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We Don't Do That Here: Investigating and Expanding Instructional Communication by "Transing" the Communication Classroom

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Traditional instruction and communication research defines appropriate, effective teacher self-disclosures as moderate, relevant, and positively-valenced. However, despite the wealth of research about teacher self-disclosure in the classroom, no current research explores the constraints faced by trans instructors in navigating personal identity in the classroom. To fill this gap, I engage in the practice of "transing" teacher self-disclosure from my perspective as a trans/non-binary GTA. This autoethnography provides important insights into how marginalized instructors are unable to enact taken-for-granted "best practices" in the classroom.*

Keywords: self-disclosure, trans theory, communication studies, instructional communication, autoethnography

* * *

It's the first day of GTA orientation, my first time experiencing the department and our workplace in person. I feel excited about the moments to come, because school has always been my happy place. It's two hours into the day and my excessive water drinking habit has made me have to pee. I ask two second-year GTAs to join me in finding a gender-neutral bathroom. After minutes of searching with no success, I enter the Communication Office, disclose my trans/non-binary identity, and ask where to find the

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gender-neutral bathroom in the building. [Redacted] stares at me, confused, and replies, “We don’t do that here.” I feel as though I cannot breathe, as if someone has sucked the oxygen from my lungs.

* * *

Communication studies at large has a cissexism and transphobia problem. Both Johnson (2013) and Yep (2003) argue communication studies scholars often assume the sex/gender binary to be real, leaving little room for trans* people in our analyses or physical, educational buildings¹. Unsurprisingly, the problem of cissexism faced by communication studies broadly also plagues instructional communication research. Although a growing number of instructional communication scholars have recognized the need to shift classroom and research practices to create safe(r) educational environments for trans* students (e.g., LeMaster, 2019; LeMaster & Johnson, 2019; Spencer & Capuzza, 2016), scholars have yet to use research methods to explore trans* teachers’ experiences in communication studies classrooms. This fact corroborates Spencer and Capuzza’s (2016) claim that instructional communication is currently behind other fields in its efforts to explore, include, and highlight trans* experiences. As a remedy, Yep (2003) explains that including trans studies in communication research can help us better account for how power and ideology create and reify differences. This remedy should be extended to the study of communication and instruction as well. Thus, I use autoethnography as a trans/non-binary instructor to better understand and critically interrogate key concepts in instructional communication research and practice.

Transphobia and cissexism in academia manifest in cavernous gaps and malpractices in research about trans* experiences, further marginalizing already oppressed communities. In instructional communication in particular, Spencer (2015) found that articles claiming to explore and discuss LGBTQ issues typically mention the term “transgender” only when spelling out the abbreviation itself. Spencer and Capuzza (2016) claim that this practice harmfully conflates gender with sexuality, ignoring the nuances of the experiences of trans* folks as existing across a broad range of genders and sexualities and thus embodied and lived experiences. They find that the term *transgender* appears all of five times in *Communication Education* (as of 2016), with each of these instances involving little to no analysis or exploration beyond the use of the word. As of October 2021, this number

1 The language we use holds power (Foucault, 1972), and thus it is necessary to make intentional decisions about terms used to describe trans* (and all) people in research. For the purposes of this autoethnography, the term “trans*” is used to refer to the umbrella of experiences associated with transness. Tompkins (2014) explains that the asterisk “...blends the symbol’s wildcard function with its use as a figurative bullet point in a list of identities that are not predicated on the trans- prefix” (p. 27). Additionally, I use the term “trans” without the asterisk both as a noun to describe my and others’ specific individual experiences of transness and as a verb to describe the act of “transing” as detailed by Yep et al. (2015).

has increased to 20. Of the articles added, zero come close to exploring or centering the experiences of trans* people in instructional communication. Even in related fields like education research, few to no investigations of the experiences of trans* instructors exist. Of those that do, many publications (e.g., Bower-Phipps, 2017) fall victim to the same harm of equating experiences of sexuality and gender criticized by Spencer and Capuzza (2016), failing to attend to the larger power structures this practice reifies in the first place. In response to this harm, Spencer and Capuzza call for greater interrogations of the core assumptions about gender and transness in both research about and the practice of instructional communication, making the present autoethnography a timely and necessary endeavor.

