Coming out in Bytes and Pieces: Self-identification Online

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Abstract

This position paper explores the statement that online teachers should disclose their gender, race, class, age, values, interests, politics, capacities, heritage, sexual orientations and/or preferences, in the interests of valuing and advancing the recognition of diversity. Teachers, especially in the social sciences and humanities, should also encourage their students to do the same. Self-disclosure is advocated as the cornerstone of vital and empowering educational relationships and transformative learning. The use of various methods of teacher and student self-disclosure in a multi-media environment are explored, with a particular emphasis on coming out as a lesbian.

Online learning has often been conceived as genderless, ageless, raceless, and classless because of the disembodied nature of virtual interactions. A 1993 cartoon (Steiner, 1993) suggested that even dogs can fool humans about their identity on the internet. More serious consideration of gender, age, race, class, and other social characteristics in online communication can be found in McGann (1997), Ebo (1998), Miller et al (2000), and Nakamura (2002). Such scholars have pointed out that many Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) users think of online interaction as a kind of cybertopia, free of the discrimination and oppression that is apparent in the “real” world. As an online educator, I long for free and egalitarian interactions among online teachers and students; however, I do not believe that utopia has been achieved. My position is that, in the interests of advancing and valuing the recognition of diversity, I reveal my personal identities online. I judiciously make my gender, race, class, age, values, interests, politics, capacities, heritage, orientations and/or preferences known, using self-disclosure as a teaching and learning tool. I also encourage my online students to do the same.

Without venturing into the enormous discussion of why it is important to be appropriately self-revelatory as an educator (see for example Cayanus, 2004; Vella, 2002; Fisher, 2001; Gilbert, 2002), I will summarize by saying that personalizing my online teaching allows me to: offer *interesting* examples, make myself more accessible, and build *trust* between myself and my students. As Terry Anderson (2004, p. 174) indicated, “The first task of the e-learning teacher is to develop a sense of trust and safety within the electronic community.” If I am an interesting, accessible and trustworthy online teacher in a multi-media environment, I am more able to frame the connections between myself and others. This self-other connection (Mead, 1934; Buber, 1958) is the cornerstone of vital and empowering educational relationships and transformative learning (Dirkx et al, 2006). I believe that online teachers and students can create a more egalitarian, empowered and, therefore, productive educational relationship if they disclose and discuss their social diversity.

In this paper I will describe how and why I self-disclose online as a means of recognizing diversity and empowering my students. I will pay particular attention to coming out as a lesbian. I will then consider ways in which multi-media technologies can enhance self-disclosure in an online environment and conclude with final practical suggestions.

In recent decades, many educators have discussed various ways in which they have revealed their lesbian or homosexual orientation (See Harbeck, 1992, 1997; Jennings, 1994; Rofes, 2000). Similarly, I have tried a variety of methods of coming out in online university courses. For instance, because of the importance of self-introductions in establishing a safe (i.e. respectful) and inviting online space within text-based asynchronous discussion groups, I carefully consider and prepare what I say about myself, in order to help students understand who I am as a person. Introductions to students' family members arise frequently in these introductory discussion threads so, just as heterosexual people refer to their wives or husbands, I often refer to my same-sex partner. I have announced my family status in different ways (e.g. discussing "my partner Annette", or indicating that I am in a long term relationship with a woman). This increases trust because I demonstrate openness and honesty about my life at an early stage in the course.

After an online course which encourages openness and diversity, student evaluations often reveal the importance of self-disclosure. A few comments culled from such evaluations include: "The professor's relaxed approach to the course was one of the best things." "You've inspired me to broaden my perspective and pursue diversity issues in more depth." "Your timely, honest, and thoughtful advice was always tremendously supportive." "One of the best things about the course was the Interaction with other students because that is often where the most learning takes place." "[The course content] helped to make the course personal and interesting." "The big thing for me was that I did a lot of learning and "stretched my mind". Such comments indicate accessibility among course participants and feelings of trust, which usually lead to more interesting educational experiences.

When an online learner comes out, I come out in response, often supporting and sometimes countering the learner's arguments about gay or lesbian issues. The main reason for this is to avoid isolating the student. The attempt is made to create solidarity through sharing lesbian or gay identity. Fletcher and Russell (2001) agree that faculty have an opportunity and responsibility to address issues of sexual orientation in university courses, and Lenskyj (2005) also advocates coming out in both face-to-face and online environments. Lenskyj proposes that "A feminist instructor… is justified in challenging racism, classism, homophobia, heterosexism and other forms of oppression, and in expecting all students to grapple with their personal prejudices and fears of difference as she herself is doing " (2005, p. 150). With Lenskyj and Barnard (2004), I believe that coming out online is central to the construction of lesbian identity (Munt et al, 2002), the reduction of homophobia, and the creation of holistic, transformative education about social difference.

