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Student-Instructor Negotiations of Vulnerability in Higher Education

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Student-to-Instructor Negotiations of Vulnerability in Higher Education

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Abstract

Brené Brown, author of *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live. Love, Parent, and Lead* states, “Vulnerability is not weakness, and the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional” (p. 2). The purpose of this study is to examine student-instructor negotiations of vulnerability via acts of self-disclosure both inside and outside of the classroom. For the traditional student, college is a transitional period that prove challenging, leaving one feeling vulnerable. This study offers a unique perspective of vulnerability and expands our limited knowledge on how vulnerable self-expression manifests within institutions for higher learning. I analyzed existing literature surrounding vulnerability to help guide my research. The literature includes topics such as communication apprehension, self-disclosure, authenticity and personhood, empathic responsiveness, and communication beyond the classroom. For this study, I utilize grounded theory to uncover greater insight on student-instructor negotiations of vulnerability. Throughout the coding process, I found three emergent themes: (1) vulnerability is a process, (2) vulnerability as a pathway to connection, and (3) vulnerability invites vulnerability.

Keywords: vulnerability, authenticity, self-disclosure, interpersonal communication, student-instructor relationships, higher education
Dedication

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my loving parents. Without their unconditional love and support, I would not be where I am today. I appreciate all that you do for me and love you both with my whole heart. Thank you for always believing me. I truly could not have done this without you.
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To my graduate cohort – I love you all very dearly. There were many laughs and we shed several tears. I will never forget our late night grading parties, office pranks with Chief Side Eye, and so many other cherished memories. You are a group of incredibly intelligent, supportive, and talented individuals. I would not have made it through graduate school without all of you. We have a bond that cannot ever be broken. Thank you for the wild ride and leaving me with memories that will last a lifetime.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

“Vulnerability is like being naked on stage and hoping for applause rather than laughter” (Brown, 2012, p. 39). We fear to not only accept, but also embrace feelings of vulnerability. Leading vulnerability researcher and expert, Brené Brown (2012) notes, “We are totally exposed when we are vulnerable...we are in the torture chamber that we call uncertainty. And, yes, we’re taking a huge emotional risk when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable” (p. 37). This emotional risk can cause discomfort and make us feel inferior when in interactions with others.

However, it is important to note, feeling vulnerable is not indicative of weakness as some individuals are led to believe. Rather, Brown (2012) argues, “Vulnerability is the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experiences” (p. 12). Without allowing ourselves to experience vulnerability, we are doing a disservice to ourselves by hindering the exposure of our true selves to those around us, and potentially hindering interpersonal relationship growth.

Parley (2010) notes the term “vulnerability” has Latin roots translating from the word vulnerare, meaning, “To wound” and is defined as the act of being harmed or attacked. The author also describes vulnerability as having the potential for openness or exposure. Unfortunately, vulnerability has also been connected to perceptions of weakness, inferiority, dependence, and defenselessness. That is, someone who acts vulnerable is seen as weak, dependent, or inferior to those who show a tough exterior.

The result, of course, is that we often work hard to not be vulnerable with others even as we seek meaningful relationships. On the other hand, Batchelor (2006) argues that vulnerability can be associated with the notion of opening up or having a voice. This
definition resonates most closely with Brown’s (2012) notions of vulnerability. Brown (2012), however, recognizes the negativity and risk that comes from being vulnerable. She notes that “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” are inevitable experiences for individuals who choose to act vulnerable when in interaction with others (Brown, 2012, p. 34). It is this definition of vulnerability, as carrying uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure that I focus on for this study.

Specifically, this study examines instructor and student relationships and how they negotiate vulnerability through the use of self-disclosure inside and outside the classroom setting. Communication scholars Metts and Planalp (2002) suggest, “We need more studies of real interactions where emotions are negotiated in the moment, using all available channels, responding to situational constraints, and the like” (p. 362). This study attempts to answer that call. Using a qualitative interview format, participants recount experiences of vulnerability among instructors and students in an effort to understand how vulnerability shapes student-instructor relationships, and ultimately, meaningful educational experiences.

This study also offers a unique contribution to the field of communication by allowing us to expand our knowledge of instructor-student negotiations of vulnerability both in and out of the classroom. Current literature on vulnerability in higher education is limited and focuses primarily on the vulnerability of teaching (See Brantmeir, 2013 & Palmer, 1998 for good discussions on vulnerability and teaching). Few studies examine student vulnerability in the classroom (see Batchelor, 2006), and no studies to date have examined the communicative negotiation of vulnerability between instructors and students.
Uncertainty

One defining trait of vulnerability is uncertainty; uncertainty about what to disclose, when to disclose, and to whom one should disclose. This is even more challenging in the college or university setting. College is a time when students are transitioning into emerging adulthood, providing them with increased autonomy, new opportunities, and the potential for new relationships (Arnett, 2000).

During this transition, students will also likely come face-to-face with other challenges such as homesickness, struggles with time management, sleep deprivation, relationship troubles, or mental health issues (see Brunner, Wallace, Reyman, Sellers, & McCabe, 2014; Ponsford, 2016; and Watkins, Hunt, & Eisenberg, 2011). Such challenges can negatively impact student performance in the classroom and trigger feelings of vulnerability. During these times, students may take the opportunity to discuss challenges they are facing with their instructors, but only if they perceive their instructors as being open to such disclosure. Because of this, it is essential for instructors to be cognizant of what today’s college students are dealing with so that they can reasonably and effectively respond to these challenges.

Brunner et al., (2014) note that as educators, “We must know how students are navigating their personal concerns; what keeps them succeeding; how they feel about themselves, their education, their relationships, their future; and what keeps them well and enables them to build resiliency and reach their goals” (p. 260-61). Unfortunately, interactions between instructors and students in the classroom are often limited, superficial and task-oriented.

Out of class interactions are even more limited and mostly ineffective, in part,
because many students and instructors feel uncertain about how to engage in these interactions (Cox, McIntosh, Terenzini, Reason, Lutovsky Quaye, 2010). Perhaps, if instructors are willing to be vulnerable with students and learn how to listen and understand student challenges, then they will be able to connect more fully with students and reduce uncertainty.

Risk

Brantmeier (2013) notes that within the context of teaching, “Vulnerability is about taking risks- risks of self-disclosure, risks of change, risks of not knowing, risks of failing – to deepen learning” (p. 97). From an instructor’s perspective, revealing personal information to students can be risky and can leave them (instructors) feeling vulnerable.

For instance, during the fall semester of my second year as a graduate teaching assistant, I decided to come forward and tell my students my uncle was dying from cancer and was not expected to live longer than a week. I was hesitant to tell them for a variety of reasons. Prior to disclosing this information with my students, I thought to myself, ‘Would my students think I am giving them an excuse?’ or ‘Would this be considered sharing too much information and diminish my credibility as an instructor?’

In fact, Rosenberg (2005) argues, “The situations where we are the most reluctant to express vulnerability are often those where we want to maintain a tough image for fear of losing authority or control” (p. 115).

In the end, I am glad I chose to come forward with my students about my situation, even though it left me painfully emotional in front of twenty-two college students. However, in that moment, I was able to be Kelli, a human-being, rather than Kelli, the instructor and share my experience, along with teaching my students that it is
okay to share our emotions and experiences with others because these emotions are what make us human. Ultimately, one of my students came up to me and gave me a hug at the end of class. I knew I made the right choice, not only for me but also for my students to recognize that we are all fighting our own battles and that we are here to support one another.

While there may be great risks that come with vulnerability, in many instances, the rewards seem to outweigh the risks. Cayanus, Martin, and Weber (2003) argue that higher amounts of instructor self-disclosure are positively linked to student participation, out-of-class communication, and student motives for communicating with their instructors. In my experience, disclosing information about my uncle led to greater student interaction, and in one case, vulnerable displays of affection on one student's behalf outside of the classroom.

Ebersole, McFall, and Brandt (1977) do note, however, that instructor self-disclosure does not lead to reciprocal student self-disclosures in every case. The authors found that students may turn to other support systems, such as their peers. This may be due to lack of perceived vulnerability on part of the teacher. A primary focus of this study, then, will be to examine instructor self-disclosure to examine its influence on students' willingness to openly display vulnerability. Ultimately, I hope to examine whether an instructor's decision to self-disclose can (and does) open the door of opportunity for students to feel comfortable discussing personal and vulnerable matters outside of class with their instructor.

**Emotional Exposure**

When talking about vulnerability within the context of education, as people, as
VULNERABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION students, and as instructors, it is impossible to leave our emotions at the door. Ellis and Garvey (2012) assert, “Emotions are a part of our classroom experiences, as young children, as high schoolers, as college students, and as instructors” (p. 11). One of the many emotions we experience in the classroom is vulnerability. Whether you are a student or an instructor, experiencing feelings of vulnerability are inescapable.

In Parker Palmer’s (1998) book titled, The Courage to Teach, he proclaims, “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (p. 10). Palmer states:

In every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students, and to connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood – and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning (p. 10).

Palmer’s statement suggests that emotional displays and vulnerability are a natural (and necessary) part of teaching in order to connect with students. Moreover, when students come forward with potential struggles, it is essential for instructors to partake in empathic responsiveness. Rosenberg (2005) defines empathy as the ability to “Empty our mind and listen to others with our whole being” (p. 104). In moments when students self-disclose, the ways in which instructors react will dictate the remainder of the interaction. Rosenberg (2005) proclaims, “Time and again people transcend the paralyzing effects of psychological pain when they have sufficient contact with someone who can hear them empathically” (p. 127). Thus, teacher responsiveness may be critically linked to student’s desire and willingness to be vulnerable with instructors in and outside the classroom.

It is important to note, though, one reason students do not interact with their
instructors is due to their own communication apprehension. Students are not only hesitant or afraid to speak with instructors, but they are fearful of communicating with those of a higher status in general (Martin, Myers, & Mottet, 1999). Certainly, students may feel vulnerable when they do not understand course material, or are going through many of the challenges mentioned earlier.

Palmer (1998) also argues that many teachers do not know what to do with student self-disclosures, making them even less likely to occur. According to Palmer, many teachers see sharing personal experiences in the classroom as inappropriate and “More suited to a therapy session than a college classroom” (p. 12). Unfortunately, when instructors (and students) view and treat such disclosures as inappropriate in the classroom, teachers and students alike are less likely to practice vulnerability in the classroom. It takes a courageous, self-aware person, such as Palmer’s confession above, for vulnerability to find its home in the classroom.

My own experience with being vulnerable in the classroom lead to more student willingness to be vulnerable. Many of my students opened themselves up to discussing personal, sensitive topics in their speeches. Moreover, my expression of vulnerability led one student to express vulnerability with me outside the classroom as well. Thus, I am curious as to whether these vulnerable communicative acts that begin in the classroom lead to students’ vulnerable disclosure with instructors outside of classroom.

