

College Students' Perception of Self-Disclosure in the Student-Instructor Relationship
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Abstract of Thesis

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A communication construct that relates to student-instructor interaction, both inside and outside of the classroom environment, is self-disclosure. Self-disclosure occurs when an individual tells another individual about him- or herself (Rosenfeld, 1979). This information is typically of a personal nature and not always made available to other individuals.

This study used both quantitative and qualitative methods of research to examine the perceptions students have of instructors who self-disclose. Data from a total of four focus groups were used to better understand students' perceptions and suggest differences in perception that might exist between 4-year university and 2-year college students.

Findings of the study focused primarily on self-disclosure as impacting change in the student-instructor relationship, student comfort levels in the classroom, use of instructor self-disclosure by students for personal advancement, and positive perceptions of self-disclosure. The study concludes that students from 4-year university focus groups perceive differences in self-disclosure from instructors across different academic disciplines. Finally, students from 2-year college focus groups generally viewed instructor self-disclosure more positively than students from the 4-year university groups.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Enrollment figures for higher education institutions have increased significantly over the past three decades. Between 1972 and 1998, the percentage of 16- to 24-year-old high school graduates immediately entering college increased from 49 to 66 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). The American College Testing Program (2004) indicated that 65.2 percent of high school graduates immediately entered college upon graduation in 2002 while in 1960 figures indicated only 45.1 percent. This steady rise in enrollment on college campuses across the nation has motivated scholarly studies on the influence college institutions have on student development and learning.

The college campus is a learning environment, both in and out of the classroom setting. It is a social community of students, faculty, and administration that collectively creates a culture unique to its campus (Hockbaum, 1968; Jacob, 1957). For decades, scholars have examined the relationship between instructor behavior and student learning from a number of angles, including student-instructor informal interaction and its impact on “effective” teaching (Wilson, Wood & Graff, 1974; Wilson, Gaff, Dienst, Wood, & Bavry, 1975) and the influence of student-instructor informal interaction on student success (Endo & Harpel, 1982; 1983).

Such research suggests that student norms, values, attitudes, and general knowledge are enhanced when student-to-instructor interpersonal communication occurred. McCroskey and Richmond (1983) go far as to argue that this type of interaction is central to the teaching process. Hurt, Scott and McCroskey (1978) stated that there is “a difference between knowing and teaching, and that difference is

communication in the classroom” (p. 3). This statement implies that communication is integral to the teaching process. Therefore, we might assume that the potential for learning occurs whenever the student and instructor communicate. We could also assume that this communication may occur either in the classroom itself or in instances where the student and instructor communicate with one another outside of the classroom.

A communication construct that relates to student-instructor interaction both in and outside of the college classroom is self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is the process of an individual telling another person about him- or herself (Rosenfield, 1979). This information is typically of a personal nature and not always revealed to other individuals (Rosenfield). Throughout the self-disclosure process, individuals communicate thoughts, feelings, and experiences to another person (Derlaga, Metts, Petronio & Margulis, 1993) either intentionally or unintentionally.

Self-disclosure, as it relates to the student-instructor relationship, has become a recent subject of interest for communication scholars. Punyanunt-Carter (2006) stated, for example, that teaching assistants are often advised by their experienced peers to self-disclose in the classroom, in an effort to create immediacy and credibility in the student-instructor relationship. Despite interest in student-instructor self-disclosure, there is little empirical research exploring the nature of such disclosures in this unique relationship. Could personal information revealed during the self-disclosing process adversely affect the image of an instructor? Furthermore, could such information create unnecessary tensions or embarrassment for the student? Topics, motivations, and possible positive or negative outcomes for student-instructor self-disclosure need to be better understood, as

they may significantly impact student learning, self-esteem and other relational factors.

By examining students' perception of self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship through both a quantitative and qualitative methodology (specifically focus groups), scholars, instructors, students and others who work in campus settings may gain a more comprehensive understanding of this important communication construct.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature in the areas of the student-instructor relationship, self-disclosure and perception will be examined to set the context of this study. Theoretical concepts focusing on the development of close relationships will also be reviewed to facilitate our understanding of disclosure in student-instructor relationships.

The Student-Instructor Relationship

Interpersonal relationships, such as those between a student and instructor, are connections that one develops with other individuals as a result of their interpersonal interactions with them (Beebe, Beebe & Redmond, 2005). Such relationships are transactional, because each individual in the relationship can affect the other person and vice-versa. Relationships can vary from fairly interpersonal to highly intimate. Although interpersonal relationships appear to be easily understood, nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, interpersonal relationships are influenced by a number of factors beyond the control of those engaged in the relationship.

Interpersonal relationships are better understood through systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1968). Communication scholars have used systems theory to define the interpersonal relationship as a systematic process. Bertalanffy defined a system as a set of interconnected elements that can be described in terms of inputs, throughputs or processes, and outputs. Bertalanffy further stated that the most fundamental notion in systems theory is that a change in any part of the system can affect all other elements. In terms of interpersonal relationships, the relationship can be thought of as a kind of system

– meaning that one element of the relationship can affect the other elements, and thus, the system (or relationship) as a whole.

As a process, a relationship is constantly changing and therefore it can be assumed that interpersonal relationships evolve over a period of time. Individuals are constantly being defined through their interpersonal communication with another when they are involved in a relationship. As time passes, one builds a history of interactions that collectively have an impact on future interactions with the other individual.

Interactions are irreversible: that is, once a communicative transaction occurs it cannot be undone. Thus, from a theoretical standpoint, the process of building a relationship is ongoing and future interactions build on previous ones.

An interpersonal relationship can be formed either as a result of choice or because of circumstance (Beebe, Beebe & Redmond, 2005). Relationships of choice are those where one chooses to initiate, maintain or terminate future interactions with an individual. Relationships of circumstance, on the other hand, are ones that exist because of life circumstances – as future interactions are often unavoidable. Relationships with family, co-workers and classmates are examples of relationships of circumstance.

The student-instructor relationship is also often formed because of circumstance. Students and instructors generally do not choose to engage in a relationship with one another; rather, the relationship is formed because the student has a class with the instructor. While classroom instruction remains the primary vehicle where relationships form, there are other roles in which the instructor serves the student and thus, a relationship may potentially form. These roles may include the student having an

instructor as an academic or extra-curricular advisor or work-study supervisor. A student may interact with an instructor through service on an institutional committee or involvement in the campus' shared governance process. While many of these interactions initially occur because of circumstance, it is possible for the student-instructor relationship to become one of choice as a student may choose to have future interactions with an instructor after he/she has completed that instructor's course, terms of a work-study contract or involvement on a committee or governing board.

In recent years, the student-instructor relationship has received increased attention. Over the past two decades, for example, there has been a major movement on college campuses in the United States called the "learning college" (Grieve, 2001). This movement in higher education refers to a college that focuses on community-based learning. A community-based learning environment is one where the learning process is centered on interactions and experiences both in and outside of the classroom setting. Grieve indicated that community-based learning tied to the concept of an institution being a "student-centered" learning environment where a student constructs knowledge through experiences at the institution in addition to knowledge acquired in the classroom.

In this "learning college" model, instructors play an important role in creating student learning environments. Previous research suggests that an instructor must build a relationship with his/her students in order to establish the "student-centered" learning environment colleges strive to achieve (Grieve, 2001). In order for an instructor to accomplish this task, it is usually necessary for him/her to interact with students both in and outside of the classroom setting. Of course, it is hoped that any student-instructor

interaction will have a positive outcome so that the instructor can build a healthy relationship with the student.

Quality of self-disclosure between an instructor and student is crucial in the development of a healthy relationship. When Grieve (2001) analyzed the components of a positive student-instructor relationship, Grieve suggested that the most obvious way to do so was through honesty. Burnstad (2000) pointed out four additional areas that need to be considered in order to achieve a learning environment that builds a positive student-instructor relationship and is conducive with current standards in higher education.

These areas include:

- Teacher expectations,
- Teacher behaviors,
- Physical space and
- Environmental strategies.

Each can be helped or hurt by the nature of self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship. Burnstad's (2000) first area, teacher expectations, is grounded in the idea that instructors need to have a clear picture of their own style and expectations. Instructors' expectations may differ considerably from students' and therefore it is the duty of the instructor to always consider expectations in terms of their position on issues and principles that may arise in interactions. Burnstad suggests that instructors need to constantly recognize their goals, framing intentions regarding course content as it relates to the needs of the students. Perhaps if instructors share goals and expectations with students informally in conversation or formally in class discussions, this would make

opportunities available for students to give feedback, thus a more positive learning environment could be created.

The second area Burnstad (2000) recognized involved teacher behaviors. Essentially, instructors need to monitor their presence in the classroom. Burnstad felt that students could sense whether or not an instructor loves the subject matter he/she is teaching in the course. A student's level of enthusiasm can be influenced by the instructor's enthusiasm in the course material. Thus, it can be assumed that student success in a course can be influenced in part by the level of passion an instructor has for the instructional material. Furthermore, a positive student-instructor relationship may grow out of the enthusiasm they share for course content. For example, a student whom has little interest in the content of a course may become engaged in the learning process because of an admiration of the instructor's enthusiasm during class time. In terms of instructor self-disclosure, an instructor's stories or anecdotes may be a vehicle for conveying not only content, but also the instructor's passion for the subject.

Physical space, Burnstad's (2000) third point, involves the idea that the classroom environment has an impact on students' interest in course content, which may ultimately have an impact on the students' perception of an instructor. A student who becomes bored with an instructor because of his/her presentation style may not perceive the instructor as positively as an instructor who integrates interesting, engaging methods of delivering course content. For example, if an instructor's only method of content delivery involves power point presentations in a darkened room, this may impact teacher immediacy and produce a more distant student-instructor relationship.

The fourth and final point Burnstad (2000) makes in connection with strong learning environments involves the use of environmental strategies to enhance the environment. As with physical space, Burnstad offered six strategies to improve the classroom environment from an interpersonal communication standpoint:

1. The instructor should introduce themselves to students with some personal anecdotes (i.e. – self-disclosing information).
2. Instructors need to be prepared for students with diverse background.
3. Instructors should initiate an activity with students that will allow them to get to know each other better.
4. Instructors should learn the student's name and provide a method for them to get to know each other.
5. Instructors should provide students with a complete syllabus.
6. Instructors should implement techniques that will allow them to assess the course.

Use of these strategies, several of which involve student-instructor self-disclosure, can positively shape future interactions.

Burnstad's (2000) strategies for building a strong learning environment often involve the exchange of personal information in the student-instructor relationship or self-disclosure. Burnstad, together with other researchers in higher education, believe that self-disclosure is a necessary and unavoidable technique that instructors can use to develop a relationship with their students. This construct is further discussed in the next section of this literature review.

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure occurs when an individual tells another individual about him- or herself (Rosenfeld, 1979). This information is typically of a personal nature and not always made available to other individuals. Heidegger (1962) considered self-disclosure to be an essential part of our understanding of who we are and an inevitable part of being human, viewing self-disclosure as an individual's "patent" - in that one shows their true identity by disclosing such information. Later scholars further defined self-disclosure as a way for people to express intimacy, creating a level of closeness that other forms of communication could not (Jourard, 1971a).

Jourard's (1971a) notion of self-disclosure implies that self-disclosure is the only form of communication that is self-revealing. However, it is important to note that many theorists imply that all communicative acts are self-revealing when viewed from a transactional perspective (Rosenfeld, 1979). For the purpose of this study then, self-disclosure will be conceptualized as a communication process considered to be voluntary and personal in nature, where one discloses an unknown about the self to the other individual.

Dindia, Fitzpatrick and Kenny (1997) referred to self-disclosure as a process. Throughout this process, individuals communicate thoughts, feelings, and experiences to another person (Derlaga, Metts, Petronio & Margulis, 1993) either intentionally or unintentionally. Self-disclosure is a major part of human social interaction because it is key factor to relationship development. From a practical standpoint then, the self-

disclosure process is necessary for building and maintaining relationships with other people.

