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## Understanding Student Self-Disclosure Typology through Blogging

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## Understanding Student Self-Disclosure Typology through Blogging

### Abstract

Significant research indicates that student self-disclosure plays an important role in the learning experience and producing positive learning outcomes. Blogging is an increasingly popular web tool that can potentially aid educators by encouraging student self-disclosure. Both content analysis and focus groups were used to assess whether student self-disclosure reveals in descriptive, topical, and evaluative categories. The results indicate that blogging encourages student self-disclosure, and the implications of these findings are also discussed.

### Keywords

Blogging, Self-Disclosure, Education, Learning, and Internet Tools

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## **Understanding Student Self-Disclosure Typology through Blogging**

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From elementary school to college, self-disclosure is a primary communicative currency in the classroom. Coming in a variety of forms, self-disclosure can be defined as communication that relates to one's self (Canary & Cody, 1994). Yet, one feature of self-disclosure is its reciprocity; meaning that a person's disclosure increases the likelihood that the other party will also disclose. The reciprocal exchange between educators and students positively influence a variety of classroom perceptions and behaviors. Numerous authors suggest that self-disclosure plays a critical role in student participation (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994), facilitating student-teacher interaction (Fusani, 1994), and achieving learning objectives (Cayanus, 2004; Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988; Sorenson, 1989). Even with these positive effects, open and honest dialogues between educators and students can be difficult to establish and maintain in the face-to-face classroom.

Blogging (see Hewitt, 2005; Stone, 2003) is a relatively new Internet tool that can potentially encourage student self-disclosure by providing another avenue for his/her commentary. Blogs resemble online diaries because they offer the unfiltered musings of the "blogger." Yet, unlike a pen and paper diary, a blog is essentially open to view by anyone with an Internet connection. Blogging is often confused with similar softwares such as listservs or message boards because those also allow the reader to post responses. However, listservs and message boards create online dialogues that expand into unregulated threads that can be extremely unmanageable. In contrast, blogging offers more control over the flow of dialogue than its counterparts, and it is this difference that makes blogging a special tool for the modern educator.

Professional literature contains little research concerning the type of self-disclosure offered in the classroom: Equally, there are few investigations that assess the

role blogging may play in the learning environment (Stiler & Philleo, 2003; Wagner, 2003). In the present study,<sup>1</sup> the authors add considerably to these gaps in the literature by describing the typology of student self-disclosure in their blog response posts, and identify the role that blogging may play in encouraging these disclosures.

### Relevant Literature

For an investigator approaching the notion of self-disclosure, there are a variety of paths in the literature (see Goffman, 1959; Tolstedt & Stokes, 1983). Yet the most flexible, comprehensive, and documented approach to self-disclosure can be found within the broad reach of social penetration theory. Altman and Taylor (1973) are credited with spearheading social penetration research: they conceptualized self-disclosure as a type of intimacy that allows relationships to progress. Altman and Taylor focused extensively upon the procedural aspects of relational development, leading to the classic breadth and depth modality. However, the present report utilizes a lesser-known product of social penetration research.

Morton (1978), one of the contemporaries of Altman and Taylor (1973), classified self-disclosure in three dimensions: descriptive, evaluative, and topical. *Descriptive intimacy* was explained as “presenting very private, otherwise unavailable facts about oneself” (Morton, p. 73). To illustrate, an individual’s presence provides a variety of easily observable characteristics (height, weight, etc.). So, as one reveals personal information that is not apparent, but nonetheless descriptive (marital status, place of birth, siblings etc.), the intimacy and probability of reciprocity between the interactants increases. Of the three types of self-disclosure mentioned in the literature, descriptive intimacy presents the least amount of risk for the interactant because it is explanatory in nature. In contrast, *evaluative intimacy* pertains to disclosures that judge phenomena (Monsour, 1992). For example, a statement of like or dislike for a particular television program provides a deeper level of insight into one’s cognitive schemata, and includes considerably more risk than does descriptive intimacy. Lastly, *topical intimacy* refers to disclosures regarding sensitive topics (Canary & Cody, 1994; Siegman & Reynolds, 1983). For example, the ability to discuss topics such as abortion, sexual orientation, and political affiliation signifies a significant bond with another individual. Similar to evaluative intimacy, the interactant assumes more risk when engaging in communication over sensitive topics.

