They Ask, Should We Tell? Thoughts on Disclosure in the Classroom

by Rosamond S. King

Regardless of whether or how one discloses personal information to one’s students, the process is often difficult. One queer teacher writes, “The choice of a teacher to be ‘out’ in the classroom is perhaps unadvisable, possibly joyous, potentially disastrous, positively political, and just plain hard.” Another describes her experiences of disclosing her sexuality to students as “trying and dehumanizing and, along with other everyday experiences, add[ing] up to an exhausting and schizophrenic academic existence.”

This essay compares my decisions about and experiences around identity disclosure in the classroom to some of my colleagues’ approaches. I explain the concept of strategic disclosure, the revelation of identity based on context rather than predetermined decisions. All of the various approaches mentioned here, and the discussion of them, benefit from and grow out of innovative pedagogical approaches, especially critical, queer, and performative pedagogies, that have developed in the last twenty years. By detailing a number of pedagogical options, I hope that instructors find ways of presenting themselves in the classroom without sacrificing their well-being in the process.

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I am aware that my body—and all bodies—are in fact texts that are always being “read” by others.

I have found that professors who cannot pass for heterosexual or white or born-in-the-USA American already have less privacy on the job. People often presume to know things about us based on what they can see. And how we look leads to further presumptions about both professional and personal aspects of our lives,
from what we research, to our family structures, to how we got our jobs. Whether their assumptions are accurate or not, that they feel free to express them proves that minorities do not have the privacy majority groups often take for granted. To add to that an expectation that every term, in every class we need to open all aspects of our lives to our students is both invasive and distracting. Notwithstanding the exposure and attention inherent in being a teacher or professor, I do not believe that leading a class means that one must relinquish all privacy.

I do not think that students have a “right to know” about my life and history, including details that even my colleagues don’t know. I am deeply invested in seriously teaching the subjects I have devoted my career to, and I always want to help my students become better critical thinkers, critical readers, and critical writers. No one and nothing has yet convinced me that the best way to do this is to spend time discussing whom I sleep with and where I was born. Some may argue that disclosing information defuses its power. But I am more concerned with the power of maintaining the focus of the classroom and control over who knows intimate details of my life than I am with sharing those details with students. This relates to my second major objection to personal revelations in the classroom.

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I prefer to have boundaries between me and my students.

Such boundaries are partly my personality, but are also the result of personal experience. The bodies of professors of visible color “are always already racially historicized, sexualized, physicalized, and demonized.” In addition to being frequently asked the questions listed at the beginning of this essay, I have been sexually propositioned during class, had my degrees questioned, and had my authority in the classroom otherwise challenged in myriad other ways. In addition, every semester several students will want to see me as at best a mother figure and savior, and at worst as an emotional mammy. I care about my students, but I have neither the desire, nor the professional training or the emotional capacity to cope with the number of students who want to be emotionally intimate with me.

Instructors who have little or no experience fielding personal inquiries think they’re not a big deal. And individually, most students’ questions and confessions are harmless. But together these hundreds of students and their questions threaten to make me the emotional repository and caretaker of their angst and needs, as
"73-34-08.5.26.05," 2005. Archival pigment print, 21 x 16."
The artist, Todd Gray, is a professor of art at California State University, Long Beach. This particular piece is from a series called “Shaman.” For more, visit www.todgrayart.com.
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well as their stereotypes and exotifications. I believe that certain boundaries reinforce the kind of classroom I want to have—one that is focused and casually professional, while being both open and respectful.

Drawing boundaries and insisting on a professional distance between teacher and student is antithetical to many critical and feminist pedagogies. But some proponents of performative pedagogy—an approach that combines performance studies theory with teaching theory and methods—recognize that using traditional academic authority to establish distance is itself “a potentially radical performative” act that “refuses representationalism.” This is particularly true for people of color and other visibly “non-normative” bodies that automatically disrupt dominant concepts simply by standing in front of our classes.

It is also important to me that, though I am strict around answering questions about my own life, I am even more protective of my students’ privacy. I do not ever (and some lawyers would argue that I better not) ask students direct questions about their private lives. bell hooks and others state that it is not ethical to ask students to disclose information you as the instructor are not willing to disclose. I both agree and comply; just as I do not believe I have the right to demand personal information of them, I do not feel they have the right to do so of me. During discussion, I encourage students to question and critique each others’ ideas, not their backgrounds. I am not trying to create a utopian classroom in which difference does not exist, but I do expect students to have stronger supports for their arguments than “because I am [fill in identity marker here].”

I WANT TO DISCOURAGE THE NOTION THAT AN INSTRUCTOR’S IDENTITY SHOULD EQUAL EXACTLY THAT OF THE TEXTS THAT WE TEACH.