Instructional communication, ultimately, seeks to better student outcomes by modifying instructor behavior. In the last few decades, researchers have begun the work of investigating the role culture and identity play in this relationship between instructor behaviors and students' outcomes (i.e., Titsworth & Mazer, 2016; Gendrin & Rucker, 2007). Titsworth and Mazer (2016) speak to the need to attend to the broader societal context when assessing teacher clarity in the classroom. They explain that different cultural contexts may have unique definitions of teacher clarity, requiring theories and measures of teacher clarity developed in consideration of those unique definitions. In other words, theories of instructional communication are not one size fits all theories because they require us to pay attention to cultural norms and contexts when developing and evaluating them. Others like Gendrin and Rucker (2007) have worked to explore how instructor and student race shift student perceptions of key concepts in instructional communication. They found that Black students and White students had differing perceptions of the nonverbal immediacy of their instructors, regardless of the instructor's identity. These considerations suggest that identity and culture play an integral role in how key concepts in instructional communication function and thus provide important avenues for exploration in the field of instructional communication.

The ways in which instructors engage in educational practices is highly dependent on dominant ideologies at play in the classroom and broader school community (Hill, 2017; King, 2013). While instructional communication and education researchers investigate methods of improving teaching and educational systems at large, many of these investigations neglect to attend to the socio-political context of educational institutions, spaces specifically informed by Whiteness and the normalizing forces that feed it such as heteronormativity (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018). Dominant ideologies in spaces of education (e.g., homonormativity, cisnormativity, Whiteness, etc.) are enforced and (re)created via material consequences. When one's difference gets too loud, when it enters the public sphere at work or in the classroom, when it comes alongside additional axes of oppression and marginalization, educators can face material violence (e.g., harassment,

Kamenetz, 2018; and termination, Madani, 2020; Wingate, 2021).

As shown in the story above, the normalizing efforts of cisnormativity lead to the punishment of individuals that venture outside of acceptable norms in educational spaces, both by institutions and other community members. In the case of the New York teacher fired for marrying his partner (Wingate, 2021), another teacher at the Catholic school reported his marriage to the diocese. Here, another community member forcibly outed a gay teacher, mirroring Yep et al.'s (2015) conceptualization of gender as administrative, reinforced and upheld by punishment from others. Material consequences also occur against teachers that disrupt norms related to race and power in classrooms, like the White Tennessee teacher fired for teaching lessons on White privilege (Natanson, 2021) or the constant questioning of instructors of color like that faced by Calafell (2010). And so, we as marginalized educators must navigate oppressive, dominant ideologies in educational spaces that seek to punish us for defying those dominant beliefs, practices, and norms.

While researchers have attended to the role of identity and culture in the classroom (i.e., Gendrin & Rucker, 2007; Titsworth & Mazer, 2016), few go a step further to understand how dominant ideologies inform the role that identity and culture play in education. In a world where those very dominant ideologies shift or change how instructors (and students) can engage with educational institutions and also shift and change themselves throughout time and space, we must critically (re)engage key concepts in instructional communication to expose and untangle how identity, power, privilege, and oppression shift their meaning, enactment, and possibility. To do this is to create theories that have the ability to (or awareness of their inability to) encapsulate and account for the experiences of all teachers. If the current norm is to ignore how dominant ideologies impact instructors' enactment of theories and concepts in instructional communication, then those theories are made for instructors that do not have to be painfully aware of the dominant ideologies at play in their classrooms every single day.

* * *

This is hopeless. My heart rate is so fast I can hear it in my ears. I haven't been able to take a full breath for 15 minutes since I heard the first student refer to me with "she." Dreading the possible confrontation, I hesitantly interrupt the group discussions.