Taken as a whole, the typology presented by Altman and his contemporaries provides considerable insight into self-disclosure. The interdependence of these categories details the risks that one may take in order to develop intimacy with another. Based upon the literature described here, this investigation is led by the premise that student self-disclosure falls into the descriptive, evaluative, and topical categories.

Until the early 1980s, classroom self-disclosure was solely exchanged face-to-face. In early tele-courses, educators and researchers began to explore how the telephonic medium influenced self-disclosure. The research indicated that the telephone altered the socio-psychological dynamic between teacher and student. Hammond (1978) posited that due to the lack of nonverbal cues during the teleconference there was an increase in verbal communication between tutor and learner (p. 145). In the course of this

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<sup>1</sup> Unused portions of the focus group transcripts were mentioned in a popular manuscript.

research, mediated interaction was repeatedly identified as a factor that increased student communication (see Becker, 1978; Parker & Baird, 1978).

As computer technology became a more popular educational tool, educators began to use the new technology as a supplement to face-to-face instruction. These computers in the classroom studies were predominantly focused upon the early use of electronic mail and bulletin board systems. For example, Kiesler (1986) notes that “sender and receivers...are ignorant of the social context and feel free to express themselves” (p.54).

Today, the Internet has dramatically altered the educational landscape, and newer investigations still find that the web provides another avenue for self-disclosure. Stern (2002) indicates that females use web pages to enhance self-disclosure, especially self-clarification and self-expression. Importantly, Joinson (2001) found that the anonymity afforded by Internet activities plays a role in increased self-disclosure. Even though the influence of computer technology has been explored broadly by the academic community, the actual role of blogging has been underserved. Thus, the second premise of this report is that blogging plays a role in encouraging student self-disclosure.

## **Method**

The two premises drawn from the literature are examined using two appropriate, albeit different, techniques. First, the textual nature of blogging lends itself to content analysis, which in accordance with the first premise reveals the type and frequency of self-disclosure. The second premise concentrating upon the role of blogging in encouraging self disclosure was assessed through the use of focus groups.

### **Content Analysis Method**

At the outset of the investigation, an upperclassmen/women course housed in the Communication Studies department was identified as being suitable to repeated self-disclosure. One of the authors served as the instructor in the university course, and the blog was presented to the students as a supplement to the face-to-face activities. Care was taken to ensure that students were unaware of the research intentions. After the project was approved by the institutional review board, the students were given the option to either participate in the blog sessions or complete another class credit assignment. Overall, fifteen of 32 students from a small liberal arts university in the Mid-Atlantic United States decided to participate in the blogging (3 males; 12 females). Over nine semester weeks, seven blogs were written with readily available blog software, which generated 73 response posts<sup>2</sup> (16 anonymously<sup>3</sup>). The instructor’s blogs usually followed class sessions and were in reference to classroom content. In order to receive credit for the assignment, the participants were required to view and post a response to at least four blogs over the course of the nine weeks.

With the aid of a student assistant, the authors piloted codebook construction around the categories of self-disclosure described by Altman and his contemporaries Ten

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<sup>2</sup> For clarity, the response posts by the students were subjected to analysis, not the instructor’s blogs.