I do not want to give in to this type of identity politics. Unfortunately, it has been my experience that the assumption persists that when you teach subjects relating to people who are not straight, white, middle class, able-bodied Christian men, that your major qualifications are based on similarity of identity, not training and research. As Indira Karamcheti writes in her essay “Caliban in the Classroom,” “The demand on the minority teacher for the personal (a demand which often forms the grounds for pedagogical authority)” is commonplace. By refusing to disclose a lot about my background, I question such assumptions. Furthermore, turning questions about my identity into teaching moments allows me to lead dis-

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cussions that expose stereotypes of who can or should be professors and how identity is and is not related to teaching.

One of the main projects of my classes is to complicate identity, to question stereotypes and judgments of others based upon appearances. Of course, my very presence in the classroom—my body, skin color, age, hair and fashion styles, speech, etc.—provide pieces of information that let some, perhaps even most students think they know something about my identity. The danger of both declaring simple, static identities and of ignoring identity altogether is to reinforce minority teachers’ identities as “flesh and blood information retrieval systems, native informants who demonstrate and act out difference, often with an imperfectly concealed political agenda.” By contrast, I am happy to reveal my primary political agenda to my students. I want them to improve their critical thinking, reading, and writing skills so that they can better understand and analyze the world and its proliferation of media, and so in turn they can be better world citizens. I am also happy to tell them I don’t think I need to give in to or encourage student analyses of me and my life.

THEY ASK, SHOULD WE TELL?

While I have considered these issues and how I deal with them very deeply, lately I have been questioning my approach. For several years I taught at an urban institution in a Northeastern city with a significant, visible, and relatively powerful queer presence, at a university where the majority of students are working class immigrants, and a very high percentage are students of color. We’ll call it Urban Diverse University (UDU). But for one term I taught at an elite institution with very few black faculty, even fewer non-African American black faculty, and relatively few openly queer faculty. We’ll call this one Midwestern Elite University (MEU). According to the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, four percent of undergraduates, 2.7 percent of the faculty, and 1.6 percent of the tenured faculty at this school are black. In other words, a visiting professor who is black, not uncomplicatedly American, and not heterosexual may well be the only such person students at MEU were likely to meet during their college years.

If at UDU my students were likely to come to me regarding problems with elder care, juggling multiple jobs, and immigration issues, at the elite school the students of color, privileged as they were, complained of painful social and intellectual isolation. I supported them and mentored them as I did the students at
UDU, without revealing my own background. When one student asked me where I was from, I almost instinctively answered, “I don’t answer those questions until the end of the semester. I’m not offended by the question, but I’ll explain my reasons then.” For the first time the answer sounded hollow to me, and the student was visibly disappointed at not being able to bond more deeply with me. Black students at MEU seemed more in search of mentors and models who are like them, because they are less likely to have those mentors or a community outside of the university. I asked myself if I could justifiably deny them that identification.

So I began to waver. But the concept of being a role model has always some-

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what troubled me. Having often (and loudly) been told that I am not a “real” fill-in-the-blank (American, black person, lesbian, etc.), I am wary of representing myself as “an ideal of some behavior [or] identity.” I remembered that I have helped and mentored students suffering from domestic abuse and those caring for children even though I have never experienced either of these situations (I also refer them to appropriate professional services). All seemed appreciative, and few asked me if my life experience mirrored their own.

OTHER APPROACHES AND STRATEGIC DISCLOSURE

Let me briefly describe three other tactics used by friends and colleagues. They involve sharing identity through declarative statement, story, and assumption. Gabriel is a senior professor at an urban public institution in the Northeast. His approach to this issue is as direct as his in-your-face personality. On the first day of every class he makes it clear that he is gay. Often, during introductions, he will ask a female student, “Do you like to fuck men?” Usually they say yes, and he then says, “Good, so do I!” This is his way of being extremely clear, without making a ponderous or lengthy explanation of his identity. It is radical and, frankly, not recommended for most faculty because of the likelihood of offending and alienating students. Nevertheless, this is an example of the “coming out” method. This approach, especially in less confrontational versions, broadly fits within critical and feminist pedagogical approaches that believe instructors should “confess” their “authentic” selves to their students to create a more open and less authoritative classroom.

Another colleague, Juanita, teaches at a small women’s Catholic college in the Midwest. When issues of identity—hers or her students’—come up, she engages
everyone in the classroom. She asks all of the students to choose three words to describe themselves. After everyone, including herself, has said their words, ranging from “happy” to “Southern” to “transgender,” they discuss how easy or hard it was to choose their adjectives. This approach fits within performative pedagogy. Students immediately recognize the truth and the limitations of their words, and conversation easily segues into the construction of identity and its performance to self and others. Brueggemann and Moddelmog similarly propose that professors perform different identities in the classroom, arguing that this approach transforms disclosure “from a onetime confession into a process linked to a theory about identity.”