Overall, this study aims to uncover the ways in which vulnerability manifests through both student and instructor disclosure. In particular, I examine narrative accounts from instructors and students regarding their experiences with disclosure and vulnerability both in and outside the classroom in an effort to understand how
vulnerability shapes meaningful classroom experiences.
Student-instructor relationships are interpersonal in nature, requiring relational development and maintenance over time. Yet, these relationships are also less straightforward than other interpersonal relationships in our lives between friends, family, and significant others. While research regarding student-instructor relationships can aid in the practice of cultivating positive interactions between students and instructors, research studies have not placed an emphasis on the notion of vulnerability as it exists in higher education. Though, we have learned from Mottet and Beebe (2006) that teachers and students oftentimes communicate in such a way that they engage in conversation that is considered to be open, honest, spontaneous, and non-judgmental. Statements such as these warrant further examination into the communicative nature of relationships between instructors and their students.

While there is a lack of literature specifically addressing vulnerability in academia and how instructors and students alike experience vulnerability in academic settings, extant research on teacher-student interactions in other areas can inform our understanding of such relationships. I first examine the literature on communication apprehension and students’ desire and willingness (or lack thereof) to engage in communicative interactions with teachers.

Next, I analyze student and instructor self-disclosure literature as a means for understanding the conditions and circumstances that lead to (or inhibit) self-disclosure in the teacher-student relationship. In addition to the acts of self-disclosure, I examine literature on empathic responsiveness to demonstrate the role empathy plays in negotiating vulnerability. For example, when a student reveals personal information, an
empathic response from their instructor can make the student feel at ease; it can also validate their emotions and encourage them to participate in class more often, or even seek a relationship with the instructor outside of class.

Finally, the notion of authenticity and personhood is also relevant to this conversation. Presenting the authentic self in an academic setting can showcase aspects of our identity that oftentimes are left outside of the classroom. Many of us are familiar with the phrases, “Leave your problems at the door” and “don’t air out your dirty laundry.” What we tend to forget, or fail to take into consideration, is that these so-called problems impact our everyday behaviors. While showcasing one’s authentic self may not always involve problems we are experiencing, if we fail to recognize certain aspects of our true identity, even while in the classroom, we forego the possibility of fostering meaningful and authentic relationships and, more importantly, meaningful educational experiences.

**Communication Apprehension**

McCroskey (1977a) defines communication apprehension as “An individual’s level of fear or anxiety with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (p. 78). Experiencing communication apprehension is not limited to one specific communicative context. There are a variety of communicative situations that can trigger anxiety as well as a sense of unwillingness to communicate. Communication apprehension has the potential to be experienced in interpersonal conversations, small group discussions, and public speaking contexts (Scott and Wheeless, 1977). Apprehension towards public speaking is the most common of the communication contexts listed, yet, there are a number of individuals that are apprehensive towards
interpersonal conversations.

Students that experience high levels of communication apprehension may fear the anticipation of engaging with faculty members more so than the communicative event itself. Since they cannot move past the anxiety of the anticipation, they may never experience the interaction themselves. After all, McCroskey (1977b) reports as much as twenty percent of the U.S. population is considered highly apprehensive. Furthermore, Trenholm and Jensen (2013) allude to the fact that these highly apprehensive individuals feel anxious in a variety of communicative situations, even when talking with people they already know. While the majority of our college students do not experience this degree of anxiousness, is it worth noting there is still a chance these students are enrolled in our courses.

There are students that do not experience such a high degree of communication apprehension. When students do choose to engage in conversation with their instructors, there are a variety of motives for doing so. Martin, et. al. (1999) classified five motives students have for communicating with faculty members: (1) relational, (2) functional, (3) excuse-making, (4) participation, and (5) sycophancy. When students are motivated for relational reasons, it means they are attempting to develop a more personal relationship with their instructors (Martin, Valencic, & Heisel, 2002). Unfortunately, it is uncommon for students to attempt to develop this type of relationship with their instructors.

Additionally, functional motives for communication include learning more about class material and course assignments, while excuse making pertains to explaining why class work is either late or missing. Participation motives transpire during class, showing instructors that students are interested and understand the material and sycophancy
reasoning stems from students wanting to make a good impression on their instructors through compliments, etc. (Martin, Valencic, & Heisel, 2002).

Martin and Myers (2006) suggest, “Because communication apprehension often affects a person’s willingness to interact, it would be expected that students’ communication apprehension would be related to when and how often students would communicate with their instructors” (p. 284). Naturally, students with high communication apprehension are less likely to reach out to their instructors to acquire additional information, to discuss personal problems, or to simply converse about common interests than those who experience low levels of communication apprehension. Jordan and Powers (2007) report that communication apprehension can hinder student success as well as negatively impact both the quality and quantity of interaction with college instructors. If students are not willing to communicate with faculty members, they may be less satisfied with the relationship, which, in turn, can negatively impact their academic performance.

Blume, Baldwin, and Ryan (2013) argue “Communication apprehension may also cause individuals to perceive changes as a threat and respond with ‘flight or fight’ mentality if they realize the change will require them to increase their communication with others or develop new relationships” (p. 162). Therefore, if a student is coping with personal problems outside of the classroom, rather than “fight” by initiating a conversation about these struggle with their instructors, students may choose to “flight” and avoid communicating these problems. If students do not communicate personal dilemmas they are facing, unfortunately, instructors cannot determine how to help the student if their academics are consequently suffering because of these problems. Students
entering the classroom with high degrees of communication apprehension may be even less willing to engage in self-disclosure among their peers and instructors in and outside of the classroom setting.

**Self-Disclosure**

The majority of research involving acts of self-disclosure is centered at the interpersonal level. Furthermore, while some research discusses student self-disclosure, there is more research in regard to the use of teacher self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is defined as a “Communication process in which one person verbally provides personal information about his or her thoughts, needs, or feelings to another person” (Falk and Wagner, 2001, p. 558). More specifically, Sorensen (1989) defines instructor self-disclosure as “Teacher statements in the classroom about the self that may or not be related to the subject content, but reveal information about the teacher that the students are unlikely to learn from other sources” (p. 260).

Cayanus and Martin (2008) uncovered three dimensions of self-disclosure that are important to consider when examining instructor self-disclosure in the classroom: (1) amount, (2) relevance, and (3) negativity. Goodboy, Carton, Goldman, Gozanski, Tyler, and Johnson (2014) explain, “Amount refers to the quantity and frequency of disclosures. Relevance is dependent upon whether the disclosure is related to the course content. Negativity occurs when instructors disclose bad, immoral, or undesirable information to students” (p. 115). Student perceptions of the liking and connectedness with their instructor depend on the amount of information that is disclosed, the degree of relevance to the course content, as well as whether or not the information is negative in nature. If instructors engage in positive acts of self-disclosure, students may be more inclined to
themselves disclosure to the instructors, following the norm of reciprocity.

Cayanus, Martin, and Weber (2003) found that higher amounts of teacher self-disclosure positively led to more student participation as well as out-of-class communication. However, this particular study did not examine the multiple dimensions of self-disclosure that not only have a positive impact on students, but also the forms of self-disclosure that can have a negative impact on students. Cayanus and Martin (2008) comment on how there may be a point where the teacher discloses too much information about themselves which tends to be negatively perceived among students. However, the threshold of positive self-disclosure has not yet been established.

Fusani (1994) claims that teacher self-disclosure is a “Rich personal source of student-faculty communication” (p. 249). There is a positive correlation between teacher self-disclosure and students’ perception of affective learning, resulting in liking the class and the teacher (Sorensen, 1989). Again, there are limits to the amount of disclosure as well as restrictions to what an instructor should and should not disclose to their students. While high amounts of self-disclosure are favorable among students, there is still the potential to disclose too much information, get off-topic with the course material, and talk negatively with students, resulting in the likelihood that students do not perceive the instructor as credible or someone they themselves can reveal personal information to. After all, self-disclosure is oftentimes based on the level of trust that has been established in the relationship and also results in a sense of satisfaction and feeling understood (Cayanus, Martin, and Myers, 2008).

The use of instructor self-disclosure humanizes instructors and breaks down strict power-distance and traditionally rigid roles of instructor and student, making them appear
more approachable (Meyers, Brann, and Members of Comm 600, 2009; Berman, 2004). In fact, one student revealed, “When they use self-disclosure it shows they are on the same level, which shows [they are] caring, and I think that it actually increases learning” (Meyers, et. al., 2009, p. 13). When instructors are viewed as more approachable, it is likely that students will feel more comfortable engaging in conversation with that particular instructor. With regards to the students that find the courage to embrace feelings of vulnerability and choose to disclosure personal information, there is still this underlying uncertainty about how others will respond to the disclosure. That being said, if faculty members lack empathic responsiveness for their students, it can discourage students to continue or even begin to engage in acts of vulnerable self-disclosure.

**Authenticity & Personhood**

When instructors disclose private information, it is understandable that showing their authentic identity can potentially result in feeling vulnerable. In fact, I believe in most cases when the authentic self is revealed in the classroom, there is a greater chance for an individual to experience vulnerability. Cranton (2006) argues authenticity is one of many concepts that is easier to define in terms what it is not, rather than what it is. There are varying definitions for “authenticity,” particularly as it relates to teaching. There is the debate whether or not authentic teaching simply encompasses the “true self” or if it transcends selfhood towards critical reflection of the self (Cranton, 2006; Kreber, 2013). In conjunction with the argument that embracing the authentic self, students and instructors alike are more likely to feel vulnerable, I contest authentic teaching is the simple act of showcasing one’s true identity.

Brookfield (2006) advocates authentic teachers are people with “Passions,
enthusiasm, frailties, and emotions” (p. 5). To further illustrate the authentic teaching, it is worth addressing the notion of personhood. “Personhood is the perception students have that their teacher is a flesh-and-blood human being with a life and identity outside the classroom. Students recognize personhood when teachers move out from behind their formal identity and role description to allow aspects of their life and personality to be revealed in the classroom” (Brookfield, 2006, p. 10). The way professors can showcase their life that exists outside of the classroom is by sharing their experiences with students.

Furthermore, Palmer (1998) discusses the intersection of personal and private life that is unique to the teaching profession. There are times in the classroom setting when instructors have the opportunity to self-disclose personal information to their students. Meanwhile, concerns regarding professionalism and credibility may arise, ultimately, Palmer (1998) believes “To reduce our vulnerability, we disconnect from students, from subjects, and even ourselves” (p. 17). There may be faculty members that consider bringing emotions into the classroom is counterproductive and unnecessary, but I argue that accepting these emotions and humanizing the classroom experience can benefit both students and faculty. Despite what some teachers might think, Dirx (2006) argues emotions in the classroom are in fact, not disruptive, but expressing emotion within one’s teaching helps us to more deeply connect with our sense of self, and helps us to develop authenticity in our everyday teaching.