<sup>3</sup> The blog software provided respondents with the option of signing their response posts or remaining anonymous.

randomly selected response posts were used to develop and coordinate content analysis procedures (Krippendorff, 1980). In the end, four codebook drafts were produced in the pilot (see Appendix A). With the first issue pertaining to the frequency of self-disclosure respective to the typology, the sampling units were each separate response posts written by the student participants. As one might expect, the sampling units or response posts were composed of sentences (n=715): However, the authors noticed that each sentence did not constitute disclosure. Some sentences were either clarifications or questions regarding the class structure. Thus, it was necessary to draw finer contextual units from the sentences. The authors identified each independent and dependent clause beginning with the subjective personal pronouns: I, I've, or I'm operating as the subject. This definition was developed after an initial examination of the response posts in which it was determined that the presence of the subjective personal pronouns in a clause were the strongest possible indicator of self-disclosure. These contextual units (each independent and dependent clause) were actually recorded and analyzed (n=255).

After the pilot, these procedures were pretested<sup>4</sup> by drawing another random sample of 8 response posts from the main dataset. Reliability between one of the authors and the assistant were assessed for each variable. In reference to descriptive intimacy, the intercoder percent agreement yielded a strong percent agreement of 87.5%, and an equally encouraging Scott's pi of .80. Topical intimacy yielded a strong percent agreement of 87.5% and a slightly smaller Scott's pi of .77. Evaluative intimacy provided the strongest reliability results, with a perfect percent agreement and Scott's pi. Last, the main dataset, now containing 55 response posts,<sup>5</sup> were divided between the authors and the coding assistant. Consistent with content analysis research, the authors applied chi square statistics to each cell in order to ensure a low probability of randomness in the results.

### **Focus Group Method**

As mentioned prior, the focus groups provide insight into the role that blogging may play in encouraging student self-disclosure. Conducted solely by one of the authors, twelve students (2 males; 10 females) participated in four focus groups<sup>6</sup> over the course of one week, toward the end of the semester (see Appendix B for focus group questions). After the sessions, transcripts were produced from tape recordings, which were then indexed (see Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001) for a more manageable interpretation. By repeatedly reading the transcripts, themes or index codes were generated, which were then folded into an inductive interpretation.

Analytic induction is the iterative process of comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), where index codes are compared to an overarching premise. In this case, each of the index codes, developed by reading and re-reading the transcripts, were compared to the premise that blogging encourages self-disclosure. This process reveals index codes or

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<sup>4</sup> Both the pilot and pretest samples were not folded back into the main dataset for final analyses.

<sup>5</sup> The authors found 225 actual recording units from 715 sentences. Each unit was sorted into appropriate self-disclosure categories (descriptive, evaluative, and topical) with the aid of a coding assistant.

<sup>6</sup> The focus groups took place in the authors' offices at various times outside of the normal class session, and each group was limited to four participants. Importantly, three students could not participate due to scheduling conflicts.

themes that are either congruent with the over-arching premise, or it reveals that the index code is deviant. When a deviant index code was located, the authors modified the premise where appropriate. At the end of this process, the authors were left with a premise that can be directly tied to index codes found within the transcripts.

### **Results and Analysis**

One of the goals of the present report is to weave both numeric and textual findings into a holistic understanding of blogging behaviors. To that end, chi square analyses (descriptive, evaluative, topical) indicated that each of the categories differed significantly ( $n= 225$ ,  $\chi^2= 202.42$ ,  $df= 2$ ,  $p<.01$ ) from the expected frequency<sup>7</sup> (75). In addition, the highest proportion (77.3%, 174) of student self-disclosure was descriptive in nature. The focus group indexes also confirmed that the descriptive disclosure was either new information or an elaboration upon information that would not have been shared in the face-to-face classroom. For example, one participant comments,

I think I went into a little bit more depth on maybe like my faith background and things...that I wouldn't necessarily feel comfortable sharing in class. Probably for the reasons that verbally, I think it's easier to be interrupted, and...I can just like flow my thoughts and not have any nonverbal or even verbal interruptions and so it's a lot easier for me to get my point across....