Finally, Jackie, who has been a visiting professor at several very different schools, regularly integrates the concept and act of disclosure into her syllabi. Early in the term she asks students why they think she is qualified to teach Black Studies, and uses their answers to question definitions of blackness. This approach asks students to openly share not only their assumptions about their instructor, but also their assumptions about Black Studies as a field. Jackie’s tactic exemplifies elements of performative and critical pedagogies by asking students to describe their assumptions and then to discuss how and why their stories differ.

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Of course, no one strategy is appropriate for every teacher, class, or institution. Clearly, any instructor’s approach to disclosing identity in the classroom needs to be one s/he is comfortable with—and, it should go without saying, which does not place the instructor in any kind of danger. (I suspect that age and professional rank, as well as race, gender, and sexual orientation are significant factors.) Nevertheless, any strategy that promotes education in its broadest sense, the opening of the mind, promotes the common good by serving as food for thought for us all.

Any method of revealing aspects of one’s personal identity that responds to the situation and context can be termed strategic disclosure, a term that refers to the individual’s active determination of what information and how much information about themselves to share at any given moment. It allows the consideration of context, personal comfort, and protection. For instance, my approach at the end of the semester varies, responding to whatever questions students ask me. Juanita’s approach is also strategic disclosure because it is used as needed and responds to questions students may ask each other.

For people with complex histories and/or multiple stigmatized identities, strategic disclosure is especially useful. It does not require constant full disclosure.
Nor does it privilege any one aspect of identity. It provides an open structure for addressing disclosure in the classroom, a way of thinking about various tactics rather than a specific prescription. Strategic disclosure is representative of my overall pedagogy—to have a clear but flexible structure that allows for frequent improvisation.

Strategic disclosure also allows for changing tactics. I discovered that methods I was comfortable with at UDU made less sense at MEU. Similarly, in a very small town, it might be more difficult for professors to have a truly private life because they run into students everywhere from the grocery store, to church, to the one gay club. But even if your sexuality—or any other aspect of your identity—seems to be publicly apparent, I still think discretion in the classroom is a legitimate option. Of course, if you (as I have) explicitly and publicly disclose details of your identity in articles, essays, interviews, or anything else that can be Googled, then the information can be assumed to be public knowledge. But knowledge is only part of what is at stake. Even if you are on the board of the local queer organization, or posted a “men-seeking-men” personal ad, or walk on campus holding your partner’s hand—even then the instructor, not the student, gets to decide whether or not her or his identity and private life will be discussed during classroom and office hours.

Why are three degrees, extensive experience and research, and a dedication to teaching and learning not enough? Why must students also have access to the information on my passport, my Social Security card, my birth certificate, and my private journal—information that most people only tell friends, lovers, and family? Should teachers be allowed less privacy than therapists, doctors, and police officers? And if the answer is yes, what are the implications of that imperative?

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**CONSIDERING THE BOUNDARIES**

I feel a great responsibility to the students and the material I teach. Which is why, instead of talking about my personal biography, I make sure there is incredible diversity in the texts. Virtually any topic—sexuality, gender, race, class—that they may want to discuss in relationship to my life will be raised, but in the context of the texts.

As I mentioned earlier, clearly we are all “reading” each other all the time. It is human nature. But as teachers we often try to interrupt automatic thinking
and get students to interrogate their everyday assumptions. That is ultimately what my strategic disclosure teaching moments are all about. I don’t dismiss students who reach out across the boundary. I meet them with kindness and compassion, even as I re-direct their questions. But the lines remain necessary, both to establish authority and because I fear that without them my life will be consumed by students and their needs, a fear reinforced by living examples of black women faculty who are perpetually tired, depressed, bitter, or physically ill from overwork.

As I have taught at a broader range of institutions, I have also learned more about dealing with identity in the classroom. I hope this essay sparks or contributes to other similar conversations and toward making academia—or at least our own classrooms—a little more comfortable for minority professors and our colleagues, regardless of our identities and decisions around disclosure. Many of us will continue to deal with these issues every day. But at least we can do so while benefiting from the knowledge and ideas of others who have been in similar situations. With my own students, I continue to use some of the approaches mentioned throughout this essay, and I remain interested in methods of strategic disclosure. Like any good teacher or any good student, I continue to be open to other and better ways of addressing disclosure and identity in the classroom.

ENDNOTES
8. Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, pp. 87-89. I was unable to find similar statistics for the number of openly queer faculty.
10. Names have been altered to protect their privacy.
WORKS CITED