Berger and Calabrese's (1975) Uncertainty Reduction Theory helps explain the process of self-disclosure in more detail. This theory assumes that when strangers first meet, they seek to reduce uncertainty about each other. This theory was also based on the assumption that individuals, by human nature, seek to increase their ability to predict another individual's behavior. Another's self-disclosure provides clues to learn about how another individual thinks and feels, which can increase the likelihood of predicting future behavior thus increasing one's comfort level. This process allows one to accomplish the objectives outlined in Uncertainty Reduction Theory.

Beebe, Beebe and Redmond (2005) stated that an interpersonal relationship cannot achieve intimacy without self-disclosure and that the absence of self-disclosing material will cause superficial relationships to form. Disclosing personal information to others not only provides a basis for another individual to understand you, but it also conveys one's trust in the other individual. Self-disclosure allows one to accept the other person. Without trust and acceptance, Beebe, Beebe and Redmond feel that a relationship has little depth. Is it appropriate for the student-instructor relationship to achieve any level of intimacy?

Social Penetration Theory

Perhaps the most appropriate way to examine the development of the student-instructor relationship is through Altman and Taylor's (1973) Social Penetration Theory.

While this theory may not outline the stages in which this relationship actually develops, it can help explain the way individuals disclose in various stages in the relationship. This theory suggests that as a relationship develops, communication moves from relatively shallow, nominate levels to deeper, more personal ones. Altman and Taylor compare people to a multilayered onion. They believe that each belief, prejudice, and obsession is layered “around” and “within” an individual. As people get to know one another through self-disclosure, the layers essentially “shed away” to reveal the core of the person.

The model begins with a circle that represents all of the potential information about oneself that can be disclosed (Figure 2, Circle A). The circle is divided, as stated before, into layers of an onion that can be peeled away. Each layer represents a piece of information that can be shared with someone else. Each of these layers has a different location on the onion that is situated based on how intimate the information is to the self. This location, which Altman and Taylor (1973) called depth, is based on the idea that more intimate and personal information is located closer to the center of the onion, while information that is non-intimate is placed closer to the outer layer. For example, information such as sports or hobby interests may, for some individuals, be located on the outer shell of the onion while religious beliefs or sexual orientation is based near the center of the onion because such information is more intimate to the individual.

Figure 2 also demonstrates the concept of information breadth, which Altman and Taylor believed was representative of the number of different kinds (topics) of information one can self-disclose to another individual. Together, information breadth and depth construct the onion conceptualized by Social Penetration Theory. Altman and

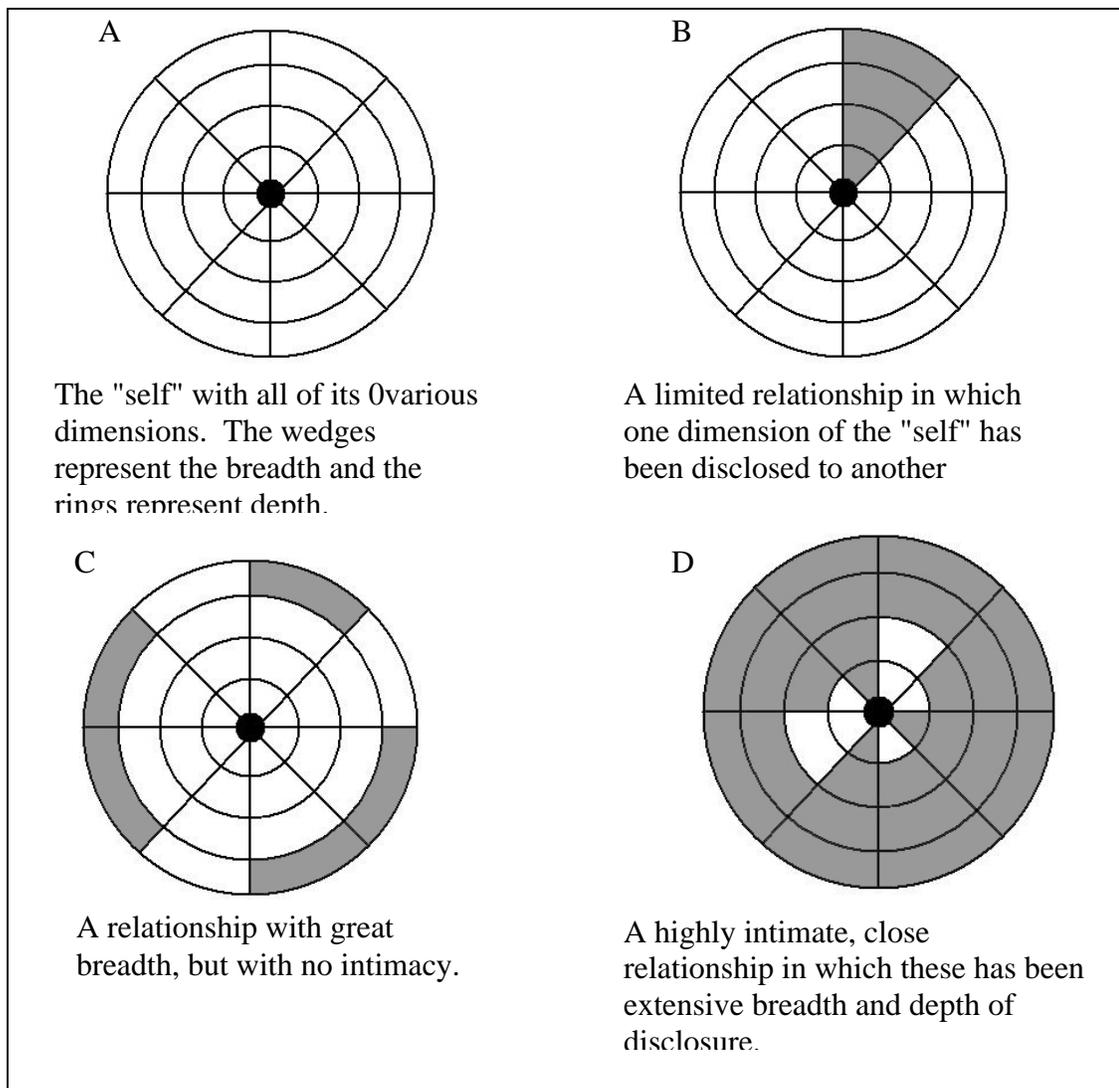
Taylor believe that in each relationship, an individual penetrates or peels the onion to the extent in which the other individual has penetrated the depth and breadth of the onion. For example, Circle B of Figure 2 represents a relationship that involves a high degree of penetration, but of only one aspect of the self. In Circle C, more information was shared (depth) however, all of it was of low breadth and therefore the relationship remained somewhat superficial. Finally, Circle D represents an almost completed social penetration. This kind of penetration likely achieved an intimate, well-developed relationship because a large amount of self-disclosure occurred.

A well-developed relationship does not always represent one that is positive for the individuals involved. Altman and Taylor (1973) further believed that it was possible to penetrate or peel the social onion almost completely, and still end up in a relationship that either needed to be ended or did not leave a positive impact on the individuals involved. They felt that perhaps, an individual might get to the center of the social onion and find they no longer feel close to the individual or dislike them because of the information that was shared. Essentially, the onion was “rotten” in the center, leaving a negative impact on the relationship or contributing to its complete dissolution.

Self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship can consist of varying levels of breadth and depth. As students interact with instructors and vice-versa, they disclose information that is either extensive in terms of breadth or depth, or both. Instructors may, in the classroom or more informal setting, self-disclose items of varying breadth and depth with students. Although as mentioned in the previous section, instructor self-

disclosure can produce a positive learning environment, if an instructor's disclosure is too broad or deep, can it destroy a positive learning climate?

Figure 1 – Social Penetration Theory Model



Source: Beebe, Beebe and Redmond (2005)

Johari Window Model of Self-Disclosure

Beebe, Beebe and Redmond (2005) stated that self-awareness is a key to knowing who you are, and understanding who other people are. In order to self-disclose appropriately then, one must differentiate between information that is considered personal and that which is not; having a high level of self-awareness. As stated earlier in this literature review, Altman and Taylor's (1973) Social Penetration Theory is based on the concepts of knowledge breadth and depth. Both concepts involve knowing oneself well and having a high level of self-awareness.

Luft and Ingham's (1955) Johari Window model summarizes how one's awareness of who they are influences their own levels of self-disclosure, as well as how much others share information about themselves to them. As Figure 3 shows, the model looks like a window in which lie four circles. The window itself represents the self. The self includes everything about an individual, including things one may not even see or realize. The upper left axis (Quadrant I) of the window is divided into what one has come to know about themselves, while the upper right axis (Quadrant II) represents what one doesn't know. The lower left axis (Quadrant III) represents what someone else may know about the individual, and lastly the lower right axis (Quadrant IV) represents what others don't know.

Quadrant I is an "open" area (Luft and Ingham, 1955). This area contains information that others may know about the self – such as age, occupation, etc. Although Figure 2 has equally sized quadrants, Luft and Ingham stated that in reality some quadrants may be larger than others. In the case of this quadrant, the more information

that the self reveals to another, the larger the quadrant can be. In comparison to the other quadrants, this could be the largest (or smallest) quadrant in the entire Johari Window model. Again – this would be dependant on the self and may vary among individuals.

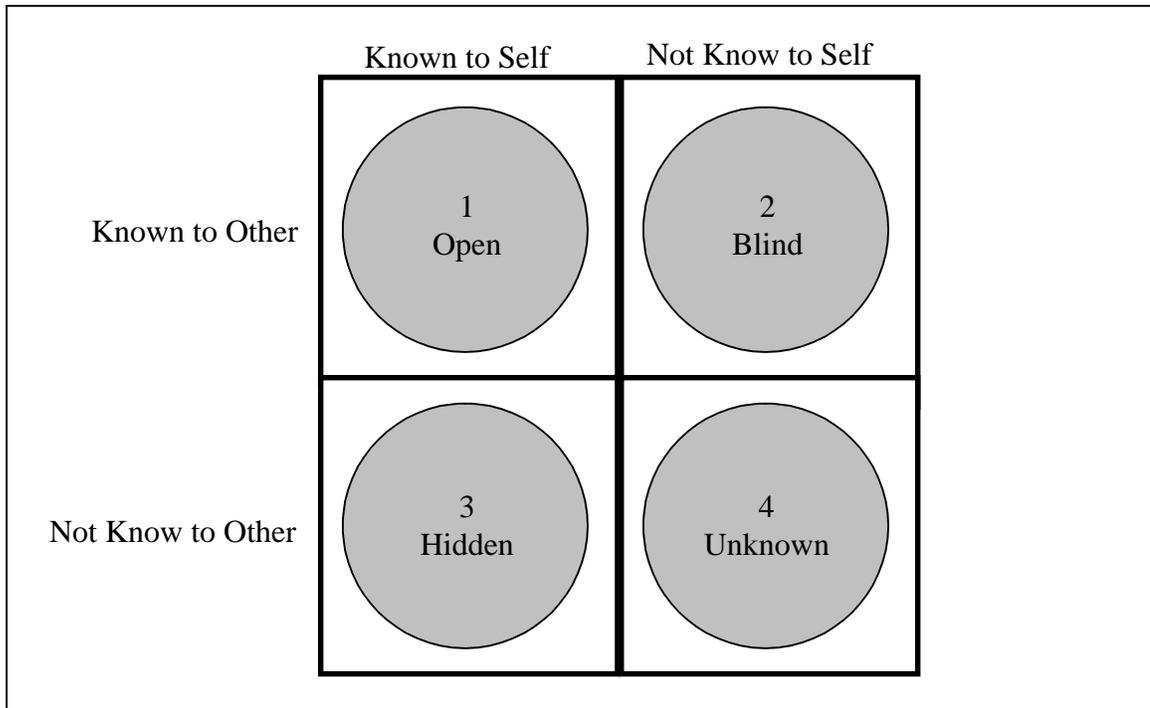
Quadrant II is a “blind” area (Luft and Ingham, 1955). This part of the model contains information other individuals may know about the self, but the individual may not recall or know. For example, a student in the sixth grade may not remember when one of their peers put a “kick me” sign on their backs in first grade. However, that student’s first grade teacher may remember this incident. In the college classroom, an instructor may not realize that his or her personal disclosures about sexual issues may embarrass students because the students are hiding their negative feelings. Situations such as these would be placed in Quadrant II of the model.

