in class the previous semester was killed in a car accident during a winter storm. I shared this story with a friend, and her immediate response was to ask me if I was okay. This friend acknowledged the bond created in a composition classroom. I was very sad following the death of this student, and to this day, I think of her often. However, due to the nature of the relationships in the composition classroom, and student-teacher relationships in general, I worry about several other students with no real answers about their wellbeing after the end of class. Student self-disclosures of a very intimate nature can be extremely problematic in an academic setting specifically in the personal essay or personal narrative writing assignments. The issue of student self-disclosures is a concern predominantly affecting female faculty members creating an undue amount of care work and stress to ensure the wellbeing of both students and faculty. Assignments should be revised to place limits on the type of information that is shared between the faculty and the students. Clear guidelines should be established and detailed early in the semester so that students are aware of what is appropriate in an academic setting as well as what additional services are available on campus. Faculty members must be prepared to make referrals to counseling services based on information that may still be learned over the course of the semester. These limits also work to ensure that assignments are graded on merit rather than an emotional pull from the writing or a strong connection or concern for the student.

The emotional weight that instructors carry regarding the well-being of their students can at times be overwhelming in terms of both the emotional load and the extra responsibilities that these situations create. One semester, a student shared with me through a personal essay that he believed that he was an undiagnosed schizophrenic and that he had for more than five years heard three separate voices. This was information he had never shared with his parents or any other person. My concern regarding this student's safety prompted me to reach out to our counseling services on campus. In an article titled "Thanks for Listening," an author, using the pseudonym Myra Green, also shared how these types of student-self disclosures can create additional work and emotional weight for the instructor:

This kind of care-work turns into a lot more than just one conversation. After the person tells the story, cries, and we talk through the issue, there can be much follow-up work to do: Find resources; talk to the department chair, consult counseling services, or visit another administrator or campus office; have a second meeting (or third) to follow up and provide new information; perhaps attend a meeting with an administrator or campus office with the person or on his/her behalf. (Green)

With my own possibly schizophrenic student, there were multiple follow-up emails between myself and the counselors because the student stayed in my class for the remaining 12 weeks of the semester. Like myself, Green acknowledged that she felt a responsibility to follow up with the student to ensure that the situation had been handled appropriately. My student referral to the counselor was indirect as I was trying to shield the student from my concern to maintain the trust that I had built, so my follow-up was twofold. I reached out multiple times to the counseling office and was only able to be given minimal information back for privacy reasons. I was also making an additional effort to communicate with the student before every class since his wellbeing still weighed on me.

These feelings of responsibility towards students are not uncommon. Kerry Ann Rockquemore, author of “Setting Boundaries When it Comes to Students’ Emotional Disclosures,” also described feeling torn between a sense of responsibility to the student and feeling pressure associated with these self-disclosures: “Part of me felt honored that people feel safe with me [...] And part of me cared so deeply about my students that I want all of them to feel seen, heard and supported in their growth [...] Despite my good intentions, I quickly burned out, because there are personal, physical and emotional costs to that level of emotional work” (Rockquemore). My relationships with my students make this job so rewarding. I want these students to feel comfortable reaching out to me if they need help with school, but that also leaves me open to being a source of comfort in personal and emotional situations for students as well.

Perhaps there is something about our very nature that leads certain instructors to experience more of these examples of student self-disclosures than others. Author Janie H. Wilson, PhD feels that more students feel comfortable talking to her in such a manner because she is a “female” (11). Myra Green shares this belief as she, too, described that some women are “warm and fuzzy or nice women” and “quiet listeners. Such women [...] are understood as empathetic helpers, sounding boards, caretakers” (Green). Green referenced the amount of “care work” that these women often undertake as an additional part of their job. I recognize a need for our students to be able to reach out to instructors or other safe adults to receive some positive feedback or support, but many of us are unprepared and unqualified for this type of care work. These issues of student-self disclosures seem to be more common in classrooms taught by female instructors based on my research and on my many conversations with both male and female instructors. A male colleague stated that his students would know that those types of personal disclosures are completely inappropriate.

