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How much of myself do I bring to the classroom?
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Abstract
Autoethnographic research was conducted on a professor’s decisions regarding how much of her personal experiences with major loss she would bring into her Death and Dying class. Her research question was, “Is it safe and helpful to students for an instructor to bring traumatic personal experiences into the classroom?” Using a self-reflective process of exploration and feedback from her students the researcher/instructor negotiated the boundaries between her personal and professional lives. Results from this autoenthographic study reveal the ways in which an instructor can safely bring her own experiences into the classroom as a strategy for enhancing student learning.

Literature
The pedagogy of vulnerability:
The pedagogy of vulnerability has been explored with regard to the appropriate boundaries of self-disclosure on the part of professors in the classroom (Brantmeier, 2013). Bringing some personal and professional experiences into the classroom can allow students to better understand the realities of theoretical concepts taught in the classroom. Too much personal information can put instructors at emotional risk and can make students feel uncomfortable which can become a barrier to learning.

Research question
“Is it safe and helpful to students for an instructor to bring traumatic personal experiences into the classroom?”

Methods
The process for this autoethnography involves the personal reflections of the researcher. These are narratives created by the researchers own experiences (Patton, 2015). I taught Death and Dying several times both online and face-to-face since my daughter’s death in 2011. I used the lesson plans from each face-to-face class to chronologically reflect on the places where my personal life and my role as professor intersected. I analyzed the information in the journal using a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). From this analysis several themes emerged. This poster will present three of them: “Creating a window with a curtain,” “Students and their walls,” and “Real world versus academic aloofness.”

Creating a window with a curtain
If the boundary between my personal and professional lives were a wall, there were windows in the wall where I could peer between the two sides. There are times when I can look over at the personal when standing in the classroom. I can even describe what is on the other side but often I need to close the curtains quickly to keep emotions from overtaking me while playing my professional role.

My students and their walls
I ask my students to sit on the wall between their role as student and their personal lives. I ask them to look to their personal experiences as a way of informing and enhancing their academic learning. If that is true and the students and I are co-constructors of learning, how can I fully participate in the process of teaching and learning if I walk into the classroom with a tall wall that separates me from my personal experiences? If I am asking my students to cross over their walls, accessing their personal experiences in the pursuit of understanding, I have to do the same. It is fundamental part of the co-constructed learning.

Real world versus academic aloofness
I was given the opportunity to see what death is really like. It is messy and disturbing and filled with misdirection. You think one thing but it becomes another. You have hope, the medical staff encourage it, but in some ways that is a disservice to the living. It gives you no time to let reality sink in. It increases the shock when the person dies. I bring these real world experiences into the classroom and in so doing I bring much more than the theoretical perspectives of academic learning.

Conclusions and recommendations
The integration of personal experiences can be helpful to student learning but there needs to be limitations to the infusion of personal experiences.

Benefits:
Instructors’ personal experiences can help to bring theory into the real world. This helps students to better understand difficult concepts. Providing some measure of vulnerability in the classroom, especially with difficult subjects, allows students to feel more comfortable opening up about their own experiences. This enriches the classroom experience and provides for a range of personal experiences, those of the instructor and those of the students, to help bring theoretical ideas to life.

Challenges:
Too much personal reflection, especially from instructors, can turn the classroom from a learning environment to a therapeutic environment. It can close down learning rather than open it up. When only one perspective, that of the instructor, is brought into the learning environment it can appear as if the diversity of experiences related to a concept do not exist or are somehow inappropriate or limited.

References