Quadrant III is a “hidden” area (Luft and Ingham, 1955). This part of the model contains information that one may know about the self, but others may not know. They may include personal feelings, religious or political beliefs, and fantasies that one does not want others to know about. Although Luft and Ingham did not mean to suggest that information in this area of the model could never be shared with others, it was meant to categorize information that is personal and would likely require a high level of disclosure to reveal to another.

Finally, Quadrant IV is an “unknown” area of the Johari Window model (Luft & Ingham, 1955). This area of the model contains information that is unknown to the self and others. They may include reactions to unknown situations, untapped physical and mental resources, or personal stances of debatable issues. Luft and Ingham stated that it

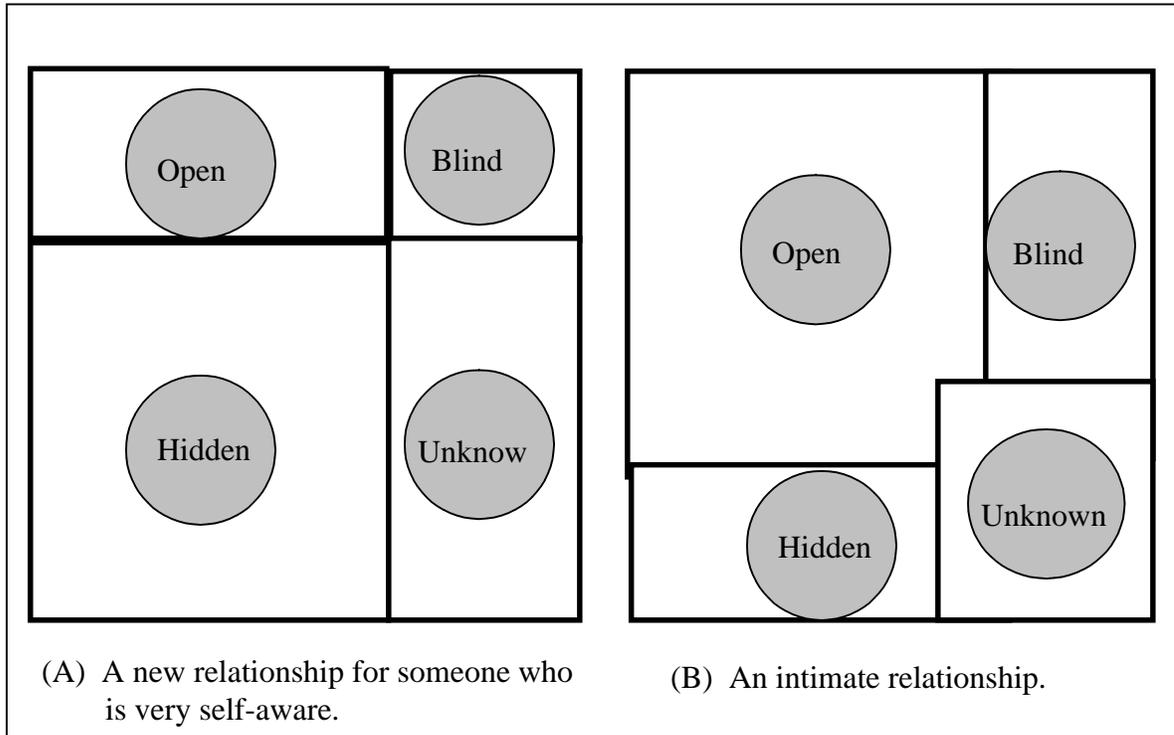
was not possible to completely know or understand the self. Everyday, individuals learn something about themselves that they did not know before. The “unknown” area of the Johari Window model will always be existent because it contains information that is unavailable to the self until circumstances draw on this knowledge.

As with Altman and Taylor’s (1973) Social Penetration Theory model, we can draw a different Johari Window (Luft & Ingham, 1955) to represent each of our relationships (Figure 2). What does this window look like in the student-instructor relationship? It can be assumed that in early stages of the relationship, it likely looks similar to that of any other interpersonal relationship. As the instructor shares information with students to illustrate course concepts, the first pane will likely grow. The instructor may reveal prejudice or attitudes unknown to him/her self, resulting in an enlargement of the second or blind pane. How this may impact the student-instructor relationship and student learning is not yet entirely understood.

Figure 2 – The Johari Window Model

Source: Beebe, Beebe and Redmond (2005)

Figure 3 – Johari Window Models Representing Interpersonal Relationships



Source: Beebe, Beebe and Redmond (2005)

Goals and Risks of Self-Disclosure

Individuals may choose to self-disclose for various reasons. An explanation of the goals and risks of self-disclosure may help us better understand the impact of self-disclosure on the student-instructor relationship.

Derlega, Harris and Chaikin (1973) indicated that individuals choose to self-disclose for a number of different reasons, including getting closer to other people, presenting oneself as likeable, gaining acceptance of others, and avoiding rejection from others. In the student-instructor relationship then, it may be possible for an instructor to

purposely self-disclose to students to build higher levels of likeability from the class. The instructor may also, for that matter, self-disclose to students to gain acceptance or respect from the students, possibly becoming more credible instructors at the institution. This behavior may occur in reverse roles, where a student self-discloses because he/she wants to earn a higher level of likeability or gain acceptance from the instructor. Perhaps the student believes that if he/she self-discloses to an instructor they will obtain a better grade in the course.

According to Omarzu (2000), individuals self-disclosed in order to achieve one of five general functions: self-clarification, self-expression, social validation, relationship development, and social control. In the student-instructor relationship, an instructor or student may self-disclose to one another in an attempt to clarify or express a point made in classroom discussion. Social validation and relationship development relate closely to the point Derlegra, Harris and Chaikin (1973) made regarding gaining acceptance of others, in that an instructor or student may choose to self-disclose to one another because they want to be liked or accepted by one another. Omarzu's last function, social control, would likely occur in the student-instructor relationship because an instructor wants to gain "control" or be respected by others in the formal classroom setting.

Individuals may also choose to self-disclose to another individual because of the norm of reciprocity or dyadic effect (Gouldner, 1960). "Breadth" generally refers to the number of different topics individuals are likely to disclose to each other. For example, if one communicator in interpersonal relationship self-discloses information from a broad

range of topics, it is expected that the other individual may also reveal information of the same or similar breadth.

Although the dyadic effect of self-disclosure assumed that individuals disclose the same breadth of information with one another, Kelly and McKillop (1996) indicate that individuals may sometimes choose to not self-disclose at all after a self-disclosing event has occurred. An individual's choice to avoid self-disclosure may occur because of the many risks often associated with self-disclosure. Kelloy and McKillop (1996) suggested, for example that a sender's self-disclosure may cause negative feedback from the recipient. While the goal of this self-disclosure may be to accomplish one of many relational goals, it is impossible for the sender to accurately predict the actual outcome of a self-disclosing event. If a self-disclosing goal is not obtained, it has the potential of having an adverse effect on the relationship.

Other risks associated with self-disclosure may include rejection by the listener, the possibility of hurting or embarrassing the listener, reduction of one's autonomy and personal integrity, and the loss of control or self-efficacy (Omarzu, 2000). While the risk that self-disclosing present to communicators may significantly impact the relationship in a negative way, the potential success of self-disclosure may create positive outcomes. The communicator then, is faced with the decision of whether or not self-disclosure is an appropriate and effective way of advancing the relationship. In the college classroom context, instructors are likely faced with deciding whether the use of self-disclosure outweighs potential consequences and actually relates positively to learning outcomes.

Self-Disclosure in the Student-Instructor Relationship

Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) and the Johari Window model (Luft and Ingham, 1955) provide us with a core understanding of how self-disclosure works and affects the understanding of who we are. These theories can be used to investigate self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship by taking students' recollections of self-disclosing experiences and situating them into one or both of these models. One needs to take into consideration though, that (1) these theories generally focus on relationships of choice, not circumstance and (2) assume a more equal power distribution, unlike in the college context where the instructor usually has more power in the relationship.

The use of self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship is not a new phenomenon. As stated previously in this literature review, instructors have long disagreed over the place, nature, and benefits of self-disclosure in the classroom. Much of this controversy has been centered on writing assignments and online web logs, where students are asked to reflect on personal experiences. Berman (2002) examined this controversy, advocating that writing focusing on intense, private issues (such as sexual abuse, racial discrimination, and binge drinking) can benefit students by releasing “negative feelings” – despite the painful process of reading and writing such information.

Previous research suggests that self-disclosure in the classroom may have many benefits for an instructor. Zigarovich (2007) stated that students who perceive their instructors as humorous, relevant, clear, and caring, are more likely to use cooperative conflict-management styles in formal academic settings. Such characteristics may be

demonstrated then, when student-instructor self-disclosure takes place. Bonwell (1998) also stated that instructor self-disclosure personalizes the classroom experience and that students appreciate instructors who share personal experiences to demonstrate knowledge conveyed in the classroom. These experiences would likely be shared in conversations where an instructor self-discloses this information.

The benefits of self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship are strengthened by findings suggesting that students prefer for an instructor who self-discloses. Ludlow, Rodgers and Wrighten (2005) found that in classes where instructors seldom self-disclose, students noted an absence of it on their evaluations indicating their preferences for more. This finding can be explained, perhaps, by previous research on the relationships between affinity-seeking and student success. Since an instructor's use of affinity-seeking is related positively to student motivation, student cognitive learning, and student affective learning (Frymier & Thompson, 1992; Richmond, 1990), perhaps self-disclosure is favored by these students because it conveys such messages.

Some scholars argue, however, that most self-disclosures in the classroom have little or no affect on a student evaluation of the instructor. Some scholars suggest that an instructor can use self-disclosure as a way to increase the comfort level of students, without the risk of losing credibility. In fact, Deiro (1997) argued that instructor self-disclosure could occur in a fashion that is helpful to the student - enhancing the learning process by connecting students to the instructor in ways that would otherwise be impossible. Deiro also warned, however, that self-disclosures outside of the context of

learning could adversely affect the instructors' attempt to "connect" with students. In other words, teachers and students might avoid self-disclosure so as to build friendships.

Clearly that is no definitive answer to how much instructor disclosure impacts that student-instructor relationship and learning outcomes. Because there remains much to be learned about self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship, the current study set out to investigate this topic. It would be naïve to expect that student-instructor self-disclosure only occurs in the classroom. It can be assumed then, that some self-disclosure may occur in situations where the instructor is interacting with a student in an environment outside of the classroom, such as the instructor's office. Thus, the study will examine self-disclosures occurring both in and outside of the classroom setting.

This study will also examine self-disclosure from the students' perspective, although I recognize that the instructor's perspective on self-disclosure may differ from the student's. Unfortunately, an analysis and comparison of both student and instructor perspectives on self-disclosure is beyond the scope of this thesis. This study, then, will investigate the following research question:

RQ1: What are student perceptions of self-disclosure in student-instructor relationships?

2-Year College vs. 4-Year University

A review of previous literature finds that issues of self-disclosure in higher education tend to focus on 4-year universities (Punyanunt-Carter, 2006; Endo & Harpel, 1983). Few studies were found at the time this study was executed that examined self-disclosure in 2-year colleges. Furthermore, a majority of the peer-reviewed studies examined used students enrolled in 4-year universities as its subjects.