Some of my lesbian or gay students have come out in response to my self-disclosures. In course evaluations and letters to me at the conclusion of the course, they have indicated how important my coming out was to them. Straight students who have friends or relatives who are gay or lesbian have also remarked that open discussion of sexual orientation in class has helped them understand their loved ones.

In addition to enhancing the learning *process*, self-disclosure can advance students' understanding of course *content*. This is because human differences are fundamental concerns in humanities and social sciences, and the disclosure of one's social location helps to establish differences and similarities amongst course participants that can be applied to ideas in the course materials. For instance, in a research methods course that I teach online, questions about research ethics are posed in relation to an often-cited researcher who surreptitiously observed and recorded interaction at gathering place for gay men (Humphreys, 1970). During the discussion of this material, I identify myself as a lesbian because this explicitly situates me

as similar to the subjects of Humphrey's research. If I don't come out, the discussion of the researcher's ethics can remain at an abstracted level, with the participants in Humphrey's study looked upon as "other", and the course participants wondering how "they" (the gay research subjects) would feel. My self-revelation allows students to understand that this particular research example pertains to real individuals that they know, and who may be different from them. This helps them to socially situate themselves and to consider the basis of their ethical decision-making (Cole, 1998). More generally, self-revelations often burst assumptions about who the "others" are, and allow students to deepen their consideration of themselves in relation to others in the social world.

In the online women's studies courses that I facilitate, the institutionalized nature of heterosexuality is often examined. In such discussions, there is much opportunity to compare my personal knowledge of heterosexism and homophobia with information in the course readings. As well, frequently there are students enrolled in such courses who are lesbian, bisexual, queer or transgendered, and thus the conversation amongst us often moves well beyond simple didacticism or review of descriptive information, to a more profound critical consideration of how sexuality varies and has been enforced throughout the world over time (Kimmel and Plante, 2004). In such discourses, it is clear that personal self-disclosure is intimately connected with course content and foundational to the interactive social construction of knowledge (Harding, 1991; Haraway, 1988).

For example, a discussion of Lillian Faderman's (1981) work included the following exchanges:

> **J**: (a self-identified lesbian who practices S-M): "Here I am making an assumption that this author is an "old school lesbian" writing this article because she continues the legacy of desexualizing women's sex/sexuality ..."
> **L**: (a self-identified heterosexual) "Hi J. That is a very good point. While I read that, I got the distinct impression that ALL those women in the past did was hold hands and nuzzle. …
>
> **Cathy Bray**: There's a great movie, "Fingersmith", from the novel by Sarah Waters, that represents lesbian sexuality in the past as powerful, creative and erotic. Kind of Dickensian, with a post-modern turn
>
> **CL**" (a lesbian in a long-term relationship) "I had a good laugh when I read the comments about these women not feeling and acting upon sexual desire. Do we get these notions from watching silly movies about Victorian women like Pride and Prejudice etc? It is probably just a hope spawned in a patriarchal society that women just "nuzzled"!"
>
> **B** (a heterosexual woman) "**J** ….is it not conceivable that much of this hand holding and nuzzling was the result of some "self – desexualization" and not necessarily a product of historical interpretation? My mother, who is in her mid 70s, grew up in a very strict Roman Catholic home where any form of discussion about sex was forbidden. Her early ideas of what sex was all about did little to recognize that every person has a sexual component to her or him and that desire is healthy and fun and not evil and dirty…"
>
> **J** (responding to **B**): "Thank you for your point. I completely agree. My mother is in her mid-60s and also strict French catholic (#10 of 12). Open sexuality of any sorts is taboo - it was so apparent, that, when at my wedding friends clinked their glasses for my wife and I to kiss, I got so tired of it that I said the bride's parents have to kiss. My mother got all red… as my father tried to give her a tiny smooch (in the 41 years they've been married this is the 4th time I've seen open affection - read sexuality - to the French catholic mamman).