While being authentic and sharing information about oneself can enhance the classroom environment, it is helpful to know how to go about displaying your personhood, or authentic self appropriately. Brookfield (2006) warns that this does not mean a teacher should suddenly transform the classroom into a “Zone of personal
confession,” rather, personhood can be used appropriately when using personal examples to further illustrate course concepts, discuss how they apply material to their work outside of the classroom, as well as sharing stories of how they “Dealt with the same fears and struggles that their students are currently facing” (p. 10). By doing so, instructors are able to be seen as more relatable to their students.

Not only do teachers make attempts to relate to their students, but in order to make connections and ultimately humanize the classroom experience, instructors engage in the act of self-disclosure with their students. Cayanus, Martin, and Myers (2008) explain that instructors typically spend more time talking than their students and during this time it is common for teachers to talk about themselves and give personal examples, in addition to covering the course material. Granted, the depth and breadth of these disclosures will vary from instructor to instructor, but sharing personal information about oneself can create a sense of discomfort. It is in that moment when a person reveals a part of their authentic self that can leave him or her feeling uncertain about how others will respond.

**Empathic Responsiveness**

The origin of the term empathy comes from the late 19th Century when Vischer and Gadamer coined the Germ term *Einfühlung* meaning “Humans’ spontaneous projection of the real psychic feeling into people and things they perceive” (Gair, 2012, p. 134). Lipps further conceptualizes empathy to mean “Humanizing objects by feeling ourselves into them” and several scholars make note of the Greek term *Empatheia,* meaning to appreciate another person’s feelings (Gair, 2012, p. 134). We evoke empathy through communicating or responding to others in conversation. Martin and Myers
(2006) define responsiveness as the approach an individual takes to respond to one another, which includes being understanding, compassionate, and a good listener.

Stiff, Dillard, Somara, Kim, and Sleight (1988) describe the notion of empathy as a multi-dimensional taking on cognitive (i.e. perspective-taking), affective (i.e. empathic concern and emotional contagion), and behavioral (i.e. communicative responsiveness) elements. While there is a lack of consensus on a definition for empathy, the greatest component of the empathy that scholars agree upon is the act of perspective taking, resulting in the ability to adopt the viewpoint of another individual (Stiff, et., al., 1988). When an individual takes another's perspective it can lead to either emotional contagion or empathic concern. Emotional contagion is the act of experiencing parallel emotions as a result of observing another person's display of emotions which empathic concern refers to the concern for others without mirroring the other person's emotions (Stiff, et. al., 1988). Fowler and Soliz (2013) conceptualize communicative responsiveness as the “Ability to listen… and communication effectively to others… experiencing distress” (Ellipses in original quotation, p. 166).

While there may be many teachers that are against the idea of inviting emotions into the classroom, many scholars continue to argue the importance of emotions in higher education. Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia (2014) point out how students and teachers alike may experience emotions in the classroom that are related to non-academic matters, nonetheless, they have the potential to influence a student or a teachers' engagement. hooks (1994) speaks about the lack of conversations amongst professors with regard to the role of emotion in the classroom. The emotions we experience enhance the classroom dynamic, and unfortunately, oftentimes, professors believe whenever emotional
responses take place, their “Academic purpose has been diminished” (hooks, 1994, p. 155). Though, it is essential to educators to acknowledge that while the content is important, they are also teaching this content to students that have feelings. Expressing these feelings can create a sense of community and build stronger relationships, and ultimately, enhance the learning experience for teachers and students.

Not only do college students have a story worth telling but oftentimes it seems that students forget instructors are human beings with a life outside of class as well. They have a past, they have feelings, they make mistakes, and they also are confronted with challenges that life throws at them. Banner and Cannon (1997) point out how teachers oftentimes believe there is no place for discussing feelings in the classroom and consider feelings to threaten their authority in their professional lives, yet “Teachers with no obvious signs of human feeling cannot establish that sense of comfort and security that is so necessary to creating a teaching environment that invites and encourages participation” (Banner & Cannon, 1997, p. 88). Through such discussions, students and instructors are better able to establish rapport. Frisby & Martin (2010) argue that establishing rapport (or a mutual, trusting bond) between students and instructors bolsters perceived classroom connectedness and enhances student-student relationships as well as student-instructor relationships.

Miller and Steinberg (1975) affirm while empathy has traditionally been considered a psychological construct, empathy should rather be viewed as a communicative construct. We communicate empathy to others, influencing the closeness of our interpersonal relationships. Nadler and Nadler (2000) indicate, “Students’ perceptions of an instructors’ empathic responsiveness may influence the student’s
comfort with, the likelihood of meeting with, and the nature of topics discussed with instructors outside of class" (p. 179). Due to a higher level of comfort with an instructor, these conversations that take place outside of class may become more personal in nature.

Faculty members that provide empathic and respectful responses to student self-disclosures can offer great support to those students dealing with difficulties in their personal lives (Booth, 2012). Nadler and Nadler (2001) also discovered that instructor empathy and credibility are positively related to out-of-classroom communication. It is hopeful that this positive perception of empathy that translates into out-of-class communication will strengthen student satisfaction and strengthen relationships between students and faculty members. If instructors are practicing empathic responsiveness in the classroom, students may be more inclined to engage in conversation outside of the classroom. Consequently, students and faculty members can form stronger relationships and provide more opportunities for vulnerable communicative exchanges.

**Communication Beyond the Classroom**

While most student-instructor interactions take place in the classroom, this does not mean out-of-class communication is to be ignored. Goldman, Goodboy, and Bolkan (2016) shed light on the multidisciplinary interest in out-of-class communication, originally receiving attention outside of the communication discipline. Out-of-class communication has been studied in education, student affairs, and student development, each contextualizing the nature of this communication differently. Nadler and Nadler (2001) define out-of-class communication as:

"Interactions outside of the formal classroom that may be initiated by students or faculty. It includes advising, students seeking out faculty to ask
questions about class content, faculty involvement in student organizations, and/or student-faculty discussion about non-class related issues” (p. 242).

Hoffman (2014) also notes, students and faculty have the potential to interact before or after class, in hallways and faculty offices, on other on-campus sites, and via email or other forms of digital communication. Furthermore, Jaasma and Koper (2002) identify six categories of out-of-class interactions: (a) course-related information; (b) self-disclosure; (c) advice; (d) small talk; (e) intellectual ideas; and (f) favor asking.

There are many students that do not take advantage of these opportunities to engage in conversation with their professors, but it is clear there are a variety of ways for students and teachers to communicate, extending past class time. The reason college students do not take advantage of such opportunities to communicate is in part, due to the fact that they do not know how or even why they would need to reach out to their professors outside of class time. Cotten and Wilson (2006) examined a sample of students and found, “Most students reported some interaction with faculty. However, they also indicated that interactions were infrequent, and not a routine part of their academic experiences. Several students reported that they had never interacted with a faculty member outside of the classroom” (p. 495).

With a lack of understanding the benefits of seeking faculty after class hours, students and professors alike might miss out on some potential benefits to these interactions. Students report greater satisfaction, sense of self-worth, increased academic skills, heightened personal development, and even a greater commitment to the academic institution (Kuh, 1995; Strauss and Volkwein, 2004; Nadler and Nadler, 2001). Students
are not the only ones that benefit from these types of interactions. Faculty members have also reported benefits to out-of-class communication. Wilson, Woods, & Gaff (1974) discovered instructors that engaged in conversation with students outside of class were more satisfied with their job and more knowledgeable about their students.

Studies have not indicated specific reasons for why student and faculty interactions are not taking place beyond the classroom. Unfortunately, previous research also has not informed us of any direct causes for why some students do reach out to their instructors outside of class hours either. Though, there are certain teacher behaviors that may encourage students to engage in conversation beyond classroom walls. These behaviors include repeatedly inviting students to ask questions after class, holding office hours, or responding to students in a way that showcases a genuine interest in students (Cox, et. al., 2010). Students are also more inclined to engage in conversation with an instructor when the teacher has a good sense of humor, disclose personal information, and employ the “chalk-and-talk” method in class, as opposed to the traditional lecture (Cotten and Wilson, 2006).

In addition to these potential benefits of out-of-class communication, there are also some drawbacks associated with this type of communication. In the eyes of college students, there are perceived costs of establishing a relationship with their instructors. Cotten and Wilson (2006) indicate there are some students that are fearful of coming across as stupid to their professors, or they even avoid any attempts to communicate out of class for the fear of disappointing their instructors for not living up to their expectations. Cotten and Wilson (2006) also found students do not perceive faculty members to be readily accessible outside of the classroom setting because they do not
typically see them elsewhere on campus. This lack of opportunity to see a professor outside of the classroom or their office can negative influence student perceptions of teacher willingness to foster a relationship or simply interact after class hours.

In order to gain a greater understanding for how students and instructors negotiate vulnerability in and out of the classroom, I propose the following research questions:

RQ1: How do students and instructors experience vulnerability in and out of the classroom through acts of self-disclosure?

RQ2: In what ways have students' educational experiences been impacted by being vulnerable and/or witnessing vulnerability in the classroom?
Chapter 3
Methodology

Historically speaking, there has been some reluctance on behalf of interpersonal communication scholars to conduct qualitative research. Waite (2007) explains, “In an earlier era, the qualitative approach, if recognized at all, was largely disparaged” and “quantitative and experimental approaches ruled the day” (p. 16). Johnson (2015), however, highlights that “Qualitative research allows for a more discovery-oriented approach is conducting research and can be particularly useful in exploring phenomena where little understanding exists” (p. 262). A qualitative approach is helpful, then, when exploring vulnerability between instructors and students since no current studies exist. And, while qualitative research lacks the ability to generalize its findings, the rich descriptions that emerge from qualitative research provide us insight into first-hand accounts of authentic, real-life human experiences.

Waite (2007) simply puts it, “The abstraction of numbers cannot capture the immediacy of lived experiences. In turn, the immediacy of lived experience cannot exploit the explanatory power of numbers” (p. 18). As a result, when discussing something as complex as human emotion from the perspective of students and instructors, qualitative data will help answer questions and provide insight on vulnerability, all while making up for what quantitative data cannot and will not answer.

Theoretical Orientation

I use grounded theory as my theoretical framework. Grounded theory is defined as a “Qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation of a process, action, or interaction shaped by the views of a larger number of participants” (Creswell, 2007, p. 63). This approach is the best way to study vulnerability since
grounded theory will allow me to collect data and find themes that emerge from student and instructor narratives related to disclosure and vulnerability.

Thornberg and Charmaz (2014) assert, “Grounded theory is a research approach in which data collection and analysis take place simultaneously. Each part informs the other, in order to construct theories of the phenomenon under study” (p. 153). The authors also suggest that grounded theory tends to guide researchers where to go, whom to interview, and what kind of data to collect next, where it is assumed that the process of data collection and looking can generate new ways of seeing communicative phenomenon. For example, while I was collecting data from my participants, all of whom were freshman, I recognized that the information I was collecting was mostly limited to freshmen experiences; that is, students who were less likely to be open to vulnerable self-disclosures due to heightened uncertainty and “newness” to the college scene. As a result, I felt gaining insight from upperclassmen would help expand my understanding for student negotiations of vulnerability. Unfortunately, I was unable to successfully recruit any upperclassmen for this study.

Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss founded the notion of grounded theory (Johnson, 2015). However, both Glaser and Strauss possess different attitudes and approaches to the practice of grounded theory. For instance, the Glaser approach is more flexible in nature, whereas the Strauss approach is more structured in advancing new theoretical perspectives (Johnson, 2015). For this study, I chose to utilize the Straussian approach to grounded theory. Howard-Payne (2016) argues the Straussian approach: (a) advocates for personal engagement with the research to expand researcher understanding of the world as the participants view it, (b) believes theoretical constructs should be pre-
determined to the data collection, (c) promotes the use of research questions to guide the study, and (d) encourages the practice of open coding.

In this study, I use narrative interviews in hopes of gaining insight into how the participants view the world, particularly as it pertains to self-disclosure and vulnerability in and outside the classroom. I also draw on Brené Brown’s (2012) notion of vulnerability encompassing uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. I use these terms as a guiding framework to begin looking for instructor and student expressions of vulnerability.

**Participants**

Twelve individuals participated in qualitative, face-to-face interviews. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling. First, I disseminated recruitment letters to the Introduction to Speech Communication courses at a Mid-Western university to recruit student participants. I also placed recruitment letters in faculty mailboxes in the Communication Studies, Sociology/Anthropology, and Education departments at the same Mid-Western University. Of the twelve participants, four were undergraduate (freshmen) college students and the remaining eight were instructors from Communication Studies and Sociology/Anthropology departments.

I attempted to recruit more undergraduate students to gain more insight from a student perspective, but unfortunately, student responses were low and no upperclassmen volunteered to be part of this study. All participants in this study were Caucasian; students ranged in age from 18-22 and faculty ranged in age 35-61. In regard to gender representation for students, there were three women and one man and for faculty, there were three women and five men.
Procedures

In order to determine how college students and instructors negotiate feelings of vulnerability through acts of self-disclosure, I conducted qualitative face-to-face interviews with students and instructors. There are several forms of qualitative interviews. For my research, I decided to conduct narrative interviews. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) declare narrative interview as “Not only a method for ‘capturing’ stories; it also assumes that people understand who they are partly through their everyday performances of narrative” (p. 180). Furthermore, what separates narrative interview from other types of interviewing, is that narrative interviews are not simply concerned with bits and pieces of the story, but narrative interviews aim to understand the act of storytelling as well as the content (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011).

This form of interviewing seemed most appropriate for this study due to the complex and emotional nature of vulnerability, as well as this study’s connection to identity and the authentic self. Chase (2008) explains, “In addition to interviewees describing what happened, narratives also express emotions, thoughts, and interpretations” (p. 65). Through the act of storytelling from my participants, I was able to gain further insight into how students and instructors make sense of and experience vulnerability in the academic environment.

Each participant was provided with an informed consent document, outlining his or her participation in the study. I discussed the information listed on the informed consent, as well as the voluntary nature of their participation and their ability to withdraw participation at any time. Faculty interviews took place in each instructor’s office while student interviews took place in the Communication Studies Seminar Room. Instructor
interviews ranged between 30-75 minutes and student interviews lasted approximately between 10-15 minutes (this shortened time spent in interviews with students will be addressed more fully in the results chapter). Additionally, all interviews were recorded on two electronic, password-protected devices. Once the interviews were saved on the devices, they were labeled with a generic pseudonym. Student interview questions can be found in Appendix A. Instructor interview questions can be found in Appendix B. All names have been changed in the reporting process to protect participant confidentiality.

Coding Process

Before I could completely analyze the data, I transcribed all of the interviews. Transcription can be performed in any number of ways. Kowal and O'Connell (2014) highlight three forms of transcription: (a) the verbal component, or the spoken word; (b) the prosodic component, or the way in which words are spoken; and (c) the paralinguistic component, or the nonverbal vocal behavior that accompanies spoken words. Due to time constraints, I elected to transcribe my data by focusing solely on the verbal component, or the spoken words from my participants.

However, it is imperative to determine what constitutes as a “word” when transcribing data. For instance, Roulston (2014) states, transcriptions oftentimes omit utterances such as ‘um,’ ‘uh,’ etc. because they do not contribute to the topic of talk. On the other hand, while these utterances may be considered ‘bad speech,’ excluding such elements of talk can lead to a loss of information that is crucial to understanding and interpreting data (Kowal and O’Connell, 2014; Roulston, 2014). During the transcription process, I omitted the use of utterances due to the fact that they did not aid in the understanding of how college students and instructors negotiate feelings of vulnerability.
Kowal and O'Connell (2014) also call attention to the fact that all transcription is selective in nature, making the act itself inherently biased. However, this risk of bias can be counteracted through critical thinking and effective decision-making. With this in mind, I made sure to maintain reflexivity and transcribe narratives from participants. The act of being reflexive "involves turning back on oneself in order that processes of knowledge production become the subject of investigation (May and Perry, 2014). This is to ensure the production of theory stems from the reality illustrated in participant narratives, rather than biases from the researcher. Although researcher motives, knowledge, and subjective views of reality and cannot be completely separated from qualitative research, practicing reflexivity is one step to help warrant reliability and validity in the data analysis, despite these researcher biases.

In following the Straussian approach to grounded theory, I completed three stages of data analysis – open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Strauss and Corbin (1990) compare open coding to putting together a puzzle by noting, "You have to get organized; to sort out the pieces by color, which sometimes includes noting minute differences in shading; so as later bit by bit to put the pieces together" (p. 204). This metaphor illustrates the process of identifying emerging concepts from the data collection and placing them into categories and sub-categories. I started the open coding process by drawing on the Straussian approach that asserts that theoretical constructs should be predetermined before data collection; that is, we should have in mind a way of looking, even while not letting these constructs limit what we find.

Thus, I started with Brown’s (2012) idea that vulnerability entails uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure and looked for ways that these ideas were present in student
and instructor narratives. While keeping these constructs in mind, I was also open to new themes that emerged from the data. Next, I conducted axial coding, which is described as the practice of fitting the pieces of the puzzle together. Each piece (or category or sub-category) has its exact location, but also fits in with the other pieces to form the overall puzzle, or theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). From this stage, I was able to bring together larger themes that emerged from the narratives. Finally, I used selective coding by integrating “Concepts around a core category and the filling in of categories that need further development and refinement” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 217). These final themes are what appear in the findings chapter.
Chapter 4
Findings

This study was carried out with the intent to answer two research questions regarding student-instructor negotiations of vulnerability. The first research question aimed to explore participant experiences with vulnerability both in and outside of the classroom through acts of self-disclosure. The second research question seeks to understand how the academic experience for students is impacted by being vulnerable and/or witnessing vulnerable displays in the classroom. A handful of themes emerged from participant narratives regarding both student and instructor negotiations of vulnerability in the classroom. These themes include: (1) vulnerability as a process, (2) vulnerability as a pathway to connection, and (3) vulnerability invites vulnerability. The findings are discussed in a blended format, sharing narratives from both students and instructors within each thematic category.

Vulnerability is a Process

The choice to embrace one’s vulnerability does not necessarily come with a great sense of comfort and ease. As Brown’s definition suggests, there are varying amounts of uncertainty that can accompany acts of vulnerability. Vulnerability itself exists on a continuum and can manifest in a number of different ways. In fact, two instructor participants informed me they experience vulnerability in the academic setting on a daily basis. When I asked Elizabeth¹ to share about a time she felt vulnerable while teaching, she described a particular instance. However, she noted that while this was only one example, there are “Thousands of them.” Similarly, John too, feels vulnerable every day. He states:

¹ Names of participants have been changed to protect participant identity.
There’s not a day where I walk into that classroom where I’m not cognizant that I’m putting myself out there. [Vulnerability] happens every time, and I’ve been doing it for years and I don’t think it will ever go away. I don’t know if it’s nervous excitement. I don’t know if it’s because I feel unprepared, but I feel vulnerable every time I go in [to the classroom].

John continues his thought by bringing attention to the light-hearted side of vulnerability: "And this might sound funny, but I always check my zipper." Other times, being vulnerable can mean crying in front of your students. Elizabeth was open about her experiences shedding tears in the middle of class at varying times throughout her teaching career. Elizabeth discloses a particular instance that occurred most recently while teaching a unit on body size and she felt personally connected to the material:

I stumbled upon something where, you know, this guy had a blog or something and he was just very hateful toward large women and basically hateful toward women is what lay underneath that. But truly hateful to the point where - and normally I can blow these things off and it just really got me where I live. And I did start crying again in class. It was like, this was hate speech. This was and, you know, at a certain point you realize it’s not about that women. It’s all women. He just hates women.

It is worth noting, only two instructors who were interviewed for this study could not identify clear moments of feeling vulnerable in their teaching. However, these two participants discussed feelings of being uncomfortable with discussing course material or sharing personal information at least one time throughout their interviews, which suggests to me there is a process potentially identifying these feelings of discomfort as vulnerability.

Regardless of whether or not someone is willing and/or ready to shed light on their vulnerable side, making the conscious effort to embrace one’s vulnerability does not simply happen overnight. John points out finding the authentic, vulnerable self is more about the journey and less about the destination. He comments:
I think finding the authentic self was more of an evolution. It wasn’t one day I woke up and I was like, damn. It took, yeah it took a long time, it took a lot of meditation and a lot of reflection and a lot of reading, re-reading things, Parker Palmer.

Craig also highlights the evolutionary nature of vulnerability. Only, in this instance, it is less about experiencing vulnerability, and more so about responding to student vulnerability. Craig reflects on one situation during his time as a graduate teaching assistant:

First semester, I had no training to be a teacher and so there were basically, no guidelines at all. I didn’t know what I was doing. Students basically tramped over me. In that second semester, I decided to tighten the screws to the point where a student came in and said, you know, “My father died and I won’t be able to turn in the assignment.” And I basically said, I want a copy of the death certificate and you will not be able to turn in the assignment late or else you’ll get an F.

Craig continues to reflect on his response to this student early on in his teaching career:

So, I was completely, sort of, non-empathetic. And I think it traumatized her and I was like, 24-years-old. I learned that lesson that you’ve got to be a little bit more giving. So, I went from losie-goosey to there are no exceptions in life. And that was – it negatively impacted her and it was a teaching moment for me. Because she came to me with a sense of vulnerability: there’s been a death in the family, I need some assistance and I was, I was as non-compassionate as possible.