Also referred to as community, junior or technical colleges, 2-year colleges are institutions of educational opportunity found nearly everywhere in the United States (American Association of Community Colleges, 2006). These institutions serve a role in the post-secondary education movement that makes it possible for 11.6 million Americans (American Association of Community Colleges) to obtain Associate and Technical degrees and certificates in a number of specialized fields.

The number of 2-year colleges nationwide has grown significantly in the last two decades to over 1,600 campuses, as recorded in 2006 by the American Association of Community Colleges (2006). While these institutions play an important role in educating the American workforce, they also provide access to 5.22 million 4-year University students (American Association of Community Colleges) who later transfer or enroll in such institutions upon successful completion of the college's degree requirements.

While one may assume that a data set derived from 4-year university students is representative of those students enrolled in a 2-year college, there are a number of unique differences between both institutions that may negate this assumption. Factors including

the average age of a 2-year or 4-year student, the educational background of instructors and the environmental differences between both institutions may have a significant impact on student-instructor interactions, including those where self-disclosure occurs.

Age

The American Association of Community Colleges (2006) reported that the average age for students enrolled in 2-year colleges is 29 years old. The College Planning Network (2005) estimates that 25% of current high school seniors will attend a 2-year college in 2006, while the remaining students will either attend in a 4-year university or not enroll in an institution of higher education at all. The average age of a graduating high school senior is 17 or 18-years old, meaning then that the average 4-year university student will be enrolled in the institution from the ages of 18 to 22.

Dickson-Markman (1986) found that the amount, depth and valence of self-disclosure differentiated between friendships can be categorized into four age groups: 19-25, 26-40, 41-60 and 61-91. This implies that age has some sort of affect on self-disclosure. When situated into Dickson-Markman's categorical age groups, 2-year college and 4-year university students actually fit into two different categories. Furthermore, due to the younger average age of a 4-year university student, it is more likely that a 4-year university instructor is in a different age category than the student, while the average 2-year college student is closer in age and possibly situated into the same category as their instructors.

Through a series of studies on self-disclosure, Jourard (1971b) found that disclosure levels generally increase with age but vary with occupation and cultural background. Previous research also suggests that the average age of students at a 2-year college is higher than a 4-year university. It is likely then, that participants from 2-year focus groups may have more self-disclosing experiences to recall than those from the 4-year groups.

Instructors

Perhaps one of the most striking differences between 2-year colleges and 4-year universities are the instructors who educate the students attending these institutions. While it is common for 4-year universities to hire instructors with previous work experience in a field outside of education, most only require that the instructor have a strong academic and research background. Although having a strong research background is certainly practical in many areas of study, it may not be as important to other areas of study requiring an instructor with more work experiences. Two-year colleges, on the other hand, require that their instructors have work experience in order to be certified to teach.

For example, the Wisconsin Technical College System (2004) requires that instructors be certified occupationally or academically. An occupational instructor is employed to teach one or more courses that are vocational or technical in nature, while an academic instructor is employed to teach one or more courses in academic subjects such as math, communication or science. The Wisconsin Technical College System assures

competency of instructors in vocational or technical classes by requiring a specific number of hours of related occupational experience, as opposed to academic degree level. On the other hand, academic instructors are required to have fewer hours of occupational experience but higher-level college degrees (such as a Masters or Doctorate degree).

Most 4-year university instructors are required to have a Doctorate degree in order to become tenured-track professors. However, it is not uncommon for some 4-year universities to hire Doctoral degree candidates or those with a Masters degree to teach select courses. Furthermore, some universities also hire graduate students as teaching assistants to teach lower-level courses at the institution. Therefore, a 4-year student may have a self-disclosing experience with an instructor with a similar background and qualifications as an instructor at a 2-year college. However, a majority of the full-time, tenured-track professors or instructors employed at a 4-year university are likely to have a Doctoral degree; a higher academic degree level than most instructors at a 2-year college.

Environment

There are many environment differences between 2-year colleges and 4-year universities. Perhaps the most obvious difference is that many 2-year colleges are not residential campuses, in that they do not have live-in facilities sponsored by the institution. 2-year colleges are primarily commuter campuses. Students are typically on campus for classes, course-related functions and extra-curricular activities. At a 4-year

university, students are on campus for similar functions but also live in a residence halls on campus or in housing near the vicinity of the institution.

It can be assumed then, that most 2-year college students are on campus to prepare for a career rather than seeking the complete higher education experience those 4-year students may be seeking. While a 4-year university also aims at preparing students for a career, the complete experience of living on campus and in the institution's community offers a extra-curricular learning environment that students in a 2-year college may not have access to. Although extra-curricular activities exist at most 2-year college campuses, 4-year universities have students on or around campus 24 hours a day, which perhaps creates a different learning environment.

Two-year colleges host numerous skill-oriented programs aimed at training America's workforce in a shorter period of time. While 4-year universities harbor similar programs, they are typically offered over a longer period of time (at least 4 years). This creates a unique climate on the 2-year college campus, in that students are typically only enrolled at the institutions for two or less years. There are even some academic programs that can be completed in only a few weeks or months. The mission of such programs is to offer a more skilled-based training academic experience, rather than one that is more liberal-based, such as those programs offered at 4-year universities.

Self-Disclosure at a 2-year College and 4-year University

While 2-year colleges and 4-year universities generally share a common purpose, they differ in terms of how that purpose is fulfilled. They also differ in terms of environment and population of students served. Do these differences have any affect on the student's perception of self-disclosure in student-instructor relationships or even in the type of relationship formed? As stated earlier in this literature review, a student's attitudes, beliefs, trust and perception of an institution are largely influenced by his/her own experiences. Since student-instructor interactions help to construct the experiences, it can be hypothesized that there may be some fundamental differences between a 2-year college and 4-year university student's perceptions of instructor self-disclosure. This study then, will also examine the following research question:

RQ2: Do students attending a 4-year university perceive self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship differently than students attending a 2-year college?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study used both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the nature of self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship. Four focus groups of students, two from a 2-year college and two from a 4-year university, were used. The research questions were addressed by analyzing the stories students told about their experiences with student-instructor self-disclosure in and outside of the classroom.

Justification for Qualitative Methods

As the goal of this study was not to measure the volume of self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship, but to better understand the nature of the self-disclosure process, qualitative methods were primarily used. Participants were encouraged to retell their stories of self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship in their own words and style so that I, as the researcher, gained insight into their experiences as they related to the topic being studied. Aspects of the self-disclosure process that were of interest to this study included behavioral patterns displayed by self-disclosers (such as frequency, recollection of personality traits, etc.) and their recipients, student perceptions of the self-disclosures, and the dynamics of the student-instructor relationship both before and after self-disclosure had occurred. Qualitative research methods are positioned to make unique contributions to the understanding of relationships (Allen & Walker, 2000). Since learning has been linked to the student-instructor relationship, it is crucial that we gain a better understanding of how these relationships develop and can be undermined. Since this study sought to gain a better understanding of the student's perception of self-

disclosure events and how self-disclosure impacted the student-instructor relationship, qualitative methods were appropriate.

Lindloff (1995) argued that in order for an empirical research approach to be qualitative, it must have the following characteristics:

1. The research must have theoretical interest in human interpretation or processes.
2. The study must be socially based in human action and artifacts.
3. The primary research instrument(s) must be human investigators.
4. The research must rely in whole or part on narrative forms for coding data and writing text to be presented to an audience.

The current study implemented all of Lindloff's qualitative research characteristics. The study had a theoretical interest in understanding the self-disclosing process between students and instructors. Data used to address the research questions were drawn from students recounting their self-disclosure experiences. The researcher in this study served as the primary research instrument, both collecting student narratives and providing a theoretical framework for a better understanding of the self-disclosure process in the student-instructor relationship.

Justification for Quantitative Methods

In addition to qualitative methods of research, one quantitative method of research was used to provide support for the second research question examined in the study. A triangulation of methodological approaches used to examine the data obtained in this study strengthens these questions findings. Therefore, since this research question

investigates the difference in perceptions of self-disclosure between 4-year universities and 2-year colleges, students' stories of self-disclosure in the focus groups were grouped into positive, negative and neutral experiences. The number of stories in each category was totaled, and a statistical analysis was used to supplement quantitative findings in the study.

Ethics

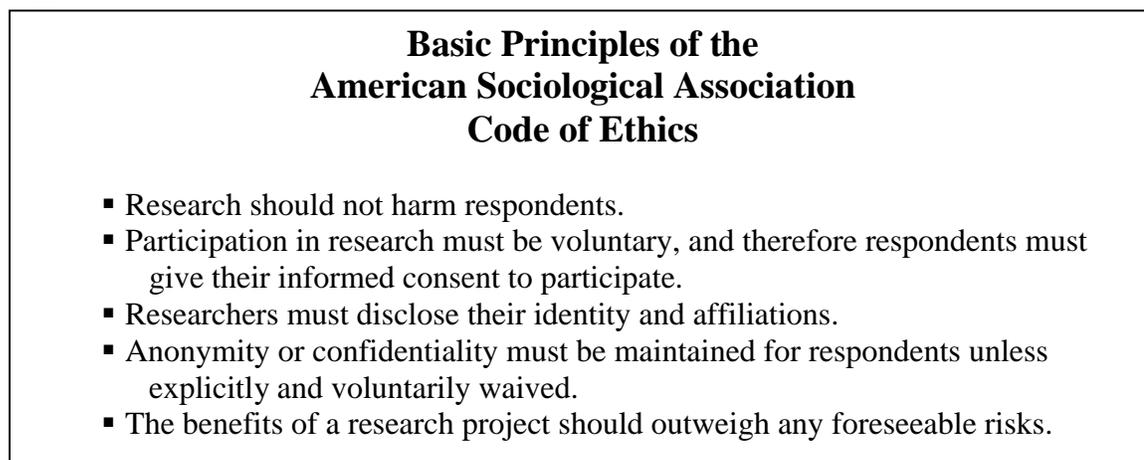
A consideration of ethics in a qualitative research study of this nature is of utmost importance. It is essential that the researcher protect the identity of participants. The University of Wisconsin – Whitewater Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved all methods of research implemented in this study. Furthermore, the principles of the American Sociological Association's (ASA) code of ethics for research were followed throughout the data collection process. Figure 5 illustrates the basic principles of this code, as noted in Warren and Karner's (2005) *Discovering Qualitative Methods*.

In order to adhere to IRB and ASA standards of research, the identity of participants was protected through an introductory statement read by the researcher and the signing of an informed consent form (Appendix A), prior to the focus group taking place. Two copies of this consent form were archived, one for the researcher and the other for participants to keep. By way of informed consent, participants were assured that there was no potential physical, psychological, moral, social, or environmental harm anticipated in the research process. In the event participants felt threatened or

uncomfortable, they were provided with contact information for the researcher, thesis director, and the campus' Health and Counseling Center.

Participants in the study were recorded using a digital tape recorder. This device created an mp3 file of the research session that was archived for transcription purposes until the conclusion of the research process. Two undergraduate students were hired to transcribe data from the research session into a Microsoft Word document. Transcribers were required to sign a confidentiality agreement, which can be found in Appendix B. The purpose of such an agreement was to further protect the identities of participants, although transcribers were never given the names of individuals in the research session they were transcribing. Upon completion of the transcription process, the mp3 files were burned to a compact disc and archived in a safe until the thesis project was completed. All Microsoft Word documents were also archived in digital and hard copy form, using the same protection procedures as those listed for mp3 files.

Figure 4



Source: Warren and Karner (2005)

Reliability and Validity

In order for a qualitative study to be reliable, one must examine the trustworthiness of the research process (Golafshani, 2003). Reliability is a concept congruent to validity and therefore, it can be assumed that a qualitative research design that demonstrates a high level of validity is sufficient enough to establish reliability in the data obtained from the study.

Ratcliff (1995) found that validity in a qualitative research design could be achieved through:

- Divergence from initial expectations of the research findings.
- Convergence with other sources of data already established in prior literature.
- Extensive quotations from field notes, transcripts of interviews or notes.
- Other data gathered from different collection techniques (triangulation).
- Having multiple researchers involved in the data collection process.
- Following up with participants upon completion of the study to see if constructs or hypothesis are supported.

