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## Getting to Know Our Online Students Through Their Computer Screens

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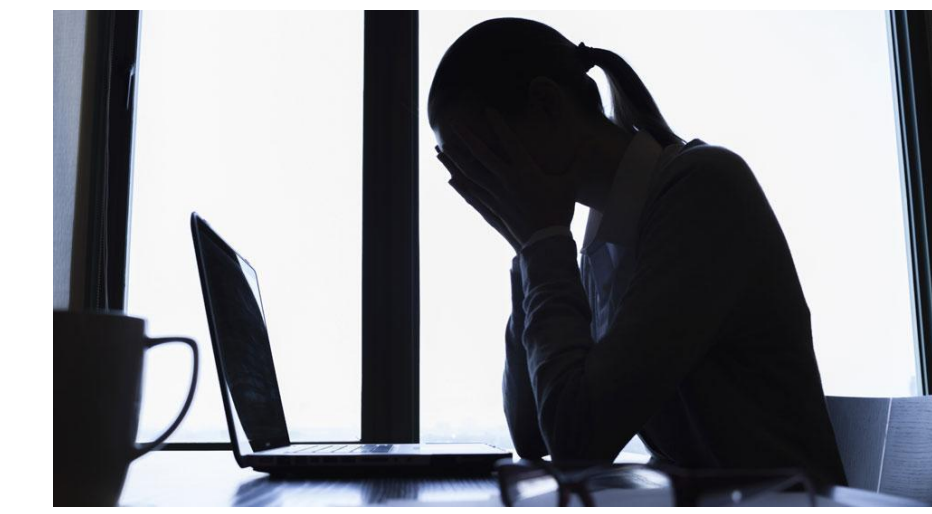
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# “Getting to Know Our Online Students Through Their Computer Screens.”

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## Abstract

After teaching several face to face courses and then making the transition to online only teaching, I noticed something different between the student and professor relationship we had once had. Eom and Arbaugh (2011) discuss that students’ feeling of disconnection and the possibility of poor educational experience makes online education challenging. It can also make it difficult for the instructors as well, and to try and figure out how to mend that disconnection. This mend is important, as Dupin-Bryant found that it’s important if the teacher is not around that “students to feel that they are interacting with a real human being to experience “personhood” with their teacher in online class (2004).”

## Introduction

Song et al. (2016) discovered that teacher self disclosure was positively associated with teacher–student relationship satisfaction. This finding by Song et al. could be the key to providing students with that “personhood” experience. In online education, often there is a narrow amount of information about the instructor that is provided to students. Green, Derlega, and Mathews explained that teacher self-disclosure becomes important since limited teacher information is given, as they define self-disclosure “as an interactive process through which one reveals personal information to others (2006).” In the world of education we are taught to keep conversations and discussions academic oriented. The idea of teacher self-disclosure terrifies some teachers or instructors. Rasmussen and Mishna understood self-disclosure as “conscious and deliberate disclosures about one’s self, aspects of one’s professional practice, world or personal views, personal history, and responses to ongoing classroom events (2008).”

## Methodology

How do we go about instructor self disclosure in the online classroom? I will provide you an example I use in my classrooms.

In my Introduction to Sociology courses (face to face or online), we complete an activity called “Guess who this is?” I list 10 things about myself that do not distinctly describe my demographics, generally things I’ve done or places I’ve travelled in my life, items that can not define my gender, race, sexuality, religion etc. I use the pronoun they to assist with this activity.

Students then must select which categories that they believe best describe the individual, only knowing the 10 facts I’ve provided them. I generally place it in a quiz in Canvas that is ungraded, but it does show them what the correct answers are. I don’t require a grade for this activity, but students are very interested in gaining bonus points for just completing the activity, whether they are wrong or right.

Example:

To earn 8 bonus points participate in this activity!  
To introduce you all to a crucial part of Sociology, I want you to participate in taking this survey, of guessing who this person is and their demographics based on the 10 things about them that I provide you.

They have driven a 3-wheeler or have crashed a 3-wheeler into a tree
They have met the late Pope John Paul II
They have ziplined through the Costa Rican rainforest
They once threw a goat over a fence
They met Jeff Saturday (formally of the Indianapolis Colts)
They have been to 5 countries
They were in a fashion show
They used to play soccer
They used to watch WWE wrestling weekly as a kid
They love to cook
They have met the band Taking Back Sunday
They have a pet named by Miranda Lambert (country singer)

Age	Income
0-25 years old	Upper Class
26-31 years old	Middle Class
32-40 years old	Working Class
41-60 years old	Lower Class
Race	Religion
White	Catholic
Black or African-American	Jewish
Aussie/ Australian	Hindu
American Indian or Alaskan Native	Christian
Asian	Buddhist
Irish	Scientology
Hispanic	Muslim
Latino	Mormon
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific islander	Atheist
Sexual Orientation	Marital Status
Bisexual	Married
Asexual	Widowed
Pomosexual	Divorced
Straight/ Heterosexual	Separated
Pansexual	Engaged
Gay	Dating
Lesbian	In a relationship
Queer	Have a friend with benefits
	Single
Where did they grow up?	Biological sex at birth
Rural/Farming Area (Out in the Country or no stoplights)	Male
Small Town (Less than 5,000 people)	Female
Suburb (Ex. Carmel, Kokomo, Avon, Warsaw)	Intersex
City (Fort Wayne, Indianapolis, Evansville, South Bend, Chicago, New York City)	
Employment	Education
Employed, working 1-39 hours per week (Part- Time)	some high school
Employed, working 40 or more hours per week (Full-time)	high school graduate or equivalent (e.g., GED)
Not employed, looking for work (Unemployed)	some college
Not employed, NOT looking for work	trade/technical/vocational training
Student	Associate degree
Self-employed	college graduate (Bachelor’s)
Retired	post graduate degree (Master’s Degree)
Disabled, not able to work	Doctorate degree (Ph.D, M.D.)

