# REFLECTION ESSAYS

# Reducing Secondary Trauma and Compassion Fatigue in the Dark Side of Interpersonal Communication Classrooms

**Mary E. King** and **Albra Wheeler**

**Abstract:** This essay describes the experiences faculty may encounter when teaching tough topics. When professionals are in the position as the individual who cares for, hears about, or witnesses the trauma and suffering of others, they might themselves be at risk for experiencing vicarious stress, or secondary trauma. If ongoing and untreated, this traumatic stress can morph into compassion fatigue, which can impede professional success and contribute to burnout. This essay reflects on the experiences of teaching the Dark Side of Interpersonal Communication where students openly shared course-related personal experiences. We reflect on how to successfully manage the delicate climate of the Dark Side classroom for optimal discussion and application of sometimes personal, and oftentimes difficult, course content. The pedagogical strategies reflected in this essay can be adopted for use in other courses with similar potential for student disclosure.

As a mid-career academic, I have had my fair share of unique teaching experiences. I have taught more than two dozen unique courses at five very different institutions with class sizes ranging from seven to 500 students across face-to-face, hybrid, and online formats. I have had countless positive student experiences and many less positive, as well. For example, I have had students lose loved ones and endure illnesses; others have been involved with gangs, imprisoned, deployed, or confronted with unintended

pregnancy. Many former students faced unthinkably difficult circumstances with more grace than I personally could muster in similar situations.

My experiences as a professor are not entirely unique or uncommon; I think many of my colleagues and peers have similar stories. However, when I taught a Special Topics course on the Dark Side of Interpersonal Communication, I was unprepared for the extreme cognitive and emotional load I sustained. Previously I heard similar stories from past students, but they were sporadic at best. This course was different in that I was faced with a room of students who each had questions and experiences for which I was unprepared. This reflection essay will highlight the unique challenge of this course, the steps I took to create and maintain a supportive environment, and advice for faculty in similar situations. Although my experiences and suggestions were employed in the Dark Side classroom, similar encounters could occur in other courses (e.g., Interpersonal Communication, Family Communication) or in other student interactions (e.g., office hours).

## Dark From Day One

I realized almost immediately this course was going to be different. I began by reviewing the syllabus in which I included a section labeled "Tough Topics," which served to alert students that the course content might be personally challenging, that they may wish (but are not required) to share personal anecdotes, and that the classroom would be a safe place. I provided contact information for several campus resources, including the counseling center, women's resource center, health center, and LGBTQA center. This information was helpful during the duration of the course as I referenced it often. In hindsight, I would have included additional contact information for a more broad range of resources, including the Dean of Students office, the Office of Greek Affairs, and the drug and alcohol wellness office. Following a review of the syllabus, a discussion and overview of the Dark Side of Interpersonal Communication began.

Almost immediately, students raised their hands asking *hypothetical questions*. They asked questions such as "What would the research say if someone [insert a highly specific, yet 'hypothetical' personal example . . . ]" and "What would you tell someone who [insert a highly specific, yet 'hypothetical' personal example . . . ]." After each question, the room fell silent and I was faced with 20 students leaning forward in their chairs anxiously waiting for the "right" answers to their "hypothetical" questions.

*So of course I immediately felt a strong sense of fear. Fear and responsibility.*

Although I taught the Dark Side course before (at a different institution, but the course demographic was relatively the same: upper-level undergraduate Communication majors), I never had the detailed and extraordinary barrage of questions I did this time. Whereas in prior classes students discussed the literature and sometimes shared experiences of infidelity or broken trust, the current anecdotes were different: everything from emotional abuse to cyberstalking to stories of seeking PFAs (Protections From Abuse).[1] Aside from the variety of experiences, the amount of disclosures was staggering. Students approached me before class, after class, and during office hours to unload sad and shocking past traumas. Moreover, I left class each day exhausted and upset, concerned for my students' safety and well-being, and wondering how I could make class academically enriching, but also a healthy experience for them.