This very example goes to show that even if an instructor is not quite ready to embrace their own vulnerability, it is important to be mindful of one’s ability to detect such vulnerable expressions in their students to respond appropriately. As Craig mentioned, this student was brave enough to open up and be vulnerable in front of her professor, but at that time in his career, he was not equipped to respond with empathy, affirming the student’s emotions and dilemma at hand.
Some participants referred to vulnerability as a pursuit, where for some individuals, they may accept or embrace vulnerability faster than others. Kaitlyn notes, “I think teaching is inherently to me from my paradigm and my perspective, my experience, a very vulnerable pursuit.” Elizabeth explains it is difficult for her to think of any challenges she has experienced with showing her vulnerable self because “This is the water in which I swim.” She continues to further her point by jokingly saying, “If you asked any of my students, you know, at any time, you’re like, ‘Have you ever seen [referring to herself by name] be vulnerable?’ They’re like, ‘oh yeah’.” While Kaitlyn and Elizabeth both willingly celebrate such a vulnerable and authentic pursuit, it can take some time for other instructors to accept such practices.

The process of being vulnerable for Gary was quite challenging at first for personal reasons. He explains:

Well maybe many years when I first started I had a little struggle with self-disclosure because I’m always such a private individual to begin with. but then I began to realize that the more I would [self-disclose], it came time to opportunities that disclosing about myself would be beneficial to the people that I was teaching. Then I began to disclose more and get in, then the more I did that, the more comfortable I became with it.

One’s developing acceptance for vulnerability may stem from fear. Palmer (1998) points out, “The culture of disconnection that undermines teaching and learning is driven partly by fear” (p. 61). Once we overcome these feelings of fear, we are able to showcase our authentic selves. Cranton (2001) defines authentic teachers as those who are “true to themselves in the classroom. Their personal and professional beings are integrated” (p. 113). This fear of integrating one’s personal life into their professional life is exactly what Mary experiences. She explains her discomfort towards students prompting her to self-disclose details about her personal life, stating:
I would say if it's [self-disclosure] on my terms, like, it's, all good because I wouldn’t be disclosing anything that you know, would make me feel weird. But when that's flipped a little it then I could be a little hesitant. Like, OK, how far is this going to go? What are you going to ask next? You know?

At the root of Mary's fear for vulnerable self-disclosure is her desire for control:

I want to disclose on my own terms. I don't want, like, you know, again, these kind of, younger students poking into my life so I don’t know. I guess that a control thing, like, I like to control that sort of flow of information and when I'm you know, potentially out of control, then I start to feel weird, potentially.

It is not only instructors that experience this sense of feeling 'out of control' when they vulnerable. One student, Abby sheds light on her resistance to ask for help from professors due to her desire for control. When asked what holds her back from speaking with professors outside of class, Abby mentions:

I just don't really like getting help from other people. I like doing things on my own. My whole life I've always had people helping me and I get old of it. I want to prove people I can do it, but sometimes I can't do it and then it's too late to go get help.

For other students, like Spencer and Lucy, it is not control they desire. Rather, they both use words to describe their vulnerability as being 'scared' or 'terrified.'

Spencer mentions he attended a small high school where everyone knew each other. He notes “I don't know if I want to express myself.” When asked if he has experienced any challenges in class with being hesitant sharing information about himself, he replies: “Yes, definitely.” He continues to explain his hesitancy by saying, “I'm scared, I guess. Or maybe the class is too big so I don't want to say something wrong or offend anybody more than anything.” Cotten and Wilson (2006) suggest that students may not disclose because they are fearful of coming across as stupid, or are afraid they will not live up to instructor expectations. Multiple student participants
indicate such fear. Like Spencer, for example, when revealing personal information in class, Lucy is also fearful of expressing her vulnerability. Lucy mentions how she has had a stutter since the fifth grade and reflects on her feelings when disclosing this information:

I’m terrified. Very, very terrified because whenever you tell a person you have a stutter or something very, very personal, like to me, I feel like that sticks with them and they’ll be like, ‘oh, there’s the girl,’ you know what I mean?

When it comes time to telling her professors about her stutter she says:

So, I try to tell them, but I don’t know how they’re going to respond to it — in a positive way or take it as ‘so?’ So, I guess that is an example because I don’t know how they’re going to respond to that.

Lucy also expresses her concern for self-presentation through this disclosure. She does not want her professors to think she is trying to make up an excuse to avoid completing certain class assignments, such as presentations. This concern is one example where disclosure leads to an even greater sense of uncertainty regarding what to disclose and to whom to disclose information.

Even though Lucy later was able to recognize this type of disclosure leads to vulnerability, I would like to point out that neither of the four student participants were able to clearly identify moments of vulnerable in the classroom setting. When I initially prompted her to tell about a time in which she may have felt vulnerable as a college student, Lucy responds, "I mean, I really haven’t had many." Furthermore, when I asked Casey if any vulnerable experiences have transpired into the classroom, Casey says, "I don’t think so necessarily. I’m sure it has in some other ways." Upon deeper reflection, she says:
Getting to know people on a personal level is another thing that probably came from that too. I also joined a sorority coming in so that was a new thing getting adjusted to, like just kind of their lifestyle.

Casey also comments, "Getting to know people overall like the classroom as well as the community was something that I struggled with." Overall, Casey could not attest to vulnerability in the classroom, but she does shed light on vulnerability about adapting to college.

For many students, it can take time to adjust to college life. Students are given a chance to ‘start fresh;’ they have a clean slate. They make new friends and it can be challenging to express yourself in this new environment. One student, Casey explains how she came to college not knowing anyone on campus. Despite not knowing anyone at college, she says this was “actually something good for me.” She further comments:

Coming into college not really having like a group of friends or a community – it was something that was really good for me to get involved in. So that was probably the most vulnerable I’ve felt since being here.

Not only are students adjusting, but new teachers are also learning along the way and trying to find their teaching style. In the beginning on his teaching career, John explains he wanted to be liked by students. He states, "It took a while. When I first started [teaching], I, you know, I wanted to be liked. Who didn’t?" John continues his thought regarding his yearning to be liked by his students, noting:

And so, it took me a while to realize that what I was doing was not necessarily a method to get people to like me, to get students to like me, but it was a reflection of my authenticity. And it took years in the classroom and that I do things with and for students that some of my colleagues are kind of like, ‘what are you doing?’ But that’s who I am and it took a really long time to figure that out.
In this narrative, John brings up commentary from colleagues regarding his pursuit to showcase his authenticity. Such remarks may stem from one’s held beliefs regarding role performance and competence. Roles are a “set of expectations that govern how persons holding a given position should behave” (Trenholm & Jensen, 2013, p.162). While there are many positions we each hold with corresponding roles, in this case these positions include “student” and “instructor.”

In fact, Cranton (2001) argues the ‘good teacher’ construct parallels with the high expectations of the ‘good mother.’ Canton (2001) continues to note the wide array of literature depicting good teaching and explains, “any person trying to measure up to all of these qualities and traits will inevitably fall short on several dimensions” (p. 27). For three of the eight instructor participants, they openly expressed showcasing their authenticity and vulnerability is a fundamental part of their role as an instructor. Elizabeth notes she feels vulnerable each day and comments on how vulnerability is rooted in her teaching practices by stating, “I mean, it’s [vulnerability] is kind of a professional principle of mine.” Like Elizabeth, When John was asked about a time he felt vulnerable in the classroom, he replies with:

Every day. Every time. There's not a day where I walk into that classroom where I'm not cognizant that I'm putting myself out there. It happens every time and I've been doing it for years and I don't think it will ever go away.

While student participants were not cognizant of their roles, their guidelines for behavior are learned. Two instructors, Mary and John discuss socialization and how process impacts how they communicate with their college professors. Mary notes, by the time students reach college, most of them have been in school for about twelve years or longer where this close relationship may not have necessarily been formed or encouraged in
their years as a student in the K-12 education system. She comments students have been socialized to talk with a teacher when a significant turning point happens for the students. She says:

You're only supposed to talk to a teacher if, you know, something – you've been assaulted or you know, something of that nature happens. So, I don't know. I mean, maybe, not even maybe, I mean - I think a lot of it goes back to how students have been socialized to be students and what a professor or teacher-student relationship is and it's not typically one that's depicted as caring, you know?

John also touched on the socialization component that influences the lack of connection among student-instructor relationships. He points out:

They [students] have been socialized from day one to be, you know, independent. It's, you know – we have this very achievement, meritocracy mentality in our world so, you can't be vulnerable at all. You can't show anything but that you are – you know, put your nose down, working hard, dispassionate... But there are so many students who – I mean, that's what they're taught and that's how they get it. It doesn't leave. There's people around here who talk about that. Just work hard. You know, do it and you gotta put the work and the effort and everything's going to be fine.

Despite this socialization cycle, it does not prevent instructors from making pedagogical efforts to establish a sense of connection with their students.

These efforts largely include dismantling the socialization cycle that students have been previously accustomed to in the K-12 education system. Through the act of self-disclosure and vulnerable expression, we reveal more information about ourselves and subsequently relate to one another beyond our social roles. When we showcase a greater sense of authenticity, we are allowing ourselves the opportunity to foster human connection on a more interpersonal level, rather than interacting with one another strictly through our roles as “teacher” and “student.” The process of establishing such connection starts in the classroom. By self-disclosing, as it pertains to course content, students and
instructors alike are opening up and allowing themselves to be seen and engage in the learning experience.

**Vulnerability as a Pathway to Connection**

In college, students gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of their respective disciplines. However, the learning experience encompasses more than the intake of new information. At the root of such a learning endeavor is connection. By connecting course content through lived experiences, students are able to think more critically and form better understandings of the material. In this sense, not only does vulnerability allow students to deeply engage and make connections to course content, vulnerability can also be used as a vehicle to foster interpersonal relationships within the classroom. One of the instructors, Kaitlyn emphasizes, "*In order to connect with people, again [vulnerability] is part of the program. It's part of what's required to make it happen.*" Making strides towards expressing vulnerability is a courageous act that does not always come easy. Brown (2012) argues there is an element of risk involved with coming to terms with one’s own vulnerable pursuit.

While there is risk involved through the act of self-disclosure, this risk provides opportunity for students and teachers alike to form a stronger relationship. Forming such relationships, however, can pose a challenge for a variety of reasons. These reasons include the following the three subthemes: (1) status barriers, (2) striking a balance in self-disclosure, and (3) maintaining relevance to course content.

**Status barriers.**

To my surprise, five instructors mentioned the power dynamic that is at play between faculty and students and of the five, two instructors also emphasized their tactics
in breaking down status barriers. Oftentimes, these barriers create a relational divide among professors and their students, hindering our ability to connect with one another. Position titles such as, "Assistant Professor," "Associate Professor," or "Professor" come with a great deal of power. As Martin, Myers, & Mottet (1999) point out, students are fearful communicating with those of a higher status. To shed one's position of power by subduing such superiority takes great strength, and is an act of facing vulnerability head on. It can be difficult to permeate such boundaries in an effort to foster student-instructor relationships.