To assure the highest level of validity and reliability in this study, several factors of the research process were strategically considered in regards to Ratcliff's (1995) suggestions. First, an accurate depiction of the methodology of the study, including the recruitment of participants and the collection of data, provided a basis from which readers can judge perceptions his/her perceptions of the validity of the study. A literature review is included in this document and references to credible, scholarly sources of information

provide a theoretical framework on which to base findings. This further supported the trustworthiness of the research.

Findings from the study converged with implications from previous studies on self-disclosure. Furthermore, outcomes from this study also fit into other interpersonal communication theories. Not only does this suggest that the research design is valid, but that the data is reliable. The findings of this study are discussed in the following two chapters of this thesis.

It is important to note that a high level of reliability in data may suggest a systematic bias from the researcher. Ratcliff (1995) pointed out that this could be avoided by putting an emphasis on the high validity of the research design. If the data collection process is properly executed from beginning to finish, and data can be linked to previous concepts derived from existing literature, both reliability and validity can be supported. This research design fulfills this requirement and therefore, can advance knowledge on the subject matter.

The Researcher

The ways in which a researcher is incorporated into the data collection process are dependent on many factors, including the researcher's gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class (Warren & Karner, 2005). In regards to qualitative methods, the researcher is subject to a relationship with participants that is not only complicated by such factors, but also by prior assumptions or experiences with the investigation. In the case of this study, the fact that I am a 26-year-old male graduate-level student attending a

4-year university, and that I have studied this topic extensively prior to the investigation may have a significant impact on the data collection and analysis processes. I also work at a 2-year college, which may further complicate the research process.

This unique relationship however, will ultimately benefit the construction of knowledge that will address the research questions. Yerby (1995) suggested “any reality one observes is modified in the act of reconstructing events of relationships in order to attach meaning or significance to them” (p. 348). Not only will I be able to reconstruct events through my interactions with the participants as a researcher, but also as a recent student at a 4-year university. Furthermore, my expertise in the subject matter will be crucial in the linking of concepts to theoretical implications that are coded from data collected in the research process.

Participants

Twenty students from two colleges in southeastern Wisconsin participated in one of four focus groups. Ten students attended a 4-year university, while ten others attended a 2-year college. Participants were instructed not to reveal their names, but rather, to provide demographic information including gender (male or female), age, ethnicity (Caucasian, African/American, Asian/Pacific Islander, etc.) and current class standing at the institution (freshman, sophomore, etc. at the four year institution, and first or second year student at the community college). Figure 6 provides a breakdown of participants by gender, Figure 7 a breakdown by age, Figure 8 by ethnicity, Figure 9 by class standing at the 4-year institution, and Figure 10 by class standing at the community college.

Participants from the 4-year university were diverse in terms of gender and class standing. Five of the participants from both focus groups were male, while the remaining five were female. In terms of class standing, two of the participants were sophomores, four were juniors and four were seniors. Nine of the participants indicated they were Caucasian, and one was of Asian/Pacific Islander decent. The average age of participants was 21 years old; the youngest participant was 19 and the oldest was 22.

Seven males and three females participated in focus groups from the 2-year college. Nine of the participants indicated they were Caucasian, and one was African/American. Five of the participants from this group were in their first year of study at the college and five were in their second. The average age of participants was 29 years old, with the youngest participant being 19 and the oldest 43.

Figure 5 – Participants by Gender

	4-Year University	2-Year College	Total
Male	5	7	12
Female	5	3	8
Total	10	10	20

Figure 6 – Participants by Age

	4-Year University	2-Year College	Overall
Youngest	20	19	19
Oldest	22	43	43
Average	21	29	25

Figure 7 – Participants by Ethnicity

	4-Year University	2-Year College	Overall
Caucasian	9	9	18
African / American	0	1	1
Asian / Pacific Islander	1	0	1
American Indian	0	0	0
Unknown	0	0	0

Figure 8 – Participants by Class Standing (4-Year University)

Freshman	0
Sophomore	2
Junior	4
Senior	4
5-Years or More	0

Figure 9 – Participants by Class Standing (2-Year College)

1st Year	5
2nd Year	5
Third Year or More	0

Data Collection

Data were collected for this study through four focus groups, each consisting of approximately four or five participants. Two focus groups consisted of students from the 4-year university, while the remaining two consisted of students from the 2-year college. The focus groups were conducted in rooms located in campus facilities at both institutions. These locations provided a neutral setting for students to share their stories of self-disclosure. Because of the private nature of such stories, rooms were secured by closing all windows, doors and blinds.

Because of the private nature of this study, and its focus on the student-instructor relationship, participants could not be recruited through instructors at the institution. Participants were recruited from the 4-year university through contacts provided to me by the campus' Office of Leadership Development, while participants from the 2-year college were recruited through the campus' Student Government Association. Any recruitment efforts were organized and executed by myself, as to further protect the identity of participants. The locations and times of the focus groups were only advertised

to participants. Participants were provided with free food and non-alcoholic beverages for their participation in a focus group session.

A focus group session began with the serving of the refreshments. This allowed participants time to eat their snacks, minimizing any potential distractions during the session. Once refreshments were consumed, I distributed two copies of the informed consent form (Appendix A) and a copy of a demographic questionnaire (Appendix C). Each questionnaire was assigned a research number. This number was orally stated by participants at the start of the focus group session, so demographical information could be identified with individuals sharing their experiences with the group. At no point during the course of any focus group session did an individual reveal his/her name. Furthermore, the questionnaire did not ask for a name – and participants were instructed not to write their names on it.

Before participants signed the informed consent form, I read the form to the entire focus group. This ensured that all participants in the focus groups both heard and read the consent procedures outlined in the document. At the conclusion of this reading, participants signed both copies of the form. One copy of the form was collected and archived by me, while the participants kept the other. Participants then completed the demographic information form and returned it to me.

Each focus group session began with an “ice breaker” question. Morgan (2002) stated that an ideal focus group would start with an opening question designed to capture the participants. Furthermore, since some members of each focus group did not know each other as well as some other participants, this question was formulated to create a bit

of a “comfort” zone for the entire group. This question, which asked why participants chose to attend the institution of higher education they were attending, provided me with a transition into the focus group questions.

The remaining focus group questions were designed to initiate conversation among participants. Therefore the questions were “open ended” in nature; allowing participants to socially construct themes relevant to the research questions. During the course of the focus group session, if a participant began telling the story, it was not uncommon for another participant in the group to become motivated, and tell his/her own story as well. Furthermore, if a participant shared an idea or brought up a topic of interest to the group, I would ask him/her to reflect on the experience.

Upon completion of the focus group session, participants were given the opportunity to ask me questions, but did not. In addition, participants were instructed to contact me if they had any questions about the study or the research process. At the time of writing this chapter, I have received no phone calls requiring further information.

Focus groups were recorded using a digital device that encoded audio in mp3 format. During the focus group session, I took some notes regarding observations I had made about the group. Such observations included non-verbal expressions, comments that were worth noting, and general observations about the behavior of the group. I tried to minimize note taking during the session, so as not to distract participants.

Data Analysis Procedures

According to Warren and Kerner (2005), qualitative analysis requires a large quantity of thickly descriptive data, good organizational skills, and interpretive ability. The data analysis procedures for this study were centered on these three principles. The average length of a focus group was 45 minutes – generating an average of approximately 12 pages of transcribed data. The techniques used for identifying emerging themes implemented a series of coding techniques used to find analytic patterns in the data. After themes were identified, data were connected to existing theoretical research concepts discussed in the literature review.

Analytic patterns in the research were identified using an opening coding technique, where I identified insights as I was immersed in the data (Warren & Kerner, 2005). This process required me to be open to whatever appeared and I both read transcribed scripts and listened to the digital recordings of all four focus groups. Although this process begins as a somewhat unstructured process, the idea was to remain “open” to whatever themes emerged from the analysis. When a possible theme was identified, it was recorded for use in the next stage of the analysis.

Using an open coding process to discover initial themes allowed me to gather a sense of what the “big picture” might be. It was extremely important to understand generally what my data were telling me before focusing on specific themes. Certain aspects of my data appeared to be more “interesting” than others. By having an overall sense of what was going on in my data set, I was able to tell if something that appeared to be “interesting” was also “important.”

Each theme that was recorded during the open coding process was written on the top of a large piece of tablet paper. Four boxes were created at the bottom of the tablet paper, each labeled:

- 4-year University Focus Group #1
- 4-year University Focus Group #2
- 2-year Community College Focus Group #1
- 2-year Community College Focus Group #2

These sheets, which I called theme sheets, were used to demonstrate where themes recorded in the open coding process were identified in the four focus groups. Figure 10 demonstrated how a Theme Sheet used in the open coding process is organized.

This study also implemented the use of quantitative measurements to investigate the second research question. A participant's recollections of self-disclosing experiences with an instructor were tallied from each of the four focus groups. The experiences were coded and identified as either being: an experience that the participant perceived as being positive, an experience that a participant perceived as being negative, or an experience that the participant did not feel was either positive or negative. What I may perceive as being a positive or negative self-disclosing experience may differ from what another views as one that is positive or negative. Therefore, data was coded and reviewed by a peer to strengthen the reliability of the study. The total number of experiences from all 4-year university and 2-year college groups was analyzed statistically.

Figure 10 – An example of how a Theme Sheet used in the open coding process is organized.

Relationship changes when student-instructor self-disclosure occurs.	
4-year University Focus Group #1	2-year College Focus Group #1
<p>S1: Yeah, I had to miss class last week because of the Women's Fair. I had to M.C. it and I told the teacher why and he talked to me today and asked me how it was. It was kind of like inquiring how things were; like a following up type of thing, which I think is a good thing.</p> <p>S3: I definitely feel it's easier to approach them when they're sharing that information in class.</p> <p>S2: I was told by an older sibling who is at Madison, which is bigger than UWW, but the thing about UWW...</p>	<p>S2: [When an instructor self-discloses] the instructor changed from a textbook to a person.</p> <p>S1: Of the instructors who don't [self-disclose]; I've barely spoken to them outside of class or in the hall. The instructors who do seem more human: I can talk to them about just about anything that's acceptable at school.</p> <p>S4: ...they seem withdrawn from the students and don't come down to a human level; the education comes between the student and instructor.</p>

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the perceptions students had of self-disclosure on the unique relationship existing between a college student and instructor. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the study's findings, which were based on the following research questions:

RQ1: What are student perceptions of self-disclosure in student-instructor relationships?

RQ2: Do students attending a 4-year university perceive self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship differently than students attending a 2-year college?

Research Question 1: What are student perceptions of self-disclosure in student-instructor relationships?

Data obtained from focus groups regarding the first research question were analyzed and are presented in this chapter according to themes identified in the open coding process. Accounts of self-disclosure reflected both students' recollections of their disclosures to students as well as instructors' self-disclosures to students. The themes identified in this process include: changes in the relationship, relational discomfort, personal gain, and positive perceptions of self-disclosure. Collaboratively, these themes address the research question in regards to student perceptions.

Changes in the Relationship

Participants overwhelmingly indicated that the relationship they had with their instructors changed after a self-disclosure incident occurred. This finding parallels previous research that suggests self-disclosure has an impact on one's interpersonal relationship with another individual (Dindia, Fitzpatrick & Kenny, 1997; Dindia, 1994; Martin & Anderson, 1995).

One participant in a focus group at the 4-year university reflected on his/her experiences self-disclosing to their instructors:

4-Year Group #1, S3: I think [the relationship changes on] almost a friendship level on some parts. When you are disclosing certain information about yourself you can't help but become like that. I mean, if something big happens where

there is a death in the family you are going to get close with that teacher if you have to sit there and explain it all to them. That is a big part of who you are and to sit there and tell them all about it; you can't help but get closer to that professor, it just naturally happens.