Reflecting on this experience, I query whether this occurrence was unique or represents a trend, potentially fueled by the current social and/or political climate. For example, I wonder if coverage of the #MeToo movement inspired students to open up about their own experiences or, perhaps, simply made them aware these incidents *were not okay*. Alternatively, it could be a sign of the political times. For example, "pussy grabbing," the recent narrowing of definitions of domestic and sexual violence (NPEIV, 2019), and a flurry of sexual abuse and rape allegations currently represent a sizable portion of media coverage. Perhaps this is a challenge associated with a new generation of college students. Regardless, I believe this may be a developing trend faculty should be prepared to encounter.

## Creating a Safe Haven

Instructional communication research studies suggest that a positive classroom climate consisting of mutual trust, openness, support, and effective interpersonal communication among students and with their instructors is strongly connected with involvement, affiliation, and courtesy behaviors (e.g., Myers et al., 2016). For this reason, I regularly emphasize the importance of a warm communication climate in my classes and take active steps to achieve this with my students. With the Dark Side class I was able to effectively enhance these efforts in three important ways.

### I Know Someone Who . . .

I encouraged my students to share relevant anecdotes in class if they felt comfortable. One of my primary concerns, however, was that students might not be willing to openly engage the material as part of our class discussion if they had concerns about "outing" themselves or potentially being judged or embarrassed. To ensure students felt comfortable sharing personal stories and related experiences their friends or family members may have had, I encouraged them to use the phrase, "I know someone who . . . . " I emphasized that consistent use of this phrase would alleviate concern that the anecdote referenced a personal experience, the experience of a friend, or someone else in the classroom. I explained that using this phrase allowed the opportunity for anyone to be the subject of the anecdote, myself included.

The students applied this technique throughout the semester. It provided the opportunity for excellent conversations, especially with the sometimes challenging content. As the instructor, I also used this technique to highlight relevant experiences (personal or otherwise) that coincided with the day's readings. (I encourage other faculty to do the same.) One significant outcome from this practice was that it not only provided a vehicle for class discussion, but also created an opportunity for students to ask follow-up questions (e.g., "What would have happened if . . . "). When this occurred, the students revisited the research, discussed implications of the findings, constructed tangible suggestions, and recommended alternatives and scripts for how they would provide advice and support for others in similar situations in the future. In other words, the "I know someone who . . . " practice was effective in having students engage the material in an applied manner.

### PostSecret

The cultural phenomenon of PostSecret started when Warren (2005) asked people around the world to send him an anonymous postcard in which they revealed a secret they had never shared with anyone previously. The response was massive and individuals wrote about everything ranging from embarrassing habits to sexual assaults (Warren). I applied this anonymous disclosure practice to the

Dark Side classroom by bringing blank note cards and distributing them at the start of each class session. I instructed students to anonymously write something down on the card: a personal experience or way in which they could relate to the content for the day or a question about the material. Students also could elect to return a blank note card if they felt uncomfortable or did not have anything they wanted to contribute. At the end of class, I had a mix of questions and disclosures that served as an excellent class debriefing.

The PostSecret practice was designed to provide an opportunity to engage with the material anonymously, but in such a way that students could use these contributions as part of the learning experience and final reflection of the day's material. The students latched onto this ungraded practice in a potentially counterproductive way, however. Although I intended this to be a cathartic exercise for even the most reserved students, by encouraging these conversations I may have inadvertently reopened some students' wounds, thus intensifying their individual, perhaps negative, experiences. Moreover, this practice perpetuated a daily dose of disclosure, thus increasing the personal revelations to which I was exposed, and simultaneously consistently exposed the students.

My advice for instructors considering some version of this practice is to use it sparingly. One option to explore is to provide students postcards in class and ask them to do the PostSecret activity on their own time (perhaps even sharing cards with willing members of their social network), and mail them through campus mail. This process would allow students to remain anonymous and still engage in the experience, yet provide the opportunity for instructors to monitor the level and severity of the in-class discussions. Although there would still be a need to facilitate the practice, the intensity of the classroom experience might be less overwhelming.