For instance, two student participants, Abby and Spencer openly admit they are intimidated by professors and specifically pointed out the age difference as a factor of their intimidation. Abby confesses, "Usually I'm kind of shy towards professors and stuff. I'm intimidated by them or with anyone unless it's someone my age." Professors like John and Kaitlyn are cognizant of student feelings of intimidation and Mary is aware her age influences the ways in which her students communicate with her. That said, they actively attempt to neutralize these feelings of intimidation by dismantling any barriers that can get in the way of forming a student-instructor relationship as early on as the first day of class.

John explains student anxiety is palpable on the first day and he makes great efforts to ease such feelings as students enter the classroom:

I know that they walk into that classroom on that first day just ready to rip their hair out with anxiety. And so, I've started to come to developing this repertoire to break through that and to disarm that. And it's made me comfortable because I can see them ease out a little bit as the process goes.
John continues to illustrate how he and his students alike are feeling vulnerable on the first day and how he attempts to break the ice:

On the first day, I've never met them and I don't their names yet. They come and they sit down. You know, they sit in their desks, they face the front. I'm standing there waiting for them and nobody says anything because they are just scared out of their mind of this class...And so, I know this is happening. So, I start talking, you know, you're chatting with them and things... Part of my vulnerability as the teacher, I feel, is making sure that I'm getting through to them that any barrier that they might present to you.... But then also for my vulnerability, is making sure that I maintain my authenticity and that you know what I used to do and go into the classroom and feel like I was putting on an act, molding and shaping it and kind of evolving into who I am as an instructor making sure that I'm maintaining that as well and part of that bridge is disarming that fear and disarming my anxieties about them not getting it. And then, I found that I do student little joked and I talk about how much of a nerd I am. And it's all true. All those thing, but those are the things I do to try to get them to feel and break down and to get a better sense of themselves in my classroom.

Kaitlyn also understands the importance of breaking down any status barriers that exist between her and her students by engaging in a classroom activity on the first day of class. Kaitlyn adapted an exercise from a former colleague in the department. For the activity, she says: "Every single person has to ask me a question and it can't have anything to do with the class and it start thinking of me as a human being instead of my role. And then I totally self-disclose. " Kaitlyn also mentions she had done this activity previously without stating the questions cannot pertain to the course and many questions students would ask were transactional, such as 'how many exams are we going to have?' as opposed to relational questions. She says, "I want to relate. Start out from the beginning... We are literally just now meeting each other. Very first day, straight out the gate." Other
instructors hold similar philosophies on desires to relate to their students. In turn, they also recognize there is a hierarchy that exists between students and faculty.

While many of the faculty that participated in this study acknowledge their power, Tyler believes a lot of professors “don’t get the recognition that [they] have a lot of power.” Unlike some of his colleagues, he declares:

I've got power. I've got power over their grade, I've got power over the kind of work I can get them to do. We wouldn't have ethics training if we didn't have an understanding that this is at some level, a power dynamic.

This is not to imply professors abuse said power, but what this means is that with a lack of awareness or understanding of this power dynamic, the opportunity to connect with one another becomes more difficult. Putting this divide aside, instructors are able to simultaneously teach the material and attempt to appear relatable to their students when also providing insight on their lived experiences outside of the academy. John further highlights the rapport he has gained with his students through showcasing other aspects of his life with his students though his teaching:

I think [revealing about oneself] is perfect because it breaks down a barrier and the greater rapport as a human being not as a teacher or as a professor, but the more you can build rapport as a human being with your students, I feel and I've found, tend to make for better relationships between the student and the content, between the student and the teacher, between students. It's a much more open atmosphere. To me, it lends to a much more credible endeavor than just, you know, being the sage on the stage.

While John and Kaitlyn are more intentional and proactive in their efforts to diminish a sense of hierarchy, there are other ways to accomplish these barrier breakthroughs and aim for greater connection. Bill, for instance, says:

I want them to connect with me on a person-to-person level, like when I talk to the whole class I don't use the term 'students,' I say
Like Bill, Gary also comments on the notion that the instructor is "a real person" and affirms, "We're all people. We all put our pants on – my mother-in-law used to say britches. Everybody puts their britches on the same way." Meyers, et al. (2009) advise utilizing self-disclosure as a tactic to humanize the instructor, break down barriers, and to be perceived as more approachable. Embodying this attitude in class and showing a different side of yourself as an instructor speaks volumes to the students.

For example, one student, Casey enjoys class when professors relate their own experience to course content:

*It makes it a lot more relatable. I think it helps, rather than just saying, like, here's what we're going to learn [and] not have any applications to real life. I think it's definitely beneficial in teaching.*

Not only is the practice of sharing personal examples beneficial to student learning, Lucy said she likes it when her teachers share personal information in class. She also notes, "When they do that, you can see them more as a person instead of just like your teacher and you can connect to them more.” While sharing personal information can prove beneficial for student learning, it is neither essential nor advantageous to share everything in the classroom setting.

**Striking a balance.**

Cayanus and Martin (2008) consider the amount of disclosure an important aspect when examining instructor self-disclosure in the classroom. Six of the eight instructors I interviewed mentioned there is a balance to be aware of when disclosing about yourself to your students. This balance is, in part, maintaining some aspects of your personal life
private, but it is also important for one to be mindful of types of disclosure. After all, sharing personal examples in class not only creates opportunity for connection between instructors and their student, it also allows students to make deeper connections with the material. For Bill, his main goal when utilizing personal examples in class is to aid in the learning of his students. He states:

_The only thing I really feel is hoping that [self-disclosure] helps them understand the concepts better. It’s not so much I’m wanting to tell everything about myself. It’s like what we’ve talked about, wanting students to better understand the information you’re giving._

When it comes to telling students about himself, it comes very naturally. Bill says, "That is just me. I can’t be someone else." Regardless of how comfortable one might be with sharing personal information, there are certain boundaries to uphold in order to avoid over disclosure. Kaitlyn declares her philosophy on maintaining such balance:

_I’m here to build a bridge, not a wall. And there’s something in my personal life that might make it seem to them that there’s a wall there. I would rather bridge that being vulnerable about it. But that doesn’t mean that, that wall to bridge is like a drawbridge. It doesn’t mean there’s a deluge of all your sh*t coming onto them cause it’s not. That’s not their role, that not what you do._

As Kaitlyn and the old adage proclaim, there is such thing as “too much of a good thing.” Both negative and inappropriate disclosure can negate any and all credibility that was established early on. Mary too, acknowledges such limitations for disclosure and chooses not to share anything and/or everything with her students. However, for her, it is more so in light of maintaining a sense of professionalism. She asserts:

_So, you know, it’s certainly a boundary where, for me, personally, I want students to know something about me. I don’t want them to know everything about me, but trying to maintain some kind of, like, humanity and personality, but also maintain a particular image of professionalism._
As a professional, Mary is well-aware of this importance in upholding a sense of professionalism in the classroom. However, I was not anticipating a student to also shed light on instructor professionalism. One of the students, Casey, brought up how there is "a fine line between professionalism and being like a friend or like something more than like a confidant." Not only is it important to decipher how much to share in order to preserve your credibility, it is essential to be mindful of the types of disclosure you engage in. Another instructor, Gary also advises instructors to be cognizant of their use of negative self-disclosure:

One thing I noticed too, I think, is the instructor has to be careful in what type of disclosures. If they give negative disclosures about them. So, constantly talking about complaining about their life and things like that, I think that works against them. It doesn’t – it kind of cases students – they may feel sorry for them or whatever, but the atmosphere that it creates is not – I don’t feel it’s a healthy atmosphere.

As Gary suggests, engaging in negative self-disclosure impacts the classroom atmosphere. When an instructor gives off this negativity, this further impedes any potential for student-teacher connection. Overall, it is essential to minimize negativity and strive for balance to avoid over-disclosure.

**Maintain relevance.**

Not only is there is a concern with over sharing and type of disclosure, but as Cayanus and Martin (2008) also attest, it is essential to maintain relevance to the content when sharing personal examples in class. Elizabeth explains, "The one thing that’s a challenge is to strike the balance where you’re still saying something meaningful."

Rather than freely sharing un-related information about oneself while teaching, Elizabeth
believes personal examples should be meaningful in some way, especially towards the

course material. She reiterates her point arguing:

*It still needs to matter and you still need to be shedding light on
something that isn’t only your personal story. Your personal
connection is important, but you are still supposed to be saying
something...Disclosing has to, has to matter to be like, ‘What does
this allow me to see that I couldn’t see before?’ If it’s not
answering that, then I don’t understand the connection.*

Striving to maintain relevance in one’s teaching takes time and does not necessarily come
easy, especially as a new instructor. Tyler reflects back on his time as a graduate teaching
assistant, describing his presence in the classroom as ‘*a rush.*’ He notes:

*Suddenly, it’s like, kind of your opportunity if you were never
involved in any drama or theatre, or something to be on the stage.
And I found it to be really, really – it’s fun. But at the same time,
you can get into so much banter with your class, you lose sight of
the fact there really is all this information that they need. And they
don’t really need to hear everything about your day or your kids,
or you know, things like that.*

As Tyler has further developed his skills throughout his career, he’s realized this banter
and use of self-disclosure can distract from the task at hand. Tyler mentions:

*It’s necessary to make sure that the information I’m giving about
myself has a purpose within the lesson and isn’t just to like,
integrate myself to the student or try to seem interesting, you know,
which is a real – that’s really hard, I think.*

It is apparent maintaining this relevance can be difficult to achieve, especially if you are
hoping to be liked by your students, or as Tyler mentions, to come across as interesting.

Though, there are other factors involved in making a class enjoyable for students.

Remarkably, it is not only instructors that feel it is essential to maintain relevance,
but it is also the students that want their teachers to stay on-topic as well. While one
student, Abby says she thinks it is “*nice to get to know your professors a little bit more,*”
there is also a caveat to their use of self-disclosure. Abby also comments, "Sometimes they're boring stories... Some stories just drag long and it's like, 'can we just get back to the lesson?' sometimes, but for the most part it's pretty good." It is not only Abby that feels some stories appear to be 'out of place.' Lucy also highlights a specific example of how one of her current professors integrates personal examples, but does so in a way that connects with the course content. She, too, notes her discomfort when professors disclose without a sense of purpose:

> I have a professor this semester and he talks about his parents dying; their death. And with that, he doesn't just say it to say it. If he has a story, he like, connects it to his parents. So, I mean, I guess if you use it in a way that is connects to the topic and it connects to your students, then I think that's fine. But if like, professors just say it to brag or like, I don't know, then I think it's a little weird.

It is clear, that in order for students and instructors to relate with one another, letting down your guard and embracing your own vulnerability is a way to achieve such relationships. The same goes for making connections with course material. In order to foster all of these connections, there are certain avenues to navigate such as breaking down barriers, and maintaining both balance and relevance in one's own acts of disclosure. Once we begin to make form these relationships, we are able to move forward and connect on an even deeper level through revealing more intimate details of one's private life or even through means of communicating outside of the classroom.