Even though the majority of the index codes strongly support the premise, the authors did identify one deviant instance within the transcripts. The participant commented that "I ...don't remember saying anything I hadn't already said or wouldn't have said in class." However moments later, the same participant paralleled other comments by stating that it was "easier" to disclose through writing than in the classroom. Importantly, another participant elaborated upon the notion that it is much easier to disclose through writing than orally.

I think that it was easier to write down what I wanted to say because I had a chance to look at it and to see what I was writing, rather than to kinda say something on the spot in the middle of class.

Time to reflect became a significant theme throughout all of the focus group data, in that the participants considered these additional moments when writing as very important to their overall revelations.

The next proportion of disclosure was topical (18.2%, 41) in nature, and in these cases, the focus groups revealed that the participants were able to comment on topics that they would have probably not mentioned in the classroom. For instance, a participant describes,

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<sup>7</sup> The expected frequency generally refers to the assumption that there is an equal distribution of contextual units per category: A statistical significance implies that the observed score differs from the expected score.

I talked more about my family more openly on the blog than I would have done in the classroom. It probably wouldn't have come out like it did ...I talk about interracial relationships...that I know I would not have talked about in the classroom in front of everybody.

Though topically intimate messages composed a statistically small portion of the total recording units, several of the respondents described the reciprocal nature of this disclosure.

I think what made it more comfortable was that everybody was opening up and sharing these personal experiences as opposed to class [when] only a few people...will ...tell their experiences. But on the blog...we were more open and honest...so there wasn't a concern because everyone was the same.

Evaluative intimacy was an extremely small portion of the overall disclosure (4.4%, 10): At the same time this data presented the most complex range of comments. Most participants agreed that they had a value-based response to the disclosures made by either their instructor or their peers. However, most of these responses are neither shared in the face-to-face classroom nor online. In addition, some of the data indicates that there is a rise in the perceived risk related to evaluative disclosures. Consider this response that a participant made to the question of whether she judged the response posts of other students, "I did, but I tried not to. I know I pretty much did on every one, every single topic. ...I looked at who wrote the topic I knew judgments about that person, which is not good to do."

Additionally, several participants indicated that they were more likely to post an evaluative response when they disagreed or had a negative response to another disclosure.

I think the blog did give me an opportunity to disagree. Like in that one blog...I felt like it was possible for me to say 'hey [Instructor] I don't agree with you'. And I felt like I was ok to do that in the blog, and it wasn't like I was restrained from disagreeing.

This is perhaps one of the most interesting comments made within the focus groups, for it is an observation of the changing dynamic between educator and student that surfaces during online interaction. For years, altered social norms have been the hallmark of computer-mediated interaction (see Kiesler, 1986; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984), and in the educational context these flexible social norms appear to be appreciated by students. In the end, the focus groups demonstrated support for the notion that a student's self-disclosure reveals itself in the typology of self-disclosure, and it is clear that blogging facilitates a more open dialogue between educator and student.



## Discussion

Although this investigation provides fruitful data concerning the utility of blogging as a self-disclosure vehicle in the modern classroom, there are several clear limitations to the conclusions drawn in the present report. Even though the chi square statistic is robust concerning sampling (Rossi, Wright, & Anderson, 1983), the use of a convenience sample injects considerable bias into the statistical tests. In addition, one of the tenets of content analysis is that categories must be mutually exclusive and exhaustive (Krippendorff, 1980). The investigators acknowledge that the primary recording units categorized into the descriptive, topical, and evaluative typology are subject to significant reinterpretation. Lastly, the use of classroom credit also presents a significant limitation to the investigation. The authors could find no other technique to ensure student participation in both the blogging and subsequent focus groups, which of course were vital to the project.