"Great discussions today, everyone. Don't forget about your upcoming assignments."

Students begin to pack up. Shuffling backpacks and zipper noises permeate the classroom.

"Before we leave, I would like to call attention to something I observed today." *I hope they can't hear the anxiety in my voice, wound tightly around my vocal cords.*

"I overheard many individuals use she/her pronouns for me..."
Can't alienate anyone...

“As a friendly reminder...”

But they have to know this is important.

“...my pronouns are they/them, and I expect everyone to exclusively use they/them/theirs pronouns when referring to me.”

I stand at the front of the class wringing my hands. Students begin to leave, and I erase the whiteboard to busy myself and avoid further discussion. A student approaches and says loudly enough for others to hear:

“I want you to know it wasn’t me. It was the boys in the left corner.”

The boys in the left corner rush out of the room, avoiding eye contact, and I do not see two of them in class the following week.

...

The Nuances of and Differences in Teacher Power

Attending to dominant ideologies in the classroom is necessary to produce educational practices and theories rooted in the lived realities of *all* instructors and students, not only those who meet the expectations of those dominant ideologies. Prevalent educational practices proposed and studied by instructional communication scholars can fall victim to assuming homogeneity when it comes to power dynamics in the classroom. One pivotal concept explored in instructional communication literature is teacher power, or “the ability to effectively influence others” (Goodboy & Goldman, 2016, p. 129). Goodboy & Bolkan (2011) outline 5 types of teacher power, three prosocial (reward, expert, and referent) and two antisocial (coercive and legitimate). Their study argues that students were motivated to engage with instructors that used the three prosocial behaviors (reward, expert, and referent) for more positive reasons (i.e., relational, functional, and participatory motivations) rather than negative ones (sycophancy and excuse-making motivations).

However, the scale developed by Goodboy & Bolkan (2011) does not engage in any cultural considerations. This is particularly important to note, given the Gendrin and Rucker (2007) finding that student race predicted different perceptions of teacher behavior, leading to different motivations and outcomes. Regardless of the kind of teacher power perceived, Black students and White students had significantly different motives to communicate with their instructors for different reasons. Beyond challenging the core assumptions made by Goodboy & Bolkan (2011), Gendrin and Rucker’s (2007) findings demonstrate the pivotal role that identity plays in teacher/student interactions. Although Goodboy & Bolkan (2011) conceptualize teacher/student, powerful/powerless as rigid, homogenous, constant categories, Gendrin and Rucker (2007) demonstrate that these categories are nuanced and complicated, and those nuances and complications impact how students react to teacher power. To conceptualize teacher power in a rigid, uniform way is to hold other, extraneous variables as constants when they certainly are not.

One way we may attend to these *extraneous variables* in a way that sees them as directly impacting teacher/student relationships and the classroom itself is by telling and analyzing stories from the perspective of marginalized instructors. To better understand teacher power and challenge current assumptions about it, I use this autoethnography to provide a counternarrative centered on my experiences with teacher power. This practice comes from the idea of “transing”, a practice that can expose the ways that gender is (re)created alongside and in tandem with multiple structures of power like white supremacy and Eurocentrism in various spaces (Yep et al., 2015). Here, I tell stories to expose the ways that my gender is (re)created alongside my Whiteness in the classroom by analyzing my experiences compared to those represented in current instructional communication literature. The process begins from an understanding that, first, gender is made meaningful in the context of other bodily and social differences like sexuality, race, nation, ability, etc.; second, gender is performative and administrative, i.e., constituted through repetitive acts and governance that makes it appear static and natural; and third, gender is multiple rather than binary. From these understandings of gender, Yep et al. (2015) argue that scholars can “trans” a particular concept or context in communication studies by analyzing how trans* people navigate a gender oppressive cultural system present within that concept.