I firmly believe that our students need the outlet that our classroom provides, but the role of the instructor is changing as our society changes. Dan Morgan was an English instructor at a community college when he wrote “Ethical Issues Raised by Students’ Personal Writing” published in *College English*. Morgan talked about the expanding role of teachers in our “broken society,” particularly when considering the “nontraditional lives led by most of our students” (324). Morgan stated his belief that there are “issues of trust and ethical responsibilities” to be considered especially when dealing with student writing and self-disclosure (324). Lorraine E. Granieri and Lara Hooper wrote a piece in response to Morgan also published in *College English* titled “Two Comments on ‘Ethical Issues Raised by Students’ Personal Writing.” Each author penned a separate section of the combined published piece. Granieri identified the lack of qualifications from composition instructors to serve as these care takers for the students: “Unless they are licensed psychologists or counselors, teachers of writing do not have the expertise to enter into a true helping relationship with their students” (Granieri and Hooper 493). This belief is also expressed by Myra Green as she encouraged her students to reach to outside help in their personal lives: “I’m not a therapist, a counselor, a social worker, a minister, or a psychologist” (Green). As a composition instructor, I agree that I feel ill-prepared to handle all of the students’ counseling needs, but I do hope that students can see instructors as a resource to guide them to a better solution on campus as Morgan is correct in his assessment that many of these college students are leading far more complicated lives than we would wish for them.

The personal essay serves as a direct invitation for painful and traumatic student self-disclosures. Students have become more comfortable sharing these types of stories openly as our culture has become more open to this type of public discourse through the use of social media. Dan Morgan states that the shift in our society has led to this shift in the number and type of student self-disclosures: “And writing about profoundly personal issues comes easily to our students because we live in a pervasive culture of public self-disclosure, as talk shows, tabloids, daily newspapers, books, and movies will attest. In our popular culture, private issues are no longer private, and public self-disclosure seems to have become a means toward personal validation” (Morgan 324). As students see these celebrity self-disclosures, they too become more comfortable sharing different pieces of their lives with their instructors and classmates

When instructors create writing assignments asking for a personal narrative, there has to be some level of expectation that these students will share information that many instructors would find to be intrusive or disturbing. Lorraine E. Granieri explained that teachers should not be surprised when students open their hearts and souls through their writing: “When we ask students to write about personal experiences and make personal connections, why are we so surprised when they give us the horror stories of their lives?” (Granieri and Hooper 493). Students today are comfortable sharing their lives and their stories, so when they are asked to write, they often find a memorable story to share that may feel less than academic but may perhaps feel therapeutic to write.

Dan Morgan shared that he had a student confess to murder in a personal narrative (Morgan 318). While some may argue that my experiences with student self-disclosures have been minor compared to what Morgan described, the emotional impact of one particular semester still weighs on me. As I reread essays from that class, I can still see each of their faces and remember specific details of their lives beyond what I learned about each of them in the essay they wrote for my class. I previously mentioned my experience with a student who believed he was an undiagnosed schizophrenic. That semester, he was technically the only student who received a referral to counseling, rather I notified counselors about my concerns for his health and safety.

However, I had two separate young ladies mention abusive boyfriends. The first lady wrote describing the emotion abuse and “hurtful words” causing her to become “extremely depressed” to the point that she “did not want to live anymore.” The second young lady described how her former boyfriend tried to create distance between she and her family. As each of these essays came to a close, both young women seemed to be in more positive places in their lives, but the abuse, the heartbreak, and the questioning of their worth weighed on my heart as a mother to a young daughter, and I empathized as a woman who had previously been in a negative relationship many years ago. I watched each of them closely looking for any reason to question their newfound stability.