This account of self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship was rather intriguing because it supports the argument that the revealing of information about oneself to another person is a major part of the social interaction process, and is key to developing a relationship (Dindia, Fitzpatrick & Kenny, 1997). When stressful, tragic events happen in students' lives during the course of a semester, these events are also opportunities for self-disclosure with the instructor and may, in fact, build their relationship, as in the case above. Becoming "close" to the instructor may, in turn, enable this student to more easily ask for help with course requirements.

A participant from a 4-year university group talked again about how the relationship she had with an instructor changed after self-disclosure took place:

4-Year Group #2, S1: ...for me since being a freshmen here, it can be very easy to be intimidated being at a four year college and seeing professors and assistant professors who have master's degrees and PhD's and it's intimidating to try and talk to someone or even engage in somewhat philosophical/logical conversation, but when it [self-disclosure] divulges a little information that's personal, it kind of takes down those barriers and exits out the student/professor relationship and you feel a lot more comfortable because we have a professional and personal

relationship based on similar thoughts, similar values. It makes the experience a lot better.

As one can see, this example references positive growth in the student-instructor relationship due to self-disclosing experiences.

Concepts from Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) may be used to help explain how self-disclosure impacted the student-instructor relationships in the previous examples. As referenced in the literature review, the theory compares individuals in a relationship with an onion consisting of many layers. This framework suggests that as relationships develop, the intimacy level of communication moves from relatively shallow, nominate levels to deeper, more personal ones causing relationships to always be reevaluated. The relationship then either continues when deemed rewarding or ends when the costs outweigh benefits.

While Altman and Taylor's (1973) Social Penetration Theory argues that relationships can be discontinued at any point in the process of forming relationships, an exception would apply in most student-instructor relationships. As reviewed in previous literature, the student-instructor relationship is one that initially forms by circumstance and not by choice. The previous except shows how, when a student self-discloses so as to give an instructor deeper insights into the student, he/she feels "closer" to and more "comfortable" with that instructor, symbolizing a stronger connection than other students might experience. Whatever the instructor's reaction to this disclosure, the student must continue this relationship at least for the duration of the course. After the course ends, it

will be up to the student and instructor to decide if the relationship will continue and develop.

As stated previously, Deiro (1997) warns that self-disclosure should be used as a tool to build the professional relationship with the student and not a personal one. Deiro however, does not indicate why self-disclosure should be used to only build professional relationships and not personal ones in the student-instructor relationship. Obviously, one may assume that Deiro emphasized professional relationships because building a personal relationship with students in the classroom for personal benefit may pose an ethical issue for an instructor with the institution. However, it would be unrealistic to assume that instructors will only engage in “professional” relationships with every student he/she interacts with throughout their career. Perhaps Deiro was aware of the discomforts that self-disclosing experiences may create when used for personal gain.

Relational Discomfort

In addition to relational changes, participants in focus groups talked about student-instructor self-disclosures that occurred as the result of an assignment and caused feelings of discomfort. These feelings generally left a negative impact on students’ ability or desire to learn. In this case, the classroom self-disclosure of an instructor differed from that expected by the student in the course, and left him unsettled:

4-Year Group # 2, S1: Actually last fall before commencement, one teacher informed me he would be one of the marshals; he was explaining what he has to do. For that reason, he let us have off from doing his paper. The pertinent part

was the fact that he said it was bullshit that he had to be up at 7:00am and be here at a certain time. He also said if you ever teach for a university don't ever let the Chancellor bull shit you into getting up for a dope ass job on a Saturday morning. I was like, okay, [that was] kind of random.

This participant went on to explain that the instructor appeared to be “out of character” when this incident occurred. The self-disclosure did not fit his expectations. According to Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), the instructor was peeling off layers of the onion too quickly, and had probably not laid the groundwork needed for such a disclosure. This honest but negative self-disclosure then, left the student a bit unfocused and thus comfortable.

Another framework on which “out of character” disclosures such as this one can be situated is Luft and Ingham’s (1955) Johari Window model. Again, as discussed in detail in the literature review, this theory summarizes how one’s awareness of who they are is influenced by their own levels of self-disclosure, as well as how much others share information about themselves to them. As Figure 3 (pg 19) demonstrates, the model looks like a window in which lie four circles. Perhaps an “outburst” from an instructor is simply personal information located in the second quadrant of the Johari Window model (Luft and Ingham, 1955), which represents what others know, but the discloser does not know about the self. Perhaps the disclosure offered by the instructor regarding graduation was not even recognized as something that might be perceived negatively by students.

The following participant from a 4-year university provided another example of instructor self-disclosure as making a student feel uncomfortable:

4-Year Group #2, S3: I had a similar experience with a U.S. experience course; I had a professor who was very down to business. [We would] just look at the book and take notes. One day we hit a topic, the Revolutionary War, and she actually broke down and cried. I thought that was surprising!

Facilitator: How did you feel when that was happening?

4-Year Group #2, S3: At first I felt uncomfortable, I was a freshman, and the class was at about 8:00 in the morning and I thought was this what I should expect from the other professors here? Is she really crying in front of the class? I was like, oh man!

Here is another case where the student's expectation of an instructor, or even instructors in general, was "off" creating feelings of discomfort. As in the excerpt with the professor and graduation, Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) dictates that one can't get to the "core of the onion" too quickly or the receiver may view those disclosures as inappropriate. In this circumstance, the second quadrant of the Johari Window might also come into play. The instructor in this excerpt may not have realized that the participant negatively perceived her disclosure and behaviors. Finally, going back to the premise of Uncertainty Reduction Theory, humans need to be able to predict how

communication will go. In the preceding examples students had not predicted their instructors would reveal such personal information or emotions.

Students from all four focus groups seemed to agree that when instructors self-disclose information to them they do not agree with politically, religiously or personally, it makes them feel uncomfortable. Again, Altman and Taylor's (1973) Social Penetration Theory explains that this incident symbolizes the "peeling" of an onion, revealing information that is perhaps greater in depth than a student expects. Numerous participants from the 4-year university focus groups reflected on such experiences. One participant talked about an incident where an instructor's personal belief made him feel discriminated against:

4-Year Group #1, S5: Yeah, I kind of had an incident freshmen year, first semester, but it was probably because I was a freshmen it was a shock to me. Some of the things she [the instructor] said I just couldn't like believe. She said that type of thing and I guess you know coming to college, I think that was my first class ever too.

4-Year Group #1, S1: Like what did she say?

4-Year Group #1, Subject 2: She was all for women like totally discriminating against guys. If guys would talk she would be like "no."

Although this example does not necessarily indicate that the instructor blatantly self-disclosed her prejudice against men to her students, perhaps the depth of information

revealed by this instructor over time made some of the students feel uncomfortable. Again, a student's expectation of what an instructor should/could share in class with students was violated, leading to feelings of discomfort and possibly defensiveness.

Another participant felt that a student's academic performance in the course was affected if they did not agree with the instructor's political or personal beliefs, or if the instructor "forced" their opinion on them:

4-Year #1, S1: Yeah, I had an experience in my Global Perspectives or World of Ideas [class], I don't know, whatever; one of those and I had this teacher... He is an African American from England and I remember that he yelled at someone in class one day when we were talking about African Americans and it wasn't an African American studies class or anything like that and he like yelled at some girl in our class. She was like White middle class and she just said something and it just came out and she didn't really know it would offend him, I don't think. I don't even remember what it was but he started kind of yelling at her but his accent is like so weird that you like don't even know what he is saying. But I was just like, good, I am never taking a class with you again! Thanks. It was one of my only Bs because I hated him so much. It just affected the way I felt in class. I mean I have only gotten 3 Bs. It just affected the way I felt about him and the class as a whole. I never wanted to study.

The instructor's reaction to the situation cited above was not only crucial in the ongoing development of the student-instructor relationships positive learning outcomes. The excerpt begins with the student recalling that another student made a comment, possibly a self-disclosure that the teacher perceived as uninformed or racist – we don't know for certain. We do know the instructor "yelled" at the student. In this example, negative reactions on the part of the instructor impacted the student's performance in the course because it negatively impacts her motivation to participate in the course. Not only did the instructor violate the student's expectations, but his response to the student's comment was perceived as unnecessary and inappropriate.

As we can see, it might not be the instructor's self-disclosure, but their reaction or feedback to student self-disclosure that causes discomfort. In another example, a female participant from one of the 4-year university focus groups commented on a situation that occurred involving a death in a close friend's family:

4-Year Group #1, S2: Yeah, one time my best friend's dad died and I was trying to get out of school for it and she [the instructor] was like "Well, I don't really think you need to go because she is not in your immediate family" and I like freaked out. This is my best friend, this is my family! She [the instructor] just couldn't understand the relationship between my friend and [her] family. It made me feel awkward. Like I couldn't go to class without feeling like you don't care about your students, you don't have a relationship with people like college students do, like you must not have friends. Maybe that is just me, but you don't have friends if you don't have sympathy.

In this particular circumstance, the participant who had self-disclosed her personal feelings about her best friend's father demonstrated her discomfort and dissatisfaction with her student-instructor relationship, which grew out of the instructor's cold response. This instructor's lack of empathy in response to a student's personal situation and disclosure were perceived negatively by the student. However, the student was forced to remain in the relationship until the end of the semester. One wonders if these negative feelings towards the instructor adversely affected her performance in the class.

The following story, as told by a student from one of the 4-year university focus groups, also related to student self-disclosures in the classroom and feelings of discomfort. Although instructor self-disclosure is not specifically mentioned in this story, one wonders if the fact that the instructor "set up" this activity could lead to a negative perception of the instructor on the part of students:

4-Year Group #1, S1: I had an experience with a girl in my class when it was a bad experience for her; it was really hard for her to talk about. We had to do a presentation in my Interpersonal Communication course, so clearly it was like a presentation about something about you, and this girl talked about how her dad passed away and she was like "this is like the first time I have ever talked about it to anybody" besides like her best friends and she did her whole presentation on it. We were all like sitting there and we were all just like "yeah ok". But I mean what do you do? This poor girl was crying you know, but we were all like yeah,

good job. It was really weird; it was so awkward because none of us were like friends with her you know.

This example may imply that very personal information, regardless if exchanged by instructors or peers, may make students feel uncomfortable in the classroom environment. This should be considered with Burnstad's (2000) environmental strategy, which stated that the environment of the classroom can have either a positive or negative affect on the students.

If very personal self-disclosures from students are encouraged or even required by the instructor, the classroom could be a negative environment for learning. If this disclosure, however, was a more isolated event, then perhaps the learning environment overall was still positive and supportive. The student's trust in her classmates enabling her to share this story indicated that this might be so. This excerpt also suggests that instructors need not only be aware of their own self-disclosures, but whether or not their course approaches student's classroom self-disclosure in a positive or particularly harmful way.

Personal Gain

Whereas previous excerpts have demonstrated how students become uncomfortable with some instructor disclosures, even "shutting down" and refusing to perform up to their potential, other students used these types of disclosures to their advantage. One participant, in his recollection of his self-disclosure experiences, shared that he would "lie" on essays, tests or other assignments to agree with an instructor's

political or personal beliefs that had been shared in class. The participant anticipated receiving a higher grade because he was “siding” with the instructor:

4-Year #1, S3: Yeah, it just always helps to have a better relationship with that teacher – no matter how you build it. Even if it means “siding” with the instructor’s beliefs; I need to get a good grade and that’s all that really counts when it comes down to it.

This example implies that students use self-disclosing events that occur in the student-instructor relationship to their advantage. The participant used self-disclosure here to establish “common ground” with the instructor. He was able to use past experiences with the instructor for his own gain, in that he knew what the instructor would enjoy reading about. A possible outcome of self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship then, is that students can use past self-disclosing experiences with the instructor to his/her own advantage.

