



## Guidelines for Personal Disclosure (for Teachers)

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Social and emotional learning differs from both academic teaching and traditional group therapy in that teachers are encouraged to share their own feelings and experience as part of the teaching process. Appropriate disclosure can enhance the classroom experience. Inappropriate disclosure can be dangerous to teacher and student alike.

### **Why Personal Disclosure?**

Personal disclosure by teachers of social and emotional learning is designed to promote community, authenticity and appropriate role modelling. This approach comes from a belief that:

- it is crucial in these times to foster more meaningful community;
- that the school world is a primary community for its members both young and old; and
- that a caring, learning community is fostered when we begin to carefully soften the boundaries between private and public life.

One goal of a caring, learning community is to create environments in which teachers, as well as students, can be real and authentic in more and more spheres of their lives. This model reflects a shift in the greater society away from a pattern of people moving from role to role in which of the self is hidden or distorted.

We also believe that young people benefit from personal relationships with adults other than their parents. Role models and mentors who are not primarily in an authority relationship to teenagers offer an important perspective. Many of us learn as much from personal stories - the wisdom gained from mistakes and triumphs in a human life - than from formal discussions about ethics, psychology or sociology. Listening to stories of a teacher's own trials and pain from early life while witnessing the teacher's present strength and joy, students can gain a sense of hope and strength as they learn the important lesson that people can and do survive and thrive from the many challenges and even suffering of a lifetime.

The Passages process is designed to foster a strong connection between the individual and the group rather than between the individual and the teacher.

The teacher's disclosure of feelings and ordinary life experience facilitates this process in that he becomes a real person, demystified of idealization. And because he is not a blank screen, he is far less likely to foster a student's projections.

Traditionally, one way that we have maintained a sense of professionalism is to separate the personal from the professional. In encouraging personal disclosure, we are not moving to the opposite pole of sharing anything and everything or trying to establish a peer relationship with students. If teachers have been used to holding back their feelings and experiences to be professional, there may be a danger in just opening the floodgates and letting too much spill out. For the safety of the students as well as the safety and integrity of the teacher, we must have some guidelines for appropriate and inappropriate disclosure.

### **Be Conscious Of The Modelling Aspect Of Your Sharing**

Personal sharing by the leader in Passages is an important model in regulating the level of group discussion. Early in the semester, it is recommended that a teacher share first in a circle discussion. This lets the group know that he or she is willing to be vulnerable and not just asking them to put themselves on the line. If she wants to encourage a rather light tone to promote safety and ease in the beginning, or on the week after a particularly deep intimate discussion, she can set this tone indirectly by telling a story that is light while still being authentic and meaningful. If he wants to encourage greater depth, he can take a plunge herself and share something more intimate or speak with greater intensity of feeling.

One must be careful not to be arrogant or manipulative in this "regulatory" purpose of personal disclosure. If you try to manipulate the students by selecting a life story for this purpose, it can backfire. They may sense that your heart is not really open, that you are trying to control things, and as a result, the sense of safety will be undermined. Keep in mind that some students may be intimidated by the depth of your feeling or experience. They feel they have to match it somehow and they may not have the access to their feelings, the experience, or the articulateness that the teacher has. If they feel intimidated in this way, they may just give up. Despite a teacher's verbal assurance that students need not speak eloquently or intimately, students will receive the message inherent in the teacher's behavior. Words pale beside the message of the model.

Another form of arrogance comes from thinking that if you tell a happy story it will encourage a feeling of happiness or joy in the room. In fact, I have often found that when I am feeling particularly joyful or satisfied and share this with a group, it seems to magnetize any sadness or disappointment they are feeling. There is often a dialectical response - hearing how happy one person is makes them realize they are not feeling so happy and they feel the contrast rather than being inspired to see what is good in their life. Other students may feel inspired to see the bright side of their life, so it is quite unpredictable and therefore arrogant for us to try to control the discussion by our disclosures.

## **Be Scrupulous About Not Using The Students As Your Support Group**

As you choose your stories, your emphasis is not on taking care of yourself but on sharing what has value for your students and serves the group process. This doesn't mean you can never ask for their support. It can be a empowering for young people to respond effectively to a genuine call for help from an adult-if it is something they can offer with ease and if you are not terribly needy or vulnerable about the issue. When my own children first went through the video games addiction, I asked my students to help me understand what was going on and share their perspectives on video games so I could make better decisions as a parent. In helping me think more clearly about this situation, the students were able to experience making a real contribution, an important aspect of building self-esteem. The video games issue was important to me but did not make me feel vulnerable or burden my students with fear or responsibility. On the other hand, if I were to suspect my child of chemical addiction or other such serious concerns, I would never consult my students for help.

## **Do Not Share What Is Immediate, Raw or Highly Personal In Your Life.**

A teacher must have a safe place outside class and student relationships to share this category of experience. If your feelings are immediate and raw, there is too great a likelihood that you are using your students for your own personal support. The burden of this on children is too great. Too many of our children are in family relationships in which they have been enrolled to "parent the parent." Our culture is rife with single parents who are isolated and overwhelmed, narcissistic parents who themselves never had models for being close to children without using them as personal confidants, masseurs or support teams, or even addicted parents who require their children to become emotional or physical caretakers.

Sharing anything that is highly personal is also a big risk for a teacher. If you talk about an imminent breakup with your spouse, a betrayal, an addiction in the family, an unwanted pregnancy etc., the drama of your story may be too much for a student to contain. Feelings of fear, confusion or amazement may prompt them to spread your story to friends or family. When you tell such a story, which at times indeed you may feel is appropriate and useful to an issue or circumstance in your group, you must be prepared to hear it come back at you in the halls or from your supervisor.

In my second year of teaching, in a class discussion about death, I told a group of sophomores the story of the death of my first husband-a young doctor who died in the early seventies. There was a boy in the class who virtually never spoke and who had a life threatening illness. He was apparently so disturbed by my story that he went home and told his parents. His parents were furious with me for telling a personal story, which they felt from a "therapeutic" perspective was unprofessional. (They argued that our program was basically like therapy and that therapists follow a code of no self-disclosure.) They reported me to my supervisor and withdrew their child from my class.

At first I felt betrayed by this boy's violation of confidentiality-it was a great lesson for me in understanding that adolescents often cannot and often should not maintain confidentiality. (See following section on confidentiality.) My supervisor was very sensitive and supportive in handling the case and because this death had occurred fifteen years earlier, I was not terribly vulnerable about having this information shared. I did not regret my decision to tell the story, and have told it many times since without repercussions. But I have looked carefully at how and why I told the story-I believe that in that instance I may have been using it manipulatively to encourage the students to share more deeply. And I learned that I must be fully prepared for leaks and gossip if I speak from a private place.

### **Know That You Ultimately Cannot Predict Or Control Student Responses To Your Disclosure.**

In the context of a school setting, a teacher cannot possibly know enough about each student's personal history to know what seemingly benign comment may trigger something powerful for the student. This is true in all directions - students' stories may trigger powerful memories or feelings in other students or in the teacher and vice versa. If we took this too seriously, we could not ever speak from the heart. But if we are simply aware of this possibility, we can be discriminating and alert as well as humble and forgiving about the repercussions and reactions to our personal disclosure as teachers.