My being White and visibly trans/non-binary informs my access to power in the classroom. For students that hold transphobic belief systems, my asking them to use my pronouns is not only futile, but it also puts our relationship in a compromising position. While I felt I engaged in as much kindness and positivity as I could, my use of power to gain compliance from students to use my correct pronouns alienated at least the boys that neglected to come to class the next week. Additionally, missing from the story above is the fact that only one student felt motivated to engage with me after class. Most days that I taught argumentation in person, I had multiple students stay after class to engage in small talk, ask questions about the course, or invite me to their upcoming performances and sports games. It felt as though my use of power that day dissuaded students from engaging with me at all. Their absence the following weeks demonstrates a distancing from my class, from me as a teacher, from me as a person.

The student that pointed out the boys in the left corner as being at fault engaged with me after class for the purpose of distancing herself from the misgendering and identifying those responsible. While she did engage with me, I interpreted her behavior to fall under the sycophancy motivation category, or “communicating in order to flatter or impress the instructor” (Goodboy & Martin, 2014, p. 268). While her motivations may have been relational in nature, she never expressed any type of allyship toward trans* people before or after that interaction, even when classroom discussions swerved toward trans* people in sports or a lack of gender-neutral bathrooms

on campus. This interaction left me feeling as though her informing me of the boys' mistakes was to gain my favor rather than build a deeper relationship with me over shared interests or worldviews. I especially feel this given her saying that it wasn't her and it was someone else, presumably in case I had assumed it was her. I did not feel like she told me because she cared about our relationship but rather because I am the one grading all of the assignments in the class. The reactions to my standing up for myself and reaffirming my pronouns shows that transphobia and cissexism, the dominant ideologies at play in repeated misgendering (and negative reactions to correcting misgendering), complicate how students perceive teacher power. Simply having to have a conversation about my personal identity and experience of transphobia informs student perceptions of me in general, the type of power I deploy to gain compliance, and thus the relationship I can build with them as pupils.

Importantly, as a White trans/non-binary person, my authority in the classroom has never been challenged by other educational staff or students during my time as a GTA. In a White supremacist society, my access to Whiteness affords me authority and protection from the questioning experienced by instructors that do not have that same privilege. White supremacy, heteronormativity, classism, etc. operate in tandem and determine together the amount of authority and value granted to members of educational institutions. As explained by Gendrin and Rucker (2007), predominantly White institutions, and thus their classrooms, are steeped in White supremacist communication values and norms. As experienced by Calafell (2010) and more, instructors of color working in predominantly White classrooms do not have the same access to the expert power axis in students' eyes (even if they are experts and exhibit the same behaviors as instructors that do experience White privilege). An instructor can do all of the right things and not get the positive engagement or motivate students to engage in productive ways because of cultural context and dominant ideologies in the classroom. The identity characteristics (and the dominant ideologies that influence our assumptions about them) play a substantial role in students' motivations to engage.

The complicated nature of how students perceive the actions of their instructors (and vice versa) challenges our current oversimplification of the relationship between teachers and students as being those with power versus those without power. Even among those that seek to challenge structures of power within the academy, many researchers ascribe power to instructors and powerlessness to students without much regard for the circumstances and variables that make those classifications more complicated. For example, Wilkinson and Hartsough (2021) present a beautiful poem exploring the use of metaphor and allegory to explore power in educational spaces like the classroom. However, their analysis and exploration of power paints students as colonized and faculty and instructors as colonizers. Although

this may be a helpful framework for some critiques of the academy, its oversimplification of the relationship between instructors and students spells trouble for marginalized instructors. Not only have many instructors directly experienced colonization themselves, but this conflation of instructors with power cannot explain the experiences of instructors that have been fired and ostracized because of their identities and the belief systems of their students and broader educational institutions. Trans* teachers getting fired because their students and students' parents complain about their identity to school administrations have a complicated level of and relationship to power in their classrooms. Although teachers who are at higher risk of being fired for their identities maintain power over students when grading papers, leaving feedback, and acting as a role model (to some), they must also navigate the risk that their forcible outing or self-disclosure could result in termination.