Positive Perceptions

Despite the suggestion that students perceive self-disclosure negatively in the student-instructor relationship, there was a large number of participants in all focus groups who indicated that their experiences with student-instructor self-disclosure were rewarding and beneficial to their academic success

Linking Content to Real Life

Focus group participants, for example, cited that instructors who link course content to their own “real life” experiences are helpful to their learning process:

2-Year #1, S2: Self-disclosure helps change the instructor from a textbook to a person.

And the following excerpt:

2-Year #2, S1: My favorite Gen. Ed. [General Education] teacher (he checks with his wife first before he shares stories and from there) always uses examples from his own life. Then it becomes the real world – not just what the textbook says.

Thus, these excerpts highlight how self-disclosure from the instructor can illustrate course concepts in a way textbook examples may not be able to do so.

One participant from a 4-year university focus group also indicated his preference for instructor self-disclosure, not because it linked “textbook” material to “real life” experiences, but rather because the instructor’s “real life” experiences helped him remember “textbook” material:

4-Year #22, S3: I have a professor who does not hold anything back in class, about his travels and personal life – and I find many of them quite shocking.

Facilitator: Why?

4-Year # 2, S3: A lot of times it goes into drug and alcohol us; I think he does it for attention; it's kind of a boring class otherwise, but the professor definitely makes it a lot more interesting

Facilitator: So you think it's for the attention of the class? You don't think it's credible?

4-Year # 2, S3: Oh yeah, I believe it's true, if you just look at the guy...I'm trying to think of a specific story.

Facilitator: Or a general story is fine.

4-Year #2, S3: He talked about traveling to the Bay of Fundi that has the world's largest tide differential, so he'll sit there until the tide goes out drinking a six pack, get up, grab a rock, and just bashes its [a crab's] head in, and takes it home and cooks it up and eats it, and then drinks more beer until he passes out.

While this story may seem to be a bit extreme, it demonstrates how an instructor may strategically use self-disclosure to capture the attention of his/her students, or it may have been a spontaneous reminiscing. Whatever the case, the student was able to associate the “Bay of Fundi” with a “shocking” story he recalled hearing from his instructor. The

point may be made that when self-disclosure expectations are violated, the event and the details surrounding it are definitely “memorable.”

Positive Effects on Comfort Levels

Participants in all focus groups agreed that self-disclosure, for the most part, was a positive component of their classroom experiences in higher education. Although I have previously discussed how instructor self-disclosure can negatively impact a student’s comfort levels, recall an earlier excerpt where the participant talked about the importance of self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship because of its ability to help him/her feel *more* comfortable with his/her instructor:

4-Year Group #2, S1: ...for me since being a freshmen here, it can be very easy to be intimidated being at a four year college and seeing professors and assistant professors who have master’s degrees and PhD’s and it’s intimidating to try and talk to someone or even engage in a somewhat philosophical or logical conversation, but when the professor divulges a little information that’s personal, it kind of takes down those barriers and exits out the student/professor relationship and you feel a lot more comfortable.

This student seemed to feel that as a result of the instructor’s self-disclosure, that they were real people, often with similar thoughts and values to them. The following example also shows how instructor self-disclosure enables instructors to relate better to their students:

2-Year #2, S4: When an instructor does not talk about himself or herself they seem withdrawn from the students and don't come down to a human level, the education comes between the instructor/student.

The student apparently views “education” or course content as being only part of what is necessary in the learning process, and that the relationship of the instructor to the student is a key in content delivery.

Other participants said that they prefer an instructor who self-discloses because they could get to know the instructor as a “person” and not just an instructor. For example, consider the following focus group excerpts:

2-Year Group #2, S4: But even hearing the one [instructor] that does karaoke – it's great to hear after 5pm they become human.

4-Year Group #1, S3: I definitely feel it's easier to approach them [instructors] when they shared that kind of [private] information with the class.

2-Year Group #2, S1: They're a person and not a machine

2-Year Group #2, S2: [When they disclose personal information] It seems like they'll understand more.

Thus, a student's perception that an instructor is a “real” person as indicated by the instructors' self-disclosure, would seem conducive to student learning.

The last recollection cited suggests another benefit of self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship.

2-Year Group #1, S5: Hearing about personal life outside of school, they become people too – you understand why they don't always get back to you as soon as possible.

If self-disclosure helps a student understand the instructor better, this in turn may help them understand why an instructor does things the way they do, or why a course is run the way that it is. This can help the student feel more satisfied with the course and more motivated to try to achieve.

Summary of Research Question 1

Punyanunt-Carter (2006) indicated that teaching assistants are often advised by their supervisors to self-disclose in the classroom to create intimacy and credibility. In many cases, these supervisors are tenured or tenure track instructors at the institution. This implies that seasoned instructors at higher education institutions across the nation support unique and creative methods of educational content delivery in the classroom, which might include using personal disclosure. The findings from this research question support the notion that students often appreciate an instructor who is willing to get “personal” with their students because it links course content to the real world, makes instructors more approachable, and helps students better understand their instructor and why the course is run as it is.

However, there appears to be a fine line between a student’s perception of a positive self-disclosure experience and one that leaves the student feeling awkward or uncomfortable. My analysis of data supporting this research question reveals that the self-disclosure of political or personal beliefs to students may create a more “negative” student-instructor relationship, especially if the instructor and student don’t agree. This study suggests that students who disagree with instructors’ political or personal beliefs are not only likely to feel uncomfortable after they hear the instructor self-disclose this type of information, but it might negatively impact their relationship to the instructor and class performance as well. One student, however, talked about how knowing an instructor’s bias, even if it did not match one’s own, could be used to his/her advantage. Unfortunately, if a student isn’t honest with an instructor and completes tasks only to

receive a satisfactory grade, they are not truly making the most of their collegiate experiences.

Luft and Ingham's (1955) Johari Window model helps us understand how one's revealing of "hidden" information could make the recipient feel uncomfortable. This occurs when instructors self-disclose very personal material or when they use activities that require personal self-disclosure on the part of their students. This discomfort could obstruct the students' learning process if it is experienced over the course of a semester, rather than being an isolated, one time event.

Students' perceptions of self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship can relate to the Johari Window model (Luft & Ingham, 1955) as well as Altman and Taylor's (1973) Social Penetration Theory. When students have "layers" of their instructor peeled off too quickly or unexpectedly they feel discomfort. While Altman and Taylor's theory suggested that self-disclosure may result in the termination of a relationship, in the student-instructor relationship a student's choice to terminate a relationship is not possible because while a student has an instructor in class, this relationship is not one that is voluntary in nature. Yet, as in the case of at least one of the respondents quoted in this section, a student can choose not to participate in instructors' classroom activities thereby symbolically terminating the student-instructor relationship.

Research Question 2: Do students attending a 4-year university perceive self-disclosure differently than students attending a 2-year college?

Data focusing on the first research question demonstrated that participants in this study, for the most part, viewed self-disclosure as a positive component of the higher education experience. However, it was evident after reading and analyzing the transcripts and proceeding through the open coding process that participants from the 4-year university perceived some aspects of the self-disclosure process differently than participants from the 2-year college. The first part of this discussion of research question two will focus on the qualitative analysis of data. The second part will focus on quantitative results.

Qualitative Analysis

Participants revealed recollections of self-disclosing experiences they had with instructors in all four focus groups conducted in this study. A qualitative analysis of this information allows understanding of the specific perceptions students have with student-instructor self-disclosure.

Academic Discipline

The first and most obvious difference between participants in these groups involved perception in regards to the academic emphasis of a course. Participants from the 4-year university felt that they self-disclosed themselves more to instructors during class time in courses in certain academic disciplines, while 2-year students made no such distinction with discussing self-disclosure. Furthermore, participants from 4-year

university focus groups felt that instructors in certain disciplines self-disclosed more than instructors from other disciplines.

A number of 4-year participants, for example said they felt their communication instructors self-disclosed more frequently than instructors in other courses they had in their college experience. For example:

4-Year Group #1, S1: I find all the time in the Communication Department that they do [self-disclose]. I don't know, I feel like I know so much about all of my comm. teachers. I could tell you so much about some of these teachers and not even really tell you what I learned in the class because it was freshmen year or something. But all the time in communication I find that the instructors talk about themselves in class.

Perhaps only participants at 4-year universities shared this idea because their institution had a large enough Communication Department, whereas there was not a specific department concentrating on communication at the 2-year college.

The relationship between self-disclosure and academic programs at the 4-year university was also observed in another participant's account of her experience. She referenced the college of Education at the institution in the excerpt that follows:

4-Year Group #1, S3: In the College of Education we talk a lot about our childhood and our previous teachers and our previous experiences. Some people have brought up bad experiences; I personally never have but I know that they encourage you to.

Again, this provides further evidence that reciprocity of self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship may be topical, in that breadth and depth of self-disclosure depends somewhat on the academic nature of the course.

This participant went on to explain that she felt she knew her peers in the College of Education more than any other students she has had in class because of the structure in which courses are taken in the program. She identified herself as being a part of a “cohort” group, which is essentially a group of individuals who are paired to take classes in the academic program together with. Because this participant indicated she had a lot of the same classes with the same individuals, she felt more intimate with members of this group and therefore, found herself self-disclosing more in classes she had with these individuals:

4-Year Group #1, S3: Education is a lot like that too. I know I have a cohort and there are 25 of us and we have every single class together and we have the same five teachers for all of our classes for the next three and a half years so I know that already we have gotten really close and it is that kind of environment where you are free to talk about things just because it is almost like a second family, because we are stuck with each other for the next three and a half years. Our teachers are real personable like that.

Because this student, unlike the typical student from a 2-year college, is with a group over an extended period of time (3 ½ years), the discipline itself may be more of a focus than for students in the 2-year institution.

A few participants also pointed out that self-disclosure occurs in Communication or Education courses because of tasks assigned by instructors, which in turn would lead to self-disclosure during class. For example:

4-Year Group #2, S2: The core classes do this a lot – get personal information out of you – especially Speech or English classes, the topics show your character.

The teacher gets a good idea who you are through your writing.

In this case self-exploration may be an important outcome as compared to 2-year institutions that focus on “skills.” Another participant talked about an experience, which occurred in an alcohol education course offered at the institution, in which the instructor self-disclosed during class due to an assignment in class:

4-Year Group #2, S1: For the Alcohol and Other Drugs class, he asked for volunteers and he always goes into the drugs he experimented with at our age, and that gets the class discussion going, so whoever wants to share their stories – volunteer based.

Here the instructor’s self-disclosure seems to encourage disclosure on the part of his students. This provides us with further evidence that self-disclosure levels vary with the academic discipline of a course, and that Won-Doornink’s (1985) findings on topical reciprocity is a factor in these differences.

Perceptual Differences

Individuals participating in the 2-year college focus groups didn't make a single reference to any of the differences 4-year University participants found between self-disclosure levels and the academic discipline of their courses. While participants from the 2-year college spoke very highly about instructors who self-disclosed, they did not indicate whether or not these professors taught any of the Communication or Early Childhood Education courses offered at the institution.

Perhaps participants from the 2-year college generally felt that self-disclosure in the classroom was necessary in all classes in order for instructors to link textbook material to real-life experiences. Therefore, participants seemed to perceive self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship more positively than students from the 4-year university. Two year college participants frequently referenced the positive aspects of self-disclosure by suggesting that "they were happy" to hear instructors had a life outside of the classroom. These participants also stated, on numerous occasions in both focus group sessions, that they were pleased with the levels of self-disclosure that occur in their relationships with instructors.

Even though participants in the 4-year university focus groups felt that some self-disclosure was a positive aspect of their higher education experience, they typically perceived the idea of self-disclosing during class time in one of two ways:

1. Instructor self-disclosure was perceived in a positive manner because it put their course off track; therefore the instructor is talking about course-related information less, and

2. Instructor self-disclosure is not a necessary supplement to course information. This differed significantly from 2-year college participants, who felt that self-disclosure was a necessary supplement to course material because it linked their classroom experiences to those encountered in the line of work they were studying for. Furthermore, because of the high value these students place on self-disclosure in their educational experiences, they did not reference self-disclosure as an inconvenience, as some participants from the 4-year university did.