This investigation is based upon the premise that student disclosure is beneficial to the classroom experience. The focus groups and content analysis pointed to several issues that can potentially aid both the classroom researcher and practitioner. First, the focus group participants raised the notion that blogging provides an opportunity to reflect on content that the face-to-face classroom often lacks. The literature presents this idea through what Kraus, Zack, and Stricker (2004) describe as a “zone of reflection,” in which the asynchronous nature of online interaction affords more time for compositional thought. A close inspection of the focus group comments indicate that some students appear to benefit the most from this “zone of reflection” provided through blogging. Recent research suggests “the absence of visual and auditory social cues online facilitates less inhibited social interactions for shy individuals” (Stritzke, Nguyen, & Durkin, 2005, p.17). One of the concerns for future researchers is whether the disclosive content presented within an online context can or should be integrated in the face-to face classroom.

Perceived risk also emerged as a relevant issue. The self-disclosure literature has established a negative relationship between perceived risk and self-disclosure (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Vogel, & Wester, 2003). The present authors observed that evaluative intimacy was the least likely disclosure made by the students in their response posts. In their meta analysis, Weisband and Kiesler (1996) confirmed that as perceived risk increases, people are less likely to communicate sensitive information online. Since student self-disclosure is a valuable asset to the classroom experience, it appears that a blog may be one of the few tools that access the most risky type of disclosure.

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## Appendix A

### Code Book

#### Definitions

1. Self-disclosure: Communication that offers more information about the self.
2. Evaluative Intimacy: A value judgment about the worth of some object or person.  
Example: "I think this is good."
3. Topical Intimacy: A self-revealing expression concerning a particular topic.  
Example: I think that movies are violent."
4. Descriptive Intimacy: A self-revealing expression solely about one's self.  
Examples: "I believe myself to be honest."

#### Units

1. Sampling Units: The physical boundaries related to the content.  
- Each individual participant's blog
2. Context Units: The physical or semantic boundaries containing content to be analyzed.  
-Independent or dependent clauses with the subject of the clause being I, I'm, or I've. If two clauses are attached through punctuation, the first clause is evaluated.
3. Recording Units: The categories that contain the actual items to be analyzed.
  - A. Evaluative Intimacy: A self-revealing expression of a value judgment about the worth of some object, person or event.
  - B. Topical Intimacy: A self-revealing expression or opinion concerning a

particular topic.

C. Descriptive Intimacy: A self-revealing expression solely about one's self.

Enumeration Units: The frequency of recording units in each blog.

### Unit Analysis Procedure

1. Identify case/blog number
2. Locate first Context Unit (highlighted clause)
3. Does the direct object confirm that the clause is solely about the person?  
 Example: "I have a personality that other people like."  
 Flag words: "I think" or "I believe" are indicative of Descriptive Intimacy  
 - If yes, it is a Descriptive Intimacy.  
 Place one check mark in correct column under appropriate case.  
 - If no, continue to step 4
4. Does the direct object indicate a judgment about a person, place, or thing?  
 Example: "I don't agree with making people walk home."  
 Flag words: "I agree" or "I hate" are indicative of Evaluative Intimacy  
 - If yes it is Evaluative Intimacy. Place one check mark in correct column under appropriate case.  
 - If no, continue to step 5
5. Does the direct object refer to a topic that does not reference the subject of the clause?  
 Example: "I think conservatism is rampant in Virginia."  
 - If yes it is Topical Intimacy. Place one check mark in correct column under appropriate case.  
 - If no return to step 3.

## Appendix B

### Focus Group Questions

1. In the blog, did you express personal information about yourself that you might not have in the classroom?  
 Probe: How did that make you feel?  
 Probe: Do you regret expressing that personal information?
2. In the blog, there were a variety of topics (e.g., faith, parents, fear). Did you express anything about a topic that you might not have in the classroom?  
 Probe: How did that make you feel?  
 Probe: Do you regret expressing that information?

**STATE: Value judgment is a statement of how good or bad you think an idea or action is.**

3. In the blog, did you make value judgments on what I and others wrote?  
 Probe: How did you express these judgments in the blog?
4. Do you feel the blog improved any aspect of your learning?

5. How would you have felt if I “brought up” people’s blogs in class?  
Probe: Do you think it would be right for me to do so?
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