Two students shared stories about their sexuality. One student shared about going on a school trip when she was in an open relationship with another girl, but her mother, the chaperone, was unaware that she was bisexual let alone in a relationship. The second student shared his fears and anxieties about telling a friend that he was gay and had feelings for him. He student was afraid that he would be “ostracized,” and this fear had “paralyzed him.” He opened his essay with a moving statement about how “gay” is still used as an insult followed by statements regarding the fear and anxiety which he felt about being openly gay.

One young lady wrote about her struggles emotionally dealing with grief after a classmate committed suicide by jumping in front of a train. Another student wrote about her grandfather who died after a prolonged illness while living in the home she shared with her mother. She described her grandfather as an unkind man, but she still expressed great frustration, and even anger, at other family members who refused to aid in his care or show him the proper respect that she felt he deserved at the end of his life. A third female student wrote an essay about her father's drinking, which led to her parents' divorce. Ultimately, her father went on a bender and ended up in rehab, but unfortunately, he has slipped back into heavy drinking on the weekends.

As I reflect on these students' self-disclosures, I encountered another who wrote her essay about her multiple suicide attempts and how she asked for counseling multiple times stating that no one would take her requests for help seriously. Her unanswered cries for help broke my heart and left me feeling a sense of responsibility and duty. She stated that she had "begged and pleaded for help." She described the multiple ways she mistreated her body, which I can only imagine were attempts to get someone to see her. The student then explained that her teachers did address her need for help with her parents, but that her parents refused to see that she needed help. After talking about her experience at a treatment facility, she included ten difficult mental illness diagnosis that she had received. As an instructor, I felt completely lost at what I was supposed to do with any of this information. I knew that she was receiving some additional support services on campus, but I believed that this was mostly just tutoring. She was the kind of student who always lingered after class. She was quiet during class, but when there were only two or three students left in the room, she would talk and happily share stories in order to participate in whatever non-class related conversation we were having. I worried about her because of the story she shared with me in her writing, but through our interactions, she never gave me any reason to be concerned for her well-being or safety. What was I as an instructor supposed to do with this knowledge that I didn't want to have? How is she doing now? I really have no way to know that she is still getting the appropriate care that she needs. Her current instructors likely do not know her medical history unless she shared it with them as well. Will they watch out for her by spending a few extra minutes after every class period giving her positive reinforcement and a bit of positive social interaction and encouragement? I have not had any interaction with her since our class ended, but I think of her often. I hope our few minutes after class helped to show her that there are caring adults on campus who will listen.

The final student self-disclosure cemented my decision to eliminate the personal essay assignment; a female student wrote about her rape, which was the first time any student had ever shared a sexual assault with me in my nine years of teaching. She wrote an essay about being raped at a college party while still in high school. She did press charges, but unfortunately, there was not a conviction. The student specifically wrote about questioning whether it had all been her fault and expressed concern about what she had been wearing at the time. I momentarily stopped grading the essay in order to finish reading the narrative. When it was time to evaluate the essay, I did not know what to say or write in the comment section of her essay. I realized that I was beyond emotionally drained. Her paper was the last assignment that I needed to review. The load of the other self-disclosures from this assignment already weighed so heavily on me that I felt lost... heartbroken.... confused... ill prepared.... and scared to face these young students again when we met for our next class.

The endnote that I wrote for the student on the paper about her rape felt harsh, inadequate, critical, but that was my job. I was required to evaluate the quality of the writing on her assignment. The end comment at the end of her 3-page paper read:

This was a very suspenseful and heart wrenching story. My heart is aching after reading so many personal essays this semester.

I would have liked to have seen the so what message a little bit more developed. It wasn't your fault, and you did nothing wrong... But was there a lesson learned about people? About gossip? About safety? About drinking?

The paper has a few places where the essay falls out of the past tense. The paper needs to stay in the past tense as this is a story that already happened.

53 run ons

Pay attention to how many independent clauses you have and how you are connecting them together.

I want to let you know that there are counseling services available for you for free here on campus.