This, again, could also be explained perhaps by demographical differences between participants in the focus group sessions. The average age of a participant in the 4-year university group was 21, while in the 2-year college group the average age was 29. Because the 2-year participants were older, they are potentially closer in age to their instructors than those from the 4-year university and therefore, have the potential to have more similar life experiences. They may also be more focused on the course of study chosen, and have an appreciation of the additional information an instructor's disclosure provides.

Another factor that may explain these differences involves the nature of the community college experience. As stated earlier in this chapter, 2-year colleges aim to offer more specific job training in a shorter period of time than 4-year universities do. Furthermore, 2-year colleges typically require fewer "general education" classes of which communication courses are often times a part.

Two-year colleges often require their instructors to have specific vocational experience in their chosen academic discipline. In the Wisconsin Technical College

System for example, instructors need to become certified in order to become an instructor. Certification requirements include at least a bachelors or masters degree, plus 2,000 – 14,000 hours of verified work experience in the course subject area. These requirements ensure that all instructors have “real life” experience to draw on when teaching, which can be revealed to students through self-disclosure. Thus, there may be an exception on the part of these institutions for their instructor self-disclosing experiences that relate directly to the skills they are attempting to teach. Four-year universities, on the other hand, do not have state requirements in regards to vocational experience at the time this study took place.

Quantitative Analysis

In order to compare 2-year student perceptions to those of their 4-year counterparts, I also implemented a quantitative measurement of the data collected, specifically comparing the total number of positive and negative recollections of student-instructor self-disclosing experiences in the 2-year and 4-year focus groups.

Between both 4-year focus groups, participants recalled a total of 21 student-instructor self-disclosing experiences. Of these experiences, six (28.57%) were identified as being ones that were perceived positively by participants while nine (42.86%) were negative. Six experiences (28.57%) did not contain language that suggested the experience was either positive or negative. Figure 12 displays a breakdown of this data in a tabular format.

Between 2-year focus groups on the other hand, participants recalled 26 self-disclosing experiences. Of these experiences, ten (38.46%) were identified as being positive and seven (26.92%) were negative. Nine of these experiences (34.62%) did not contain language that suggested the experiences were either positive or negative. Figure 13 displays a breakdown of this data in a tabular format.

Figure 11 – 4-year participant self-disclosing experiences.

4-Year Group #1		4-Year Group #2	
Positive	3	Positive	3
Negative	7	Negative	2
Neither Pos or Neg	2	Neither Pos or Neg	4

4-Year Group Totals		Percentage
Positive	6	28.57%
Negative	9	42.86%
Neither Pos or Neg	6	28.57%

4-Year Total 21

Figure 12 – 2-year participant self-disclosing experiences.

2-Year Group #1		2-Year Group #2	
Positive	6	Positive	4
Negative	6	Negative	1
Neither Pos or Neg	4	Neither Pos or Neg	5

2-Year Group Totals		Percentage
Positive	10	38.46%
Negative	7	26.92%
Neither Pos or Neg	9	34.62%

2-Year Total 26

As referenced in the literature review, Jourard (1971b) found that self-disclosure levels tend to increase with age. The study supports this finding, with 26 total self-disclosing experiences in the 2-year groups whose members had an average age of 29, and only 21 experiences in the 4-year groups whose members had an average age of 21. While the difference between both groups appears marginal, the difference between the average ages of both groups is only eight years.

The data suggests that 2-year participants tended to view self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship more positively than 4-year participants. 38.46% of the 2-year participants recalled positive self-disclosing experiences and only 28.57% of 4-year. The percentage of negative experiences, 42.86% of 4-year participants and only 26.92% of 2-year participants indicates that 4-year participants had more negative experiences with student-instructor self-disclosure than their 2-year counterparts. This indicates a general difference between 2 and 4-year participant perceptions of self-disclosure and supports the excerpts of which were previously presented in this thesis.

Summary of Research Question 2

Data collected from participants in this study suggested that there is a difference in regards to perception of self-disclosure between students attending a 4-year university and students attending a 2-year college. The most obvious observation made was that 4-year university students perceive a difference in the levels of self-disclosure accord to content of the course the instructor is teaching. Participants in this study, for example, felt their Communication and Education instructors self-disclosed more than other instructors they had interacted with throughout their collegiate experiences. Furthermore, participants indicated an expectation to self-disclose to instructors who had taught their Communication and Education courses, supporting the concept of reciprocity as it applies to self-disclosure.

Participants in the 2-year college focus groups tended to view self-disclosure more positively than those in the 4-year university groups. Although 4-year university participants felt, in general, that some self-disclosure was a positive aspect of their higher education experience, they typically felt such information sharing put the course off track. While some students may view this positively, it may perhaps annoy others as it would not be perceived as a necessary supplement to any relevant course information. This finding is further supporting through a quantitative analysis of the data, with 38.46% of 2-year participants recalling positive self-disclosing experiences and only 28.57% of 4-year. Furthermore, 26.92% of 2-year participants recalled negative experiences as compared to 42.86% of 4-year.

Perhaps the biggest factor explaining this finding involves the demographical differences between participants in the focus group sessions. While the average age for a participant in the 2-year college group was 29, the 4-year university group was only 21. Because the 2-year participants were older, they are potentially closer in age to the instructors they have in class, thus being able to relate to their personal experiences more directly.

Furthermore, 2-year college campuses differ significantly in nature from 4-year universities. Two-year colleges tend to offer more specific job training in their degree periods than 4-year universities. These colleges also have shorter programs lengths, thus having more intense training involved with them and less general education courses. Two-year colleges also require their instructors to have previous work experiences in order to be certified to teach, thus increasing the number of “real life” experiences they may draw on during interactions with students.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of self-disclosure on the student-instructor relationship. Using focus groups of students from both a 4-year university and a 2-year college, participant recollections of self-disclosure incidents provided the qualitative data to investigate both research questions. In addition, the data in research question two were quantified to see if they yielded support for qualitative results. Participants indicated that the relationships they have with instructors changed when self-disclosure occurred in the student-instructor relationship. Furthermore, the data suggests that 4-year students perceive self-disclosure differently than students at a 2-year institution. While the study has some limitations in regards to its sample, the findings suggest that future research on self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship could benefit institutions of higher education.

Conclusions

The first research question examined student perceptions of self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship. Participants overwhelmingly indicated that the relationship they had with their instructors changed after a self-disclosure incident occurred. While some disclosures are perceived in a positive manner, others create feelings of discomfort. Participants suggested that self-disclosure of political or personal beliefs create a more “negative” student-instructor relationship – particularly when students’ beliefs differ from their instructors. One student said that if they knew their instructors biases, they would be willing to use this information to his/her advantage,

even if it did not agree with their own. Students' perceptions of self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship can relate to the Johari Window model (Luft and Ingram, 1955) and Social Penetration Theory (Altman and Taylor, 1973) however, it was found that the development of this relationship may differ than other interpersonal relationships because of the complexity and circumstances involved.

The second research question examined the potential differences between 4-year university and 2-year college students in regards to perception of self-disclosure. Qualitative methods of research revealed that 4-year university students perceive differences in the levels of self-disclosure according to the academic content of courses. For example, 4-year participants felt that their Communication and Education instructors tended to self-disclose more than instructors they had in other academic disciplines. Participants in the 2-year college focus groups, on the other hand, tended to view self-disclosure more positively than their 4-year counterparts. This finding is further supported through quantitative data, with 38.46% of 2-year participants recalling positive self-disclosing experiences and only 28.57% of 4-year.

Limitations and Directions for Further Study

Although such findings further research on the nature of self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship, they are achieved with some limitations in regards to study sample and research design. While the sample included students from both a 2-year college and a 4-year university, it garnered a rather small sample of only 20 participants. From a qualitative standpoint, this produces more than a sufficient amount

of narratives from which to identify themes. However, as the case in the second research question, it struggles to produce qualitative results that are reliable because there wasn't enough "said" in focus groups about this topic.

Another limitation in regards to sample involved the diversity of participants used in the focus group session. Many participants in this study came from rather closely-knit groups of students at both institutions. Many of the students from the 2-year college focus groups were members of the campus' Student Government Association, while a few from the 4-year groups had been employees at the campus Office of Leadership Development. Therefore, many of these students already had a relationship with one another. While this may have increased the level of comfort and trust the participants had with one another, it may not have been representative of the entire student population's point of view. Furthermore, not all of the majors of program emphases at both institutions were represented in focus groups. Additional research using a wider variety of majors might be beneficial.

The research design of this study perhaps further limited findings in this study. This study was designed with the idea that data would be qualitatively examined. Therefore, no written survey instruments were used to measure self-disclosure levels in a quantitative sense. After data were collected from focus group sessions, a quantitative method of research was also used to examine the number of actual self-disclosing incidents that occurred. Perhaps a survey or other quantitative survey instrument would have allowed the qualitative methods of this study to further supported.

This study invites future research on the student-instructor relationship and the impact of such interactions on the institution. While this study examined student perceptions of self-disclosure, for example, it failed to investigate the instructors' expectations and/or reactions to self-disclosure in the classroom. Future scholarly research should clearly address instructor perceptions of self-disclosure. Furthermore, this study failed to investigate the potential long-term impacts of self-disclosure on the student-instructor relationship, and thus future research should examine the long-term effects of instructor self-disclosure on the students' relationship to that instructor and to the institution.

Implications

The findings in this study suggest that instructors at higher education institutions need to be more aware of their role in creating a supportive classroom environment. An instructor who can relate to students is more likely to be perceived positively by them, thus leaving a lasting impact on their experiences at the institution. This finding, when tied into existing theoretical research on self-disclosure, supports the notion that higher levels of trust need to develop in the student-instructor relationship in order for learning outcomes to be achieved. Furthermore, instructors need to carefully convey controversial topics to their students in so as to allow students to process such information and feel more comfortable forming their own opinions on the subject matter.

Furthermore, research on self-disclosure in the student-instructor relationship should be designed so as to allow scholars to identify strategies an instructor can use to

build positive relationships with their students. This would allow institutions to provide instructors with the tools necessary to advance the mission of the college or university. Instructors equipped with such tools may then have a greater chance of creating a more positive learning environment for the students.

CHAPTER SIX: REFERENCES

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APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Consent for Participation in Research Study

I _____ (please print) agree to be a participant in this research study under the direction of Jason Wiedenhoeft.

I have been told that the focus group I will be participating in will last approximately one hour. I also understand that the focus group session will be recorded using a digital voice recorder for later transcription.

By participating in this study I am helping the researcher better understanding the relationship that exists between students and instructors. This information will further knowledge in the academic community, helping both students and instructors better communicate with one another. There are no foreseeable risks to my participation in this study however, should I feel any distress during or after the research study I may contact University Health and Counseling Services at (262) 472-1300.

Completing this consent form indicates that I am at least 18 years of age. I also understand that all of my answers and responses revealed in this focus group will remain strictly anonymous, and that there will be no association between my answers and me as the respondent at any time.

If I have any questions or concerns regarding my treatment as a participant in this focus group I am free to contact the primary researcher, Jason Wiedenhoeft at (920) 723-1777 or wiedenhojs06@uww.edu, his faculty supervisor at the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater, Dr. Barbara Penington at (262) 472-9608 or peningt@uww.edu or Denise Ehlen, IRB Administrator at (262) 472-5212 or ehlend@uww.edu.

Participant Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FORM

Participant Info

In order to better evaluate the data collected in this focus group, it is important for us to collect demographical information about yourself. Please complete the following information as accurately as possible. All responses in this survey will remain anonymous.

1. **Sample Number:** _____

2. **Gender: (Circle One)** Male Female

3. **Age:** _____

4. **Ethnicity: (Circle One)**

Caucasian	African American	Hispanic
Asian/Pacific Islander	American Indian	Unknown

5. **Current Class Standing: (Circle One)**

Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior
Five-Year Senior	Six-Year Senior	More than Six-Year Senior	