



## Full length article

## Teacher–student relationship in online classes: A role of teacher self-disclosure

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## ABSTRACT

Considering the unique nature of online environments, which limit some aspects of nonverbal communication, fostering robust and lasting teacher–student relationships in online classes may be challenging. Moreover, the structural features of online settings may create a learning environment where students have minimal knowledge about the instructor. The role of teacher self-disclosure (SD) in e-learning settings rarely has been tested, although decades of instructional communication research demonstrate its significance. Structural Equation Model analysis results suggest that teacher self-disclosure and students' emotional responses toward teacher SD enhance teacher–student relationship satisfaction, which in turn increases perceived knowledge gain and class satisfaction. Further, the current study compares teacher SD and its impacts in online and FtF classes by conducting a multiple group comparison analysis. Findings suggest that the effect of teacher SD upon teacher–student relationship satisfaction is stronger online compared to FtF classes.

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## 1. Introduction

College students have shown growing interest in online courses. According to recent statistics from [eLearning Industry \(2014\)](#), approximately 46% college students in the United States have taken at least one online course. Further, 89% of four-year public colleges and universities offer online courses according to Pew Research Center ([Parker, Lenhart, & Moore, 2011](#)). Responding to the increased popularity of online education, researchers have paid particular attention to assessing how various instructional features, strategies, and formats affect students' learning experiences.

Traditional instructional communication research demonstrates the significance of a teacher's interpersonal communication practices, such as immediacy (e.g., [Andersen, 1979](#); [Christophel, 1990](#); [Frymier & Houser, 2000](#); [Miller, Katt, Brown, & Sivo, 2014](#)), self-disclosure (e.g., [Cayanus & Martin, 2008](#); [Cayanus, Martin, & Goodboy, 2009](#); [Stoltz & Bryant, 2013](#)) along with other communicator style (e.g., [Frymier & Houser, 2000](#); [Myers, Martin, &](#)

[Mottet, 2002](#); [Myers, Mottet, & Martin, 2000](#); [Myers & Rocca, 2000](#); [Norton & Ruben, 1977](#)) on learning experiences in traditional, face-to-face (FtF) classroom settings. In particular, immediacy, referring to verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors reducing social and psychological distance between people ([Andersen, 1979](#)) has been consistently reported to affect student motivation and learning in positive ways. Further, [Graham, West, and Schaller \(1992\)](#) in developing the Relational Teaching Approach argued, “Teaching involves a process of relational development and requires effective interpersonal communication skills to achieve satisfying outcomes” (p. 11). An instructor's emphasis on developing interpersonal relationships through the use of immediacy behaviors operates as an essential factor in facilitating effective learning experiences.

Instructor immediacy behaviors also have been emphasized in online education. In particular, [Al Ghamdi, Samarji, and Watt \(2016\)](#) coined the term, ‘e-immediacy’, to describe immediacy behaviors in online learning contexts. Given the unique nature of online environments, which limit aspects of nonverbal communication (e.g., eye contact, smiling, physical distance, movement, and graphic information), researchers have focused on verbal immediacy behaviors ([Jensen, 1999](#)), such as use of humor ([Kucuk, 2009](#)), addressing students by name in correspondence, and use of

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emoticons (e.g., Gunter, 2007; Kucuk, 2009; Melrose & Bergeron, 2006; Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Similar to traditional FtF classroom contexts, immediacy also has been found to facilitate student-learning experiences in online education by increasing student participation (Al Ghamdi et al., 2016; Kucuk, 2009), communication satisfaction (Al Ghamdi et al., 2016), and cognitive and affective learning (Arbaugh, 2001; Baker, 2010).

Of the various immediacy behaviors, relatively little research examines the role of teacher self-disclosure (SD) in online learning environments. In the traditional FtF setting, teacher SD functions as an important immediacy behavior as it helps reduce the psychological distance between teacher and students (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). Due to the nature of online environments that somewhat limit nonverbal cues, students might have minimal knowledge about their teacher. As Dupin-Bryant (2004) contend, “In a technologically mediated learning environment, students need to know that their instructor is a human being rather than a computer who simply processes and grades their work” (p. 2). In this sense, teacher SD may serve as a way to help students experience ‘personhood’ of the teacher in a cue-limited environment (Hosek & Thompson, 2009).

Presently, scant attention has been paid to the role of teacher SD, particularly the effect of teacher SD on the teacher–student relationship, and how the teacher–student relationship affects student-learning experiences in online classes. Some research investigates how teachers’ use of social media affects student learning experiences (e.g., Imlawi, Gregg, & Karimi, 2015; Mazer et al., 2007; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009). Other research indicates that individuals maintain different rules and perceptions for SD in online and FtF contexts (Child & Petronio, 2011) suggesting teacher SD may lead to different outcomes in online and FtF classes. In all, however, little is known about differences between online and FtF classes in terms of how much information the instructor reveals and how students feel about such revelations.