I am happy to go with you or to talk with you at any time.

After this comment, I included a name, room number, email, and phone number to the counselor on campus. My concern for this young lady only worsened over the course of the semester as her attendance became spotty during the next few weeks until ultimately, she quit coming to class all together. With her specifically, I worried that the information she chose to share became part of the reason she stopped coming to class. I have often wondered whether she regretted telling me this part of her life and felt uncomfortable coming to class. While this self-disclosure was not a requirement of the class or the assignment, perhaps it became something she wished she had handled differently. I have no way to know for sure.

These essays were from 3 sections over a single semester of a first semester freshman composition course. I had approximately 72 students at the time; about 15 of my students that semester received some sort of counseling opportunity or campus services opportunity type feedback in their end note of their paper feedback. I then decided to write one large campus services type email and announcement, which I also discussed face to face the first class meeting after grading these assignments. My email, announcement, and class discussion described that there were counseling services and food banks on campus (and where and how to reach them).

In the personal essay assignment, instructors will undoubtedly receive personal stories from young writers that require critique and evaluation. The goal of our course is to help these writers to find strategies to improve their writing skills. When the writing becomes more personal, the criticism of the writing begins to feel like a personal attack or a judgment of the student's personal life. The personal essay assignments are unfair because the student and instructor are both placed in uncomfortable situations. The instructor needs to evaluate the writing, which can, in essence, feel like the instructor is evaluating the student trauma. While instructors recognize their classroom responsibility, the need to offer these evaluations can feel uncomfortable. Dan Morgan described an essay where a female student explained that she was involved in an abusive relationship with a man who had a drug problem (320): "As a reader, my main concern was with the student's own lifestyle, values, and prospects. As a teacher, how do I negotiate my written responses? To address writing issues seems cold, and frankly, even

irrelevant at a certain level. And I have some misgivings about the ethical appropriateness of issuing an unsolicited referral to counseling” (Morgan 320). I certainly sympathize with Morgan here as I earlier described my need to comment on a student’s essay about her rape which included more than 50 run-on sentences. To address the grammar errors felt irrelevant to the overall story she had chosen to share, yet this step was necessary as part of the assignment and my duties to her as an instructor.

As previously stated, Morgan had a student who wrote a personal essay confessing to murder (318). Morgan questioned how to handle the situation, and his student essay became a discussion at a work-related meeting at his college: “Almost all of them thought that the narrative was ‘real,’ not fiction, though personally I have doubts to this day. Some advised various approaches one could take to get at ‘the truth,’ while at least a couple pointed out that as an ‘officer of the college’ I was obligated to turn the whole matter over to the college deans and to the police” (Morgan 318). Morgan described a follow up meeting with the student where the student maintained that the murder had actually taken place, and the two created a plan for how to revise the student’s essay: “We negotiated a revision which would expand the narrative, clarify the thesis, define some terms, and provide the indispensable details of context. Then we set up another conference where he would bring in a draft of the revision” (Morgan 318). The student never completed the established revision plan, and his attendance began to decline until the student stopped coming to class altogether. Regardless of whether the student had actually committed the murder, the situation described by Morgan reminds me of my own student who wrote about her rape. I question whether both students stopped coming to class because they felt uncomfortable about the information, which they shared in their writing. Morgan’s student example about committing a murder also opens up the question as to what do we do when a student writes about a crime, whether we believe that narrative to be true or not.

While I still respect the value of the personal essay or personal narrative as a tool for expression, I have begun to question whether the assignment is beneficial for students in my classes. Dan Morgan wrote that someone that he worked with had a “radical idea” to “eliminate the personal narrative altogether” (Morgan 323). Instead of eliminating the personal essay assignment completely, I have begun to change the personal essay into a scholarship essay assignment, which encourages students to be far more aware of the rhetorical situation in terms of considering their audience and purpose for a piece of writing. My students now write 475-525 word essays responding to one of three possible prompts: personal/professional goals, financial need, or how community college changed his or her life. The prompts are very closely aligned with my school’s scholarship program.