However, self-disclosure need not always happen during formal web-based introductions or during mandated online discussions. Neither does it need to be specifically related to the content of the course. Indeed, especially in multi-media online environments, the opportunity often arises to use various media to get to know students informally and one-to-one – to become more accessible. Given that making connections between personal and political issues is a cornerstone of my approach to education (Schacht, n.d.; Fisher, 2001), I often come out in e-mail exchanges with individual students. This disclosure can arise either in response to students who reveal their sexual orientation or family status, or when I initiate pertinent discussion about the connection between their own private sphere, the public spheres under discussion in the course, and my private sphere. Such informal chat arises in various circumstances such as within emails about administrative matters related to assignment submission; as a sidebar to discussions of the stresses felt by busy adult students with jobs and families; or as a humorous and relaxed exchange at times when we find each other online at the same time. These discussions occur in order to further develop friendly trust between myself and my students.

Here are excerpts from two emails between myself and a graduate student (**S**.) which illustrate my point:

> Dear Cathy,
>
> You invited me to write to you about anything at all, and I will take you up on your offer. ;-).. What I wish to tell you in this letter is a story. … not one that I have often told. …Part of my own life-story… involved a lengthy and careful appraisal of my spirituality and my sexuality. … I gave myself the freedom to explore my sexuality, and developed a number of relationships,... I grew to accept and appreciate my bisexuality and …my androgyny … One of my primary reasons for enrolling in the [university] program was its interdisciplinarity and its apparent acceptance, indeed encouragement, of the unconventional…
>
> I hope that you will take what I have written as a genuine attempt to communicate something of who I am, and that you will use that information to nudge, to prod, to challenge, to encourage, and respectfully to provoke me. I do not ask for answers. I ask for questions – questions that arise from who you are. A word here, a word there…
>
> I am fast reaching the conclusion that my choices of topic, research questions, and possible methodologies, are tantamount to choosing to jump off a cliff, without knowing what lies at the bottom, or even if there is a bottom!
>
> **S.**
>
> My response to **S** was, in part: Your "jumping off the cliff" analogy is very apt, **S**. Your first jump that has been made apparent in this course seems freeing, exciting and evocative. My remarks are intended to help you to extend the feeling of freedom, and to help you to discipline your flight somewhat further.

Most of the above examples pertain to the use of text in the asynchronous online environment. Problematically, the only nonverbal cue used with any frequency in a text-based environment - textual absence - can mean so many different things: actual absence, lurking, disdainful presence, disregard, awkward uncertain ignorance, or supportive quiet accompaniment. To overcome the difficulties associated with the use of text alone, various other mechanisms should be employed as part of the coming out process, or as part of self-disclosure more generally. Enrichment of the learning environment through the use of avatars; audio clips;

postings of visual elements such as drawings, concept maps, photos, and emoticons; video; webcams; multi-media emailing; audio conferencing, etc. is highly recommended. With the increasing use of gaming and simulation in online learning environments, students might participate in role-playing by explicitly choosing a sexual orientation, class, age, gender or ethnicity that may be different from their own. In summary, if the online environment is media-rich, more ways to develop an appropriate, flowing and contextualized disclosure will emerge. As Chin and Williams (2006) point out, a fully integrated, all encompassing learning environment harnesses the power of numerous information and communication technologies and offers greater scope for catering to individual learning needs.

Using a wealth of media forms helps to mitigate negative and/or incorrect assumptions that can arise online. Mistaken assumptions affect more than judgements about sexuality and sexual preference, of course: they pertain to *all* aspects of self-identity. Online discourse often leads to false impressions about class, race, ethnicity, disability, age and other important features of course participants. In order to overcome incorrect impressions when working online, people with disabilities are faced with the choice to come out as “differently-abled”; First Nations people must often refute assumptions that they are white; young or old people often need to state their youth or their age; sometimes women or men feel they must assert their gender, etc. In a text-only environment, all folks who do not fit default expectations that they are straight white, middle-class, expected-aged, able-bodied etc. are faced with the choice of either ignoring potentially inaccurate assumptions about themselves (due to lack of visual and auditory cues), or naming their “difference”.