In this regard, the purpose of current study is twofold. First, we aim to investigate the role of teacher SD in student learning experiences, particularly students’ perceived knowledge gain and class satisfaction in the online class context. In doing so, we argue that teacher SD will not automatically increase students’ learning outcomes; rather, teacher SD will indirectly affect learning outcomes through student–teacher relationship satisfaction. Thus, teacher–student relationship satisfaction mediates the relationship between teacher SD and student learning experiences. Second, the investigation compares the role of teacher SD between online and FtF classes to ascertain if disclosure functions differently from one context to the next. A multiple group comparison analysis allows for comparison on both individual and structural levels.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Teacher self-disclosure and students’ response toward it

According to social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), self-disclosure (SD), the act of revealing personal information to other people (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993), is a fundamental starting point in building interpersonal relationships. SD helps people develop new and maintain existing relationships (Collins & Miller, 1994; Wheeless, 1978). The relation between SD and liking, known as the ‘disclosure-liking hypothesis,’ has been consistently supported in the literature, suggesting that disclosing personal information to others can foster intimacy (see meta-analysis: Collins & Miller, 1994).

Teacher SD is defined as “conscious and deliberate disclosures about one’s self, aspects of one’s professional practice, world or personal views, personal history, and responses to ongoing

classroom events” (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008, p. 192). Although teachers’ communication with students mainly focuses on course content and materials, teachers also engage in SD within the context of the learning environment. For example, some teachers share their education/personal background, previous experiences, and opinions to clarify or illustrate class content more effectively (Cyanus & Martin, 2008; Hosek & Thompson, 2009). Given that textbooks are often limited in terms of providing practical examples, teachers’ SD may provide more “real-world” applications within the learning environment. According to Fusani (1994), teacher SD is a rich personal source of student–teacher communication.

Several studies have tested whether or not teacher SD creates effective learning experiences, and results are inconclusive. Goldstein and Benassi (1994) found SD increased student participation, but a replication study by Wambach and Brothen’s (1997) reported no association between the two variables. While Sorensen (1989) found SD influenced perceptions of the instructor, McCarthy and Schmeck (1982) found no significant relationship. A more recent study (Miller et al., 2014) also found the amount of teacher SD in the college classroom environment to produce no significant effects. According to Wambach and Brothen (1997), teacher SD may not influence learning outcomes if the disclosed information is perceived as irrelevant to the course materials or academic life. A recent study conducted by Cyanus and Martin (2008) demonstrates that teacher SD can backfire when used inappropriately. Specifically, when teacher SD is perceived to be negative, it can lead to significantly negative student affect for the course and teacher as well as reduced motivation and understanding of class materials. Similarly, a more recent finding indicated the effects of teacher SD on perceived teacher competence is moderated by students’ comfort with the teacher SD (Schrodt, 2013).

Similarly, Reis (2007) pointed out that “although self-disclosure often triggers intimate interaction, in itself self-disclosure is insufficient to instill a sense of intimacy between two people” (p. 10). Furthermore, he argued, “Interpersonal processes such as intimacy should be conceptualized as dyadic and interdependent” (p. 10). Thus, the way receivers respond to senders’ SD can play an important role of facilitating intimacy in relationships. The interpersonal process model of intimacy (Reis & Shaver, 1988) also stresses the importance of how the initial SD is perceived and integrated by the receiver. Only when “partner responsiveness” is positive, the process model explains, will intimacy develop. Therefore, the current study includes students’ responses toward teacher SD, in addition to SD amount, in testing the role of teacher SD in online and FtF learning experiences.

### 2.2. Teacher self-disclosure and teacher–student relationship in online environments

The hyperpersonal model (Walther, 1996) posits that structural characteristics of computer-mediated communication (CMC), such as limited nonverbal cues, visual anonymity, and asynchronous interactions, attribute to greater online intimacy. The model explains that senders can share selectively positive information about themselves (i.e., selective self-presentation) by taking advantage of the asynchronous interactions and limited cues available in CMC contexts. Online, senders can easily and efficiently put their best foot forward to the receiver. In response to senders’ messages, receivers tend to over-attribute the limited cues provided by the sender. As a result, greater online intimacy can be produced by both the sender and the receiver. Supporting the hyperpersonal model, empirical research has found online relationships often to be more intimate than FtF relationships (Joinson, 2001; Parks & Floyd, 1996;

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