**Vulnerability Invites Vulnerability**

To foster these significant relationships, it starts with disclosure through one's pedagogical practices. If (and when) professors move past self-disclosure as a means for learning and engage in revealing intimate, personal details about one's life, there is
potential to form even more meaningful relationships between teachers and students both in and out of the classroom setting. When we showcase our authentic self, we are opening ourselves up to the final facet of vulnerability, which Brown (2012) refers to as 'emotional exposure.'

Through such exposure on behalf of the teacher, the norm of reciprocity indicates students will also reveal information about oneself. In fact, "When applied to self-disclosure, the norm of reciprocity refers to the phenomenon of the communicator matching the partner's previous disclosure at a similar level of intimacy" (Canary, Cody, & Mausov, 2008, p. 189-190). While I did not interview students and their specific professors, the narrative data indicates students are willing and/or likely to engage in similar vulnerable self-disclosure when the professor exhibits (or models) this behavior. Having said that, the emerging theme vulnerability begets vulnerability is a work in progress.

While evidence to support this theme was not as prominent in my data, there are possible factors to account for its absence. First, being vulnerable is uncomfortable. For instance, student interviews only lasted 10-15 minutes. It is possible the students have limited exposure to being vulnerable, making it harder for them to talk about this phenomenon. Second, lack of student comfort with vulnerability could be attributed to the fact that they are not taught to be vulnerable or open with instructors; instead, seeing them as impersonal educators only there to "teach." Finally, it is also possible the theme was not as evident in the data because there are societal expectations for how students, instructors, or men and women, in general, can and should express their sense of vulnerability with others.
This section is not as fully developed as the two previous themes; however, I felt it was important to discuss this emerging area since my primary research focus was to examine how students' educational experiences have been impacted by being vulnerable and/or witnessing vulnerability in the classroom.

Brantmeier (2013) asserts he has not yet come across ‘vulnerability’ in research literature. The minimal research on vulnerability may be due to the stigmatization of vulnerability in academic culture. Palmer (1998) declares:

If identity and integrity are more fundamental to good teaching than technique – and if we want to grow as teachers – we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives – risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract (p. 12).

The narrative data from my interviews seems to suggest that teachers and students alike are uncertain about vulnerability’s role in the classroom, and feel its stigma. One professor, John states his position on such stigma in academia:

_I think that there's a stigma in the academy that you have to be a whole-hearted objective person at this level and that there are standards and those standards are clear. And you only do a disservice if you don't meet those standards._

Not naming any names, John continues to speak about a former colleague that would “Present themselves as a quintessential, the ideal scholar... This person and I have a completely different orientation to the world, but also our role in it, especially in the academy.” And as hooks (1994) explains, there are professors that believe when an emotional response takes place, their “academic purpose has been diminished” (p. 155).
Highlighting these varying viewpoints about instructor roles and expectations, John reports:

_"I was once looked at like I had 2 heads, 17 arms and was made out to feel, you know, quite like I was not deserving of my position and I wasn’t tenured yet. I was junior faculty and it was a gut check and it was tough. It was really tough."_

While it can be easier for teachers to “Hide behind their podiums, their credentials, their power” (Palmer, 2008, p. 37), it takes great vulnerability to, as two instructors describe, “check your ego” and to be seen – “really seen” for who you are not just as a teacher, but as a unique individual with feelings, emotions, and past experiences.

As previously mentioned, it can prove challenging to reveal details about oneself as a pedagogical method. It can prove equally difficult to move beyond using yourself as an example to better explain course concepts and showcase an even greater sense of authenticity. John describes his challenge to present the whole self in class as a ‘false challenge.’ Granted, it took quite some time to come this realization, however, John explains:

_"I felt like I was putting on an act and once I realized that I was being overly critical about what I was doing and realizing that I was just going up there and talking and acting and doing things in a way that was just my natural self that those challenges disappeared and it’s made me a much more confident, comfortable instructor because of that."_

Similar to John, Mary comments on how her job in fact became easier once she incorporated more of herself into her teaching and became more authentic. She recounts:

_"I don't know if there was like a particular point where I just stopped fighting that in in the name of false professionalism... So you know, I think whenever it was, that I just kind of stopped doing that, just the job became easier. It’s not an easy job, right? Those classroom interactions became easier because I was more me and they appreciate it."_
Once an instructor becomes more comfortable with unveiling their authenticity like John and Mary, this strategic sense of humanizing the classroom becomes another part of negotiating one’s vulnerability.

After speaking with the students, it is evident the professor sets the tone. If they allow themselves to be vulnerable and if they invite students to share, the students are therefore also willing to engage in similar behavior. In regard to authenticity and vulnerable self-expression, Casey explains, “I just think like, the teacher kind of sets the tone and the students follow.” Another student, Lucy explains her comfort level of self-disclosure varies in each class. In the courses where the professor asks how they are doing, she explains, “I guess I feel more comfortable cause I could share,” as opposed to those courses where the professor does not engage in this behavior.

As mentioned earlier, through connecting lived experiences to course material, students are able to understand the content. When professors allow students the opportunity to practice self-disclosure, their learning experience may change. One instructor, Mary even highlights this shift in learning experience. She notes:

*If you have some kind of rapport and charisma with them based on you know, what you disclose to them or with them, you can get them to do things and you know, like being engaged in learning and actually try to do well.*

Reflecting on the notion that students will work harder and/or be more engaged in the overall learning experience, a student, Abby identifies a specific professor that has opened up about their past life and struggles. She says:

*They’re opening up about themselves, so it’s kind nice knowing about their past life and who they came to be, and to be a professor. Something like, the things that they’ve done with their*
family. I think it's interesting... He made it through, so I can do that. I can make it through struggles in life.

Bill, like Abby's professor, highlights a moment when he was sharing with his students about his difficulties getting to the point he is at today:

I emphasize persistence because I had trouble in my marriage, with my daughters, I had trouble with school. I had trouble with a job and then my brother passed away right when I was taking my Ph.D. comprehensives.

Bill further explains:

I've had several students come up to me afterwards saying, 'I'm so sorry you had so much trouble. But that gives me hope that I can do things that I don't think I can and so forth like that.

Through these moments when students and instructors are learning about one another, the potential to form a relationship beyond student-teacher deepens. A student, Spencer explains, "I'd rather build a relationship with a professor that shares about themselves." Spencer also says he enjoys classes more when the teacher shares information about themselves. He also notes, "I feel more comfortable with them because if they're sharing stuff about themselves, it makes me want to share stuff about me." Not only do the students enjoy class more, one instructor, Mary, also mentions how she enjoys class more when she is able to embrace her authenticity. She comments:

I will say though that as I have been doing this for a while. I mean, just the more I let people in, I think the more productive class is, honestly. And because that relationship is better. The comfort level is there. I think the students enjoy class more. And to be honest, I enjoy my job more.

This shift from a basic, surface-level relationship that is dictated through social roles to a more intimate understanding of one another impacts the overall learning experience for students and instructors alike.
Of the four students, three indicate when professors share information about themselves and invite their students to do the same, they feel cared about and can sense their professors enjoy their job. When students and teachers establish this rapport in the class, there is potential for the relationship to expand beyond classroom walls and course content.

There were a handful of instructors in this study who clearly identified their own moments of vulnerability and their need to let students see that vulnerability. Some of these moments included: (a) Using their teaching assistant to escort them to the restroom because they were wearing a boot from a recent surgery and had difficulties opening the door, (b) 'Breaking down' when they told their students their beloved dog was in surgery and they were waiting on a call from their partner, and (c) Telling their students they were in the emergency room the other day because they were showing signs of a heart attack and that they had already experienced heart failure. Each of these moments displays an act that can be seen as potentially going against the grain of academic culture.

The instructors in this study, however, were able to clearly illustrate moments of student vulnerability that transpired out of the classroom, making it seem as if perhaps the stigma of vulnerability is diminishing. Elizabeth, for example, describes a class assignment where a student's courage to be vulnerable led to what can be interpreted as a deeper and more concrete understanding of the course concepts:

*They’re supposed to be exploring symbolism in material culture and religion, but they can do whatever they want as far as topic. But then they have to give me like a museum label kind of written piece contextualizing it. And so, someone did something and the thing itself had to do with rock and roll. The stuff he wrote was about being a survivor of sexual abuse and how this particular kind of music helped him through it.*
Elizabeth continues her thought and begs the question, "Why do they feel the need to disclose that?" She explains, "I think the only reason is that I have given them a space to make sense of something in light of their personal experience in order to interpret it."

Naturally, some classes more so than others, warrant students to share personal experiences in class as they relate to course material.

However, even in such classes that permit students to make personal connections, they do not always feel they can express such vulnerability in front of their professors and peers. As Craig suggests, "I think if there's a space for people to feel vulnerable, to talk, and to get some form of support of identification, I think that's really helpful." Bill is one of the faculty members that fosters such a classroom climate by freely expressing moments of his own vulnerability. In Bill's third or fourth year of teaching, he had a student come visit him in his office. Bill says:

_There was a football player that I has in class and his fiancé was killed in a car accident by a drunk driver and when he came back, I told him, I said look – if you want to talk, please stop by. And he came by and I was very surprised, but very pleased. And he didn’t say anything. He just sat there...He talked a little bit. He just mainly sat there, just starring off. But that was fine. At least he felt he could come here and do that._

Like Bill, John is another one of those instructors that values transparency with his students and chooses to teach authentically. There was a memorable event John shared, where he walked past a computer lab where he recalls, "They were studying and looked absolutely gaunt and I had worked with the students for a couple semesters." He mentions the student was an advisee of his and they have 'really good rapport.' John continues to shed light on the situation, stating:

_I didn’t need them to tell me what I saw, but they were starving. I knew a bit about the history and the situation and helped out when_
I could. So, I walked by a couple times, kind of checked it out, made small talk and then I came back in [my office] and I just, I got angry. Not angry at them, but angry at the situation.

John invited the student into his office and it is in that moment he asked the student, "When was the last time you ate?" and the student broke down saying, 'it had been days.' This instance alone demonstrates the power of the authentic connection that can occur with students and instructors when both are willing to be vulnerable.

Other instructors highlight different moments of student vulnerability such as discussing with students about a loved one passing away, going through chemotherapy, struggles with relationships, being kicked out of college due to failing grades, and so forth. This study begins to demonstrate that through instructor modeling of vulnerability, it opens up student opportunities to engage in similar behavior. Though the notion 'vulnerability invites vulnerability' requires more exploration, the instructors that have exhibited vulnerability in the classroom setting have had students come forward and showcase their own vulnerability. Due to these interactions, students and their professors gain a better understanding of one another and form more salient relationships.