* * *

“Hi class, it’s nice to meet you.”

My voice shakes.

“To start, I want to go around and have everyone introduce themselves.”

Heart rate increases.

“I’ll start.”

Here we go. Just like you rehearsed. You got this. Your friend is sitting right there to support you.

“My name is Mikay. I use they/them pronouns. I introduce my pronouns when I meet people for the first time so they know how to refer to me. My pronouns are important to me as a trans/non-binary person, and I feel uncomfortable when referred to as he/him or she/her. Please respect that and refer to me with they/them/theirs or my name. If you would like to share your own pronouns when you introduce yourself, feel free to do so.”

I feel the blank stares back at me, the stares of students that have probably never had a trans instructor before. No students choose to share their own pronouns during their introductions.*

* * *

Self-disclosure: Beyond an Instructional Tool

Queer scholars in education research have shifted the conversation to attend to the unique experiences of self-disclosure for queer teachers. Lesbian, gay, and/or queer teachers (referred to as LGQ teachers in the present exploration, representing those that deviate from heteronormative expectations of sexuality) must consider 1) the potential alienation of homophobic students and 2) the potential risk of losing their job or being treated differently by staff and parents when deciding to disclose their sexuality (Nielsen & Alderson, 2014). Due to these potential consequences, queer teachers employ varied levels of self-disclosure with their students and the broader school community, ranging from being “out” to everyone to hiding potential markers of their sexuality (Bower-Phipps, 2017; McKenna-

Buchanan et al., 2015; Tompkins et al., 2019). Thus, research exploring LGQ instructors names these instances of personal self-disclosure as strategic, wherein instructors enact agency to navigate the potential marginalization that comes with disclosing one's sexuality (King, 2013). King (2013) explains that strategic self-disclosure as a method of personalized boundary setting allows LGQ teachers to maintain some level of safety and comfort with regard to their sexualities in educational spaces.

Importantly, however, factors constraining one's ability to engage in strategic self-disclosure are highly dependent on both socio-political context and the multiple intersecting identities of the instructor and their students (Arraiz Matute et al., 2020). For instance, skin color is not a category one can choose to disclose or not disclose in many instances, and it is a category that shifts how one's sexuality is accepted and/or understood by others. King (2013), in her discussion of strategic disclosure, explains that her inability to "pass for heterosexual or white or born-in-the-USA American" leads people to presume "things about [her] based on what they can see" (p. 102). These assumptions complicate the agency of some teachers to choose when and how to define their own subjecthood in the first place. Supporting this perspective of strategic self-disclosure as highly individual, Hill (2017) details her own choice to be vulnerable with students in her classroom as a Black lesbian educator. She explores the ways in which her Blackness makes her queerness undetectable in predominantly White classroom spaces because of normative conceptions of queerness upheld by White supremacy and Whiteness. Thus, disclosing her identity challenges normative conceptions of queerness as the antithesis of Blackness, a goal she has set for herself in her own classes. For both Hill (2017) and King (2013), the interplay between homonormativity and Whiteness substantially complicates questions of strategic self-disclosure and "outness" in the classroom.

While LGQ teachers modify the amount and kind of self-disclosure they engage in relevant to their sexuality, if I am to have my pronouns known and used in the classroom, I must disclose them on the first day of class. As evidenced by King (2013), Bower-Phipps (2017), and Tompkins et al. (2019), choices around if, when, and how to disclose one's sexuality are constrained and informed by one's intersecting identities, socio-political context, class/school environment, and more. As demonstrated above and following this logic, transness as one aspect of an instructor's identity has the potential to change and inform teacher self-disclosure as well. Supporting this assumption, Leonardi (2017) found that the ability for LGQ adults more generally to choose to come out in their classrooms was substantially impacted by their gender identity and expression, as being in or outside of the binary. Others make assumptions about our sexualities and genders when we fall outside of traditional gender norms, removing our agency to define our own identities.