I recognize that self-disclosure of one’s lesbian or gay orientation can provoke negative reactions. Indeed, gay and lesbian teachers have for decades refrained from coming out because they can be vilified, fired from their jobs, threatened physically, assaulted, and in some horrific cases, murdered (Jeffs, 1995). However, case law in various jurisdictions has established the right of teachers to reveal their orientation (Van Brummelen And Sawatsky, 2002). More importantly, cultural changes have emerged in many areas such as Canada, the United States, and Northern Europe to support honest appropriate self-disclosure. Lenskyj (2005, p. 159) comments that it is especially important for an instructor to come out when homophobic remarks are made. Though I have not encountered overt homophobia in my online teaching (perhaps because much of this online teaching has been more recent than Lenskyj’s, with employed adults, and at the masters level) I agree that homophobic remarks or any other kind of blatant discrimination should be dealt with swiftly and directly in order to establish safe conditions for students and myself. In sum, coming out facilitates the learning process in most circumstances, by building trust and establishing a respectful environment for all participants.

My argument that self-disclosure should happen online is countered by authors such as Karen Turner in her article entitled “Teaching a Studies-in- Race Course Online: The Challenges and the Rewards” (2004). Turner suggests that an online teacher should instruct students not to identify themselves by race/ethnicity and/or gender in their postings to a listserv because “complete anonymity encourages more meaningful dialogue” (2004, p. 229). For me, anonymity merely encourages assumptions that are often incorrect. Additionally, those who are hesitant about self-identification online might consider Hartlep’s (2001) study in which it is noted that “lectures that included instructor self-disclosure led to better exam performance than lectures without instructor self-disclosure” (from the abstract). In the end, my experience has demonstrated to me that, in both real and virtual worlds, honest self-disclosure is the best way to encourage meaningfulness and educational growth.

Though I have stressed how I self-disclose as a member of a minority, oppressed group, I reiterate that it is not only people from marginalized groups who must engage in responsible self-disclosure in the online environment. As Helen Lenskyj says: “Since the risks for lesbian students and instructors are high, it seems reasonable to expect heterosexual women to join lesbians in identifying and challenging homophobia and heterosexism” (2005, p.150). Lenskyj’s

call for solidarity applies to white women and men, to those with class privilege, to men and women who are able-bodied and middle-aged, and to other privileged groups - as well as to heterosexuals. Ziegahn (2005) and Gerber (1994) support this call for general acknowledgement of teachers' and learners' social location.

Self-disclosure by *all* participants in an online course can be encouraged in two ways. First, a teacher can direct some of his or her introductory explanations in the course guide or within web-based discussion to the politics of the online classroom. Such remarks can educate participants about power imbalances between majority and minority group members by, for instance: pointing out the effects of silence on both dominant and marginalized participants; typifying the mistaken assumptions that are often made due to silence; and explaining the harms that arise because of such mistakes. Online teachers can stress that all learners benefit from honest, authentic self-disclosure about power and privilege, difference, oppression and solidarity. Using a variety of media formats, teachers can encourage all learners to recognize that private troubles are public issues (Mills, 1959), and that unambiguous efforts to reveal and end unfair discrimination are necessary in our social institutions.

Second, a teacher can instigate careful introductory interactions that ask *all* online course participants to personally and specifically identify themselves. For instance, white, able-bodied, middle-aged teachers can "come out" as white, able-bodied, middle aged etc. – and recognise their social privilege. "Coming out" as a straight teacher (or as "normal" in other ways) highlights the fact that "normal" ethnicity, sexuality, physical ability, age etc. should not be assumed (online or elsewhere). If a straight teacher comes out, this also demonstrates to learners the primacy of self-disclosure. Teacher self-revelation and mandated self identification opens a safe space for second language speakers, people who face size-discrimination, African-Americans, people from First Nations, Francophones, or Hispanics who speak English as a second language and many, many others from oppressed groups to identify themselves.

Merry Merrifield (2001) similarly recommends that educators "move the centre" of discussion so that all learners feel that their own culture is equally valued. However, she also notes the ambivalence among online educators regarding whether the online environment can allow students and teachers to truly know each other, saying:

> there is a kind of tacit assessment and compilation of observable minutia that informs us or "feeds in our data banks" as we meet and interact with new people. Such data are psychologically missed in interaction that does not include the senses—hearing an accent, seeing a face, smelling a hair gel, or touching in a friendly hug. So some teachers perceived the online relationships as partial or "incomplete," (Merrifield, 2001, p. 296)

I share Merrifield's concerns about the gaps and absences online. However, for most students who enroll in an online course, their choice is not between online and face-to-face education, but between online education and no formal education. Some empowering self-disclosure in an imperfect environment is better than none at all. To conclude, it is my position that, because of the importance of difference among participants, the effective use of technology in teaching and learning requires that students and teachers use a variety of methods of self-disclosure in a multimedia environment.

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