This is the list of demographic choices that students must select whom the individual is.

As students go through the quiz and answer what they believe categorizes the individuals based on the 10 facts, they can learn about concepts that may or may not be familiar to them. Notice the Race category, as this leads to further discussion of race and ethnicity and which is which, and I can reference this activity throughout the course. This is also true for the Religion category with Catholic and Christian.

Since I am a Sociology and Human Services instructor, it is most important to cover the differences between these basic demographics because the students will encounter them in their personal and professional life and with potential clients. The common answers I receive (even though I post a picture of myself on the course homepage) are Middle Age, White, Catholic, Straight, Male, Grew up in suburbs, Upper/Middle Class, Employed 40 hours a week.

This activity allows students to get to know myself through personal facts, and demographics, but also some controversial information that not all instructors provide to their students, such as my sexual orientation or marital status, or income. Thus providing the self disclosure that Song, Kim and Park, (2019) explain is important to creating the connection with students. Once the answers are revealed, many of them are shocked to find out that who I am describing is me.

Revealing personal information such as this allows students to know who I am sociologically. This activity also allows students to gain a small introduction to topics that we will be discussing about throughout the term. I also do this activity to build a personal connection through self-disclosure, but so they can feel comfortable with me as an authority figure and as one of their peers who has been in their shoes before.

## Results

The research results from Song, Kim, and Park, (2019) indicated that even basic information about their teacher such as sex, ethnicity, and physical appearance is rarely shared with students.” The finding that one out of five students searched information about their teacher implies that students have a desire to want to know about their teacher. Shown in figure 2 below from Song, Kim, and Park, (2019), self disclosure can lead to that relationship satisfaction between teachers and online students and have a positive impact on the perceived knowledge that the students gain. Swan and Shih (2005) discuss that when professors address students by name, share personal experiences, and use a personal tone, they are important factors for enhancing social presence. When professors combine self-disclosure with a social presence in the online classroom, there can be a positive impact for all.

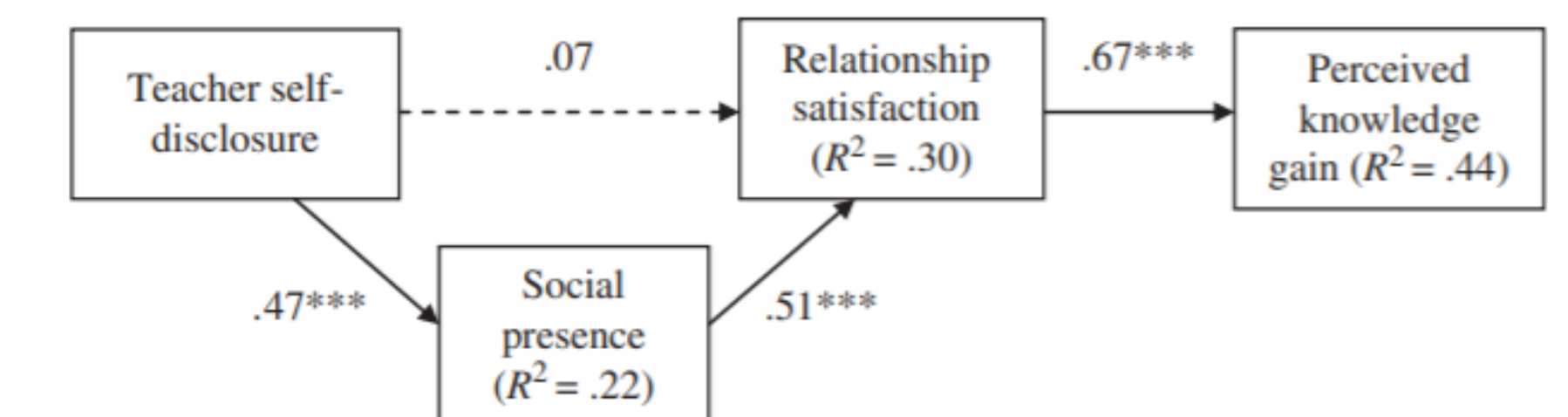


Figure 2. Tested model.

## Conclusion

While this may seem simple for an instructor of such disciplines such as mine to incorporate this into my course and curriculum, this can be related to any discipline as an introduction discussion board, a quiz, or it can be incorporated into an assignment or lesson. For nursing, you may work with patients or co workers of these different demographics, how would they identify them based on just facts on the patient’s charts and reveal to them that the health information is yours. For math or statistics instructors, create formulas or story problems that include yourself and your information in the problem, or ask students to include their own information. It’s not just about doing the self-disclosure but also keeping that social presence with students throughout.

I’ve had students state that they greatly appreciate how I interact with them through emails or Canvas discussions. I’ve been told by students that they way I speak to them, while personal, but also professional, that I don’t make them feel like just another student on my roster.



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## Acknowledgements

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