As instructors, we establish the climate of our classroom in terms of how formal and structured or casual and relaxed we want the environment to be especially when it comes to topics of discussion. Nancy Lynne Westfield wrote in her article, “TMI: Over-sharing is NOT Caring,” about the responsibilities that students and teachers both have to maintain an air of professionalism in the classroom. She stated that class should never feel like therapy for either the instructor or the student. Westfield believes that the best strategy for avoiding these student self-disclosures is to set clear guidelines for the individual assignments: “The best strategies I know for helping students and myself not to lapse into disconnected personal storytelling is to be clear about my aims, objectives, and goals for each course, each session, each learning activity

and then to keep those goals central to all discussions” (Westfield). The move to the scholarship assignment encourages students to write with a new level of professionalism that had not previously been present in the more casual personal essays. The objective of possibly winning money has served as another incentive for creating polished pieces of writing that also feel much improved as compared to the run on and fragment heavy personal essays of previous semesters.

The change to the scholarship assignment will still allow these types of sharing opportunities to be available while at the same time shifting the tone of the assignment to encourage the students to consider their more professionally. The scholarship assignment is still a way for students to open up about who they are and what they have experienced while asking each of them to look at these experiences through a positive lens. The scholarship assignment takes “poor me personal essay” and encourages the student assignment to evolve into a “look what I have overcome scholarship essay.”

While the scholarship assignment attempts to shape the frame of reference for students who are sharing personal information, other course work and other assignments may create opportunities for individuals to want to stray into writing that still contains intimate information. Granieri, Griffing, and Westfield all specifically detail creating assignments and establishing boundaries from the beginning of the course that outline what is and is not acceptable to share in writing assignments and class discussions. Griffing talks in more general terms about simply establishing the boundaries from day one: “It is important that teachers give students clear guidelines from the first class on how students need to carefully consider personal disclosures before sharing them” (Griffing). These boundaries helped me to redirect a young male student whose scholarship essay free write stated that he was a closeted bisexual afraid to come out to his religious family because he believed he would be kicked out of his home. By leaning on the structure of the scholarship assignment with the three clear prompts, I was able to guide him back to an assignment prompt to help control the self-disclosure for the essay assignment which would need to be graded and evaluated.

Additionally, I began to question what the personal essay assignment was offering my students after graduation. I wonder what skills this assignment helps the students develop for the workforce. My job as a composition instructor is to prepare these students for the rest of their college writing careers and their professional writing needs. I wonder where the personal essay fits into that, and I am struggling to see what need the personal essay fills in terms of their future. Lorraine E. Granieri explained her belief about how our job as educators is to give our students the skills necessary to fully participate in the outside world “in ways that will enhance their function in society” (Granieri and Hooper 492). The scholarship assignment sets up a framework to encourage students to more readily see the rhetorical situation in a way where they can recognize its value and see its direct application through the potential windfall of money if they win the scholarship by writing a polished and professional essay. There are additional opportunities in an adult’s life where the successful application of the rhetorical situation could produce beneficial results long after college graduation (grant writing, business proposals, etc.).

Our passion for our craft and our desire to educate students must lead us to create assignments that limit the written self-disclosure, which is so difficult to evaluate fairly, safely, and honestly. The students may still choose to self-disclose in the classroom or privately during office hours, and maybe, they need that safe place that the instructor has provided. If dangerous

or concerning self-disclosures occur, the faculty member must be informed of the available campus services and be prepared to give the student a referral that suits the individual need, even walking them to the office if necessary. The shift from the personal essay assignment to a scholarship essay assignment still allows for some minor sharing in a narrative format while creating a rhetorical situation and a formal writing structure that even young freshman writers can recognize as a beneficial assignment. The style of the writing shows a vast difference from previous casual and error-filled personal narrative assignments.

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