Chapter 5
Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine student-instructor negotiations of vulnerability in and out of the classroom through acts of self-disclosure. Limited research regarding vulnerability in academia necessitated such a study as this (See Brantmeier, 2013 & Metts and Planalp, 2002). Specifically, this study uses a qualitative narrative interview format to gain instructor’s and student’s perspectives on how vulnerability is viewed and utilized in the classroom. Brunner et al., (2014) claim it is the instructor’s responsibility to know how students are navigating challenges they experience, what makes them want to succeed, and what allows them to be resilient and reach their goals. Instructors achieve this by first being willing to show their own vulnerability to students. In order to uncover student-instructor negotiations of vulnerability, I proposed the following research questions:

RQ1: How do students and instructors experience vulnerability in and out of the classroom through acts of self-disclosure?

RQ2: In what ways have students’ educational experiences been impacted by being vulnerable and/or witnessing vulnerability in the classroom?

Through the findings, it is evident there are many ways in which students and instructors each feel vulnerable in and out of the classroom. Participant narratives also suggest an overall positive educational experience on behalf of students and instructors who either practice or witness vulnerable self-expression.

For RQ1, the three emergent themes from the narrative data help us understand how students and instructors experience vulnerability in and out of the classroom. The themes are: (1) vulnerability is a process, (2) vulnerability is a pathway for connection,
and (3) vulnerability invites vulnerability. Vulnerability does not manifest in one way, shape, or form. Rather, it exists on a continuum. Just as one participant points out, it could be something as simple as checking your pants zipper or it could be breaking down in front of students, or waiting for a phone call from a spouse regarding their dog's surgical procedure. There is no one or right way to be vulnerable, but it is a process to move toward vulnerability rather than shy away from it.

In addition, vulnerability varies in frequency. In large part, this is due to the academic culture and student and instructor acceptance (or lack thereof) towards vulnerable expressions. Once students and instructors accept such expressions, there is opportunity for relational growth. Students then have the courage to seek instructors outside of class. Obstacles such as status barriers are a deterrent for students to reach out to their professors outside of class. However, when a professor is willing to share their authentic self beyond their social role as instructor, students report a greater sense of willingness to seek instructors outside of class. Through these out-of-class interactions, a greater relationship is established among students and their professors.

The themes 'vulnerability as a pathway for connection' and 'vulnerability invites vulnerability' help us to understand RQ2. Through professor self-disclosure, students perceive their professors as more relatable. Particularly, when teachers bring their past lives and struggles to the surface, students are more encouraged to put in more efforts into their education and find the strength to overcome their own obstacles. Through these acts of storytelling, it leads to greater human connection.

Furthermore, when instructors use personal examples in class, not only are they perceived as more relatable, but students better understand course concepts and material.
This is a pedagogical tool to develop relationships as well as enhance student learning. Without the use of self-disclosure as it pertains to course material, there is a lack of real-world understanding for the students. Adding these elements of depth to one’s teaching leads to a more robust learning endeavor. While the notion ‘vulnerability begets vulnerability’ is a work in progress, students overall expressed satisfaction (or joy) in class more when the instructor self-disclosed, as opposed to the courses where they do not feel like they could identify with the professor beyond their role as a teacher.

**Theoretical Implications**

Thornberg and Charmaz (2014) attest, “Grounded theory is a research approach in which data collection and analysis take place simultaneously. Each part informs the other, in order to construct theories of the phenomenon under study” (p. 153). Utilizing grounded theory allowed the narrative data to guide me through the research process and uncover new ways of looking at vulnerability and self-disclosure in institutions for higher learning. There are limited studies addressing this communicative phenomenon between students and professors. Through this theoretical approach, I have learning more about the role vulnerability plays in the academic setting. The road to vulnerable self-expression can be quite long and take time. Regardless, it is advantageous to embrace one’s vulnerability and sense of authenticity.

**Limitations**

While the findings of this study help shed light on student and instructor experiences of vulnerability, there are several limitations to this study. First, the participants in this study were either students or employees at a regional, Mid-Western
University. This study's findings, thus, provide limited knowledge on the ways in which students and instructors negotiate their own vulnerability in higher education institutions.

Second, the students that participated in this study were all first-year, freshman in college and mostly women. The number of years a student has been attending college can play a role in how one may perceive their day-to-day experiences of vulnerability or authenticity. As the freshman students mention in their interviews, they do not have significant experience engaging in vulnerable self-disclosure with their instructors in or out of the classroom. It is possible the relationships students form with their professors evolve over time in-part, due to maturity and taking more courses for their major with repeat instructors. Taking these limitations into consideration, there is potential for future studies to expand our knowledge on this phenomenon.

Future Studies

This current study serves as a guide for future research related to student and instructor vulnerability. It could prove beneficial to address elements of diversity and how gender, race, and sexuality impact one's ability to be vulnerable in the academic setting. For instance, Brantmeier (2013) affirms the possibility that, “Marginalized voices are perceived as ‘just whining or complaining’” (p. 102) when expressing one’s authentic, vulnerable self.

One instructor, Tyler acknowledges privilege is woven within the ability to show one’s vulnerable or authentic self. He mentions:

*I’m a white male and I’m not expected to be vulnerable... I think

*for women or minority instructors it would be a lot harder, though,*
obviously I don’t speak for them. There’s always that chance that
the vulnerability will be misconstrued as a lack of professionalism.

Tyler further notes, “I don’t think of acting vulnerable. I guess I feel invulnerable
greatly.” This notion can be attributed to his position as a white, male. Brantmeier (2013)
also asserts, “Privilege of vulnerability is afforded to some and not others” (102).

Brantmeier (2013) continues to say:

As a member who benefits from the dominant patriarchal and racial power
structure, my sharing personal stories as a white male, deconstructing my
identity, and suggesting I do not know a lot of things is easier for me
because of my identity (p. 102).

That said, one’s positionality can impact their willingness to be vulnerable due to any
consequences or repercussions they may face. It may also be worthwhile to examine non-
normative expressions of vulnerability in men due to societal expectations regarding male
emotional and vulnerable expressions.

Furthermore, since the professors that participated in this study teach courses in
either the humanities or social sciences disciplines, it may be worthwhile to uncover how
vulnerability does (or does not) emerge across other disciplines, particularly in the math
and sciences. Due to the fact that the humanities and social sciences focus on human
interaction, it may be easier to incorporate self-disclosure and vulnerability in one’s
pedagogical practices. Those in mathematics and sciences, however, may not display
vulnerability or allow opportunities for instructors and students to express vulnerability
and authenticity in the classroom in part, due to the course content.
Another suggestion for future research is to examine how students and instructors experience vulnerability at different stages of their academic careers. The timing in one’s academic journey may shape how each engages in and negotiates vulnerability in and out of the classroom. Classroom environment may also influence vulnerability expressions. As one faculty participant, Gary, mentioned, he has observed more self-disclosure in the online courses than in his traditional, face-to-face courses. Future studies can examine the ways in which vulnerability manifests in an online course setting as opposed to a face-to-face course setting.

**Practical Implications**

There are several practical implications of this study. The narrative data collected for this study provides great insight for instructors. According to Brantmeier (2013), “A pedagogy of vulnerability challenges teachers to render their frames of knowing, feeling and doing vulnerable” (p. 96). The keyword in this statement is ‘challenges.’ While some instructors will be more willing to incorporate vulnerability into their pedagogical practices, regardless of comfort level, there will be several challenges along the way.

Nevertheless, incorporating vulnerability opens avenues for students to get to know you (the instructor) on a more personal level leading to a greater investment into their education and the development of a more salient relationship expanding beyond a traditional teacher-student dynamic. This also alleviates an instructor’s pressure to divide their personal and professional lives and become their whole, authentic self in the classroom. In fact, one participant notes, he feels like “a fraud” when getting wrapped up into class lecture without room for student discussion about the topic at hand. Allowing
room for authenticity in one's teaching creates a positive classroom climate for instructors and their students.

Additionally, instructors tend to enjoy their teaching more when they can express their authentic self in the classroom. These findings support Brantmeier's (2013) recommendations that instructors share their stories because:

If the educator opens up her/his identity and life up for examination as a part of the *lived curriculum* of the classroom, students will model that self-examination and go deeper in their learning; learning becomes relevant, has value beyond the classroom, and new meaning is constructed in the process (p. 97).

Finally, this study demonstrates that when an instructor showcases their authenticity, students are able to connect more to the material and find their educational experience more enjoyable, which then leads to a greater willingness to interact with faculty out-of-class. My hope is that the insight gained from this study gives new instructors, seasoned instructors, and college students the courage to shed their skin and allow themselves to be vulnerable.

Overall, for instructors, one participant highlights a large takeaway from this study. He says:

*Check your ego at the door... The only thing that makes you different from those people sitting in those desks — we were once them. The only difference between us and them is that we are older and have way too much education. We were once them. We were*
young, we were searching, we were ignorant, we just caught the

bug that we wanted to do this. So, don’t – you can’t forget that.

The narratives show above all else, we are all human beings and as Brown (2012) asserts, “Vulnerability is the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experiences” (p. 12). Students and instructors can let down their guards, showcase their vulnerable, authentic selves and co-create more meaningful experiences both inside and outside the classroom.
References


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Appendix A
Student Interview Questions

1. Tell me about a time you have felt vulnerable as a college student.

2. How do you perceive professors that discuss personal information in class?

3. How often do you typically talk with your professors?

4. What motivates you to talk with your professors outside of class?

5. What do you normally discuss with your professors during out-of-class interactions?

6. What hold you back from talking with your professors?

7. What characteristics do professors possess that make you more inclined to discuss personal matters with?

8. When experiencing personal problems, what made you choose to tell your professor about it?

9. Think of one professor you are comfortable expressing personal issues with. How do they typically respond in these conversations?

10. If you do not feel comfortable sharing personal difficulties with professors, how do you think they might react if you chose to tell them?

11. If you choose to discuss personal problems with professors, how does this impact your overall satisfaction and performance?

12. If you choose not to discuss personal problems with professors, how might this hinder your academic success and satisfaction?

13. What strategies would you recommend professors implement in order to engage in more open communication regarding personal struggles?
Appendix B
Instructor Interview Questions

1. Tell me about a time you felt vulnerable in the classroom.
2. How often do students speak with you outside of class?
3. What are these conversations typically about?
4. What do you believe motivates students to speak with you outside of class?
5. How do you feel when disclosing personal information about yourself?
6. How do you typically respond to a student that comes forward with you about personal problems they are experiencing?
7. In what ways do you communicate with students to let them know they can discuss personal matters with you?
8. How do you incorporate vulnerability in your pedagogical practices in the classroom?
9. Can you discuss some challenges you have experienced with presenting your authentic self in the classroom?
10. In your opinion, what holds students back from reaching out to you regarding personal problems?
11. What advice would you give students that are apprehensive about communicating personal struggles with their professors?
12. Do you believe vulnerable expressions diminish or enhance teacher credibility and professionalism? Why?
13. What recommendations would you give faculty members to embrace their own vulnerability in their everyday teaching experiences?