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Integrating the Self: Practical Approaches to Authentic Teaching in Family Science

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ABSTRACT. Teaching is inherently relational. How instructors relate to students influences how students engage, learn, and grow. Authentic teaching practices provide a means for improving student-instructor relationships and ultimately student learning. The present article builds on prior literature to propose a revised definition for authentic teaching in higher education, describes authenticity as a pedagogical tool, and addresses common tensions, including discerning how much authenticity is appropriate. We present practical tools for exploration of self and reflexive