

Creating a meaningful relationship

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I sat in my room after my first day of class with only my thoughts, my computer and my first assignment for an introduction essay. I peered down at my paper and stared at the set of expectations my professor had for me to disclose my personal goals for my future and for the class. I found myself in the unusual situation of having to reveal personal information to my professor, to whom I wanted to have a positive and productive relationship with.

“ The process of deliberately revealing information about oneself that is significant and would not normally be known by others,” is the accepted textbook definition of self-discloser as stated by Adler B. Ronald (2013) in his book entitled, *Looking Out Looking In* (p. 58). Over the last few weeks in my Introduction to Interpersonal Communication class, I have learned about the correlation between self-discloser and relationships. I will compare self-discloser between a one-on-one written communication to my professor; in-class, group discussion; as-well-as anonymous, online self-discloser examined through supported readings. Two widely accepted models that explain the process of self-discloser known as the Johari Window and the Social Penetration Theory will be used in this discussion.

I will also explain how the research in the articles, “‘ Help me. I am so alone.’ Online emotional self- disclosure in shared coping processes of children and adolescents on social networking platforms,” by Katrin Dovelung (2015) and “ Determinants of individuals’ self-disclosure and instant information sharing behavior in micro-blogging” by Cheng-Yu Lai (2014) both reinforce the Jahari Window and the Social Penetration Theory. These models explain how self-discloser has a direct affect on relations between oneself and others. Self-

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Discloser is the process of opening up oneself through the exchange of personal information for the purpose of gaining acceptance or rejection.

What is unique about the Jahari window is that the amount of personal information known in each box can grow and shrink through the process of self-discloser and the feedback gained from others. An example of this, for me, has been with my classmates through classroom discussion over the last five weeks. When we started the class, my classmates and I knew very little about each other. Through the process of self-discloser and the feedback we received from others, the open area on the Jahari window grew. The “blind spot” window became smaller as we gained feedback from others informing us of the way we are perceived. As we gained new knowledge of ourselves that we were previously “blind” to, such as a new awareness of our facial expressions that we subconsciously used, the open area grew and the “blind spot” became smaller.

The “hidden area” also became smaller as secrets and more personal information was shared. As the semester has continued, my discussion group has become more familiar and comfortable sharing personal details with each other. Some of the things we have disclosed to each other have included our major, year in school, hometowns and minor things about our families. We have slowly begun to discover new talents, likes and dislikes about each other. Ideally, as two people grow in a relationship, the “open area” between them should also grow.

According to the Social Penetration Theory, on the outside of the circle lies the information that most people know. The information that less people

know about you lies closer to the center leaving the very center where there are the things no one else knows. The more information and the deeper the information disclosed, the closer and stronger the relationship. This model gave me a new outlook on how I viewed relationships. Since learning about the Social Penetration Model, I have experimented with self-disclosure with others. A few weeks ago, I met someone at a group activity.

During that first meeting, we disclosed information and discovered we had common ground. In the weeks since, we have slowly gotten to know more about each other and have become good friends. As part of the first assignment, I had to write an introduction letter explaining my personal goals for the class and in life. When I first received the assignment, I thought that I would be able to complete it with ease. As I began to write about my personal goals, however, I began to realize that self-disclosure is more challenging than I had expected. As I wrote, I experienced some of the risks and benefits of self-disclosure first-hand.

One of the challenges I encountered when working on the first assignment was deciding whether or not to disclose that I am a Connections Student as well as that I am a high school sophomore who is also being homeschooled. My concern was that some of these non-traditional aspects of myself may not leave the positive impression that I was hoping for. I had to weigh the risks and benefits and decided that the potential to get a good grade for disclosing this information outweighed the risk of potentially creating a negative impression of who I am as a student. While writing my first draft of the assignment, I also unexpectedly learned of some of the benefits of self-disclosure. During the writing process, I began to see that I hadn't really

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considered my long-term goals. Through the process of writing, I gained a much clearer perspective on who I wanted to become.

Another benefit, I discovered was allowing the instructor to get to know me as not only a name and grade but also as a person. By building a relationship with my instructor through self-disclosure, I might open the door of communications making it easier to approach her with questions about the class. After closer examination of the articles, “‘ Help me. I am so alone.’ Online emotional self-disclosure in shared coping processes of children and adolescents on social networking platforms,” by Katrin Dovelung (2015) and “ Determinants of individuals’ self-disclosure and instant information sharing behavior in micro-blogging” by Cheng-Yu Lai (2014) a congruency between anonymity and deep levels of self-disclosure were presented.

Katrin Dovelung (2015) discussed how adolescents use social media bereavement platforms. As Dovelung (2015) explained, grieving adolescents are consoled when self-disclosing to other peers about traumatic events. I would suggest that the cause may be that with anonymity a greater level of comfort is developed with less risk. Unlike face-to-face communication that takes place in group discussion, if rejection occurs, secrets disclosed will remain secret. Likewise, the risk is also greater when disclosing in a letter to an instructor to whom you would have further relations with. Revealing personal information through self-disclosure changes the dynamic of a relationship between two people, either for the benefit or deterioration of the relationship.

Both the Jahari Window and the Social Penetration Theory offer insight into the ways self-discloser can build relationships. I have experimented over the last five weeks with self-disclosure to both my instructor, through a letter, and with my classmates, through group discussions. Although assignment one offered risk, I found the process to be beneficial because it brought clarity to my vision of myself and built a bridge to better communicate with my instructor. As suggested by my supported readings, anonymity through online disclosure can bring more benefits with less risk. So far, I have gained a great satisfaction with the concepts learned in this class and have found them to be effective tools both inside and outside of class.

I look forward to building on this foundation in the weeks ahead.