## Personal Responsibility

Finally, I placed the burden of responsibility on my students. I made the students aware that the content disclosed in the classroom stays in the classroom, and that it was each student's responsibility to care for, and protect, a strong sense of community where all students feel comfortable to share with one another. Drawing on Petronio's conceptualization of co-ownership and control of information (Petronio & Durham, 2008), I reminded them that when someone discloses information, we *all* are responsible to protect that information.

## Calling in the Reinforcements: Professional Advice

Creating a protective educational environment was my first priority; a second goal was to obtain resources and information to better equip myself for this delicate situation. I contacted Albra Wheeler, the Coordinator & Sexual Misconduct Resource Advocate at Bloomsburg University, and shared my concerns about the Dark Side class. I shared how, because of the frequency and severity of disclosures, I felt *so* responsible for my students in a way I had not experienced previously, and the burden was emotionally overwhelming and physically draining. Our conversations were both informative (e.g., statistics about incidents on our campus) and cathartic (as someone who regularly manages other individuals' tough situations, it was a relief to talk with someone who *truly* understood what I meant when I described the crippling effects of my students' disclosures).

Albra introduced me to two concepts that explained my struggle: secondary trauma and compassion fatigue. Commonly examined in the helping services and medical field, these concepts are identified

as outcomes of taking on other people's traumas. *Secondary trauma* (*or secondary traumatic stress, STS*) refers to the distress family, friends, or professionals experience when trauma survivors retell and reenact traumatic events (e.g., Elwood, Mott, Lohr, & Galovski, 2011), and *compassion fatigue* refers to the cumulative stress caused by helping others who are suffering (Boyle, 2015).

Secondary trauma explained how I felt when my students recounted their situations. As an academic, it can be easy to think in broad strokes about the implications of research, but confronting it face-to-face was jarring. Each narrative the students shared stopped me in my tracks and the research became less theoretical and more real. Each recounting broke me from my academic mindset and forced me to see the actual faces of the Dark Side. This persistent secondary trauma I experienced resulted in compassion fatigue. I expected a few students to disclose, but I did not foresee the critical turning point where I was the trusted co-owner of nearly all my students' heavy disclosures. I constantly ruminated on their stories: on my commute to and from work, during office hours, cooking dinner, or playing with my children, for instance.

Albra and I decided an information panel would be beneficial to the students so she, my colleague David Heineman (who researches the damage and effects of gender disparities), and Bloomsburg University's Title IX coordinator spoke to the class. All three speakers were helpful in providing answers to questions I did not know (e.g., what can the university do when an abuser is in the same class/dorm/apartment complex as a victim). In the future, I will invite other professional resources to participate as part of the panel (specifically counselors, health care workers, and law enforcement), and I would recommend this to other faculty, as well.

## Conclusion

In hindsight, I realize I may not have been the only person experiencing secondary trauma or compassion fatigue; as students were disclosing their Dark Side experiences, their peers may have experienced their own secondary traumatic stress. Pedagogically, to offset this possibility in the future, I intend to emphasize the potential negative outcomes (as well as positive) students might experience and begin the semester with a detailed discussion of secondary trauma and compassion fatigue. I also will introduce qualified professionals throughout the semester as guest speakers to address the specific questions and concerns of the students. I anticipated encountering some challenges teaching the Dark Side of Interpersonal Communication, but was unprepared for the outpouring of dark, personal stories my students shared. By creating a protective classroom climate, seeking advice and additional information, managing secondary trauma and compassion fatigue, and reflecting on the achievements and missteps I made throughout the semester, I was able to create an educational experience with personal benefits for my students. I hope the advice and suggestions presented here can be applied and adapted in other instructors' pedagogical pursuits.

**Note**

1. Student examples are hypothetical but representative of the topics and anecdotes covered in class, and no student's actual or personal experience shared in class was used in writing this paper.

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