Throughout the above stories, I reflect on my efforts to balance the level

of self-disclosure in which I participate, particularly with students in the classroom. Although I cannot choose to disclose my identity, I enact agency while self-disclosing by not describing my gender identity, expression, or medical history beyond what is necessary. Like in the stories above, I only disclose my being trans/non-binary and my use of they/them pronouns, as these pieces of information are directly relevant to not being misgendered by students and other community members. When correcting others that misgender me, I remind them of my pronouns and move the conversation along. The choices to self-disclose with others in the room, at particular times, and without a significant amount of detail have all prevented some amount of emotional burnout associated with having to justify my existence as a trans person. Notably, as with the presence of my friend in the above story, I find agency and power through the support of colleagues and students willing to engage in behaviors to support me through moments of self-disclosure and transphobia. Moments of outside intervention from allies in the past have mitigated the pressure I felt existing as the only trans/non-binary GTA in my cohort. I am grateful to those in the department and in my life that remind me I am not alone, even when I feel it. They also remind me of the power of being out in the open, being visible.

Self-disclosure, as it is discussed in instructional communication literature, looks different for me as a trans person. Many foundational instructional communication publications (e.g., Cayanus, 2004; Cayanus & Martin, 2008; Lannutti & Strauman, 2006; Sorensen, 1989) view self-disclosure as a mechanism solely to build relational closeness with students and supplement learning during intentionally chosen lessons, implying a high level of choice and relevance to course content and classroom management. However, it is clear by my own experiences and those described in the literature of LGQ teachers that self-disclosure in the classroom is more complicated than just being a teaching tool. Hannah and Meluch (2022), in their investigation of instructors' perceptions of the risks and benefits of disclosing to students, find that instructors use self-disclosure to provide relevant examples and humanize themselves as instructors. However, many instructors also mentioned that they found self-disclosures to carry inherent risks like job security and credibility. Those fears led to some choosing not to disclose, as also found by McKenna-Buchanan et al. (2015). Ultimately, these fears about self-disclosure in the classroom complicate the teacher/student relationship as being powerful/powerless.

While Hannah and Meluch (2022) provide some nuance to our understanding of teacher self-disclosure, they still ultimately focus on using disclosure to benefit students (relationships and learning) rather than viewed as a survival mechanism or tool for marginalized teachers. Transing this concept by comparing my experiences with self-disclosure above to this productive or mechanistic view of self-disclosure can extend, expand, and add nuance to our understanding of how it can be used in the classroom. Not only

can things like teacher power and self-disclosure be chosen to help students learn, but they can also be navigated and enacted by marginalized instructors to survive educational institutions permeated by harmful structures of power. For me, actions like choosing how much to disclose and bringing allies in on the first day of class when I know a disclosure is necessary tell us the power we can find in traditional instructional communication concepts to survive. Reflecting on those actions also tells us that our actions as instructors are about more than impacting student outcomes. In an ideal world, all that would matter would be our ability to help students learn and grow. However, this autoethnography and those before it are both a reminder and a call to further investigate how marginalized instructors balance our goals of helping students alongside our survival in institutions at best not built for us to succeed and at worst actively trying to push us out.

* * *

I am very excited that one of my favorite students is coming into my office hours today.

“Hi [redacted], how’s it going?”

She responds, excitedly, “I am so good! I went to that Trans Day of Remembrance vigil you sent in the Discord. The lights were so pretty!”

I am stunned. Every semester I send information about local events, especially those hosted by and for marginalized community members in San Diego. However, this is the first time a student has gone and told me about it.

[Redacted] continues, “Yeah, I told my girlfriend about it, and she was really jealous!”

She stops herself and glances in my direction, a look of excitement on her face. Prior to this conversation, she had never disclosed her sexuality to me. I feel excited and proud that she felt comfortable being vulnerable. I like to think my self-disclosure and choices as an instructor have something to do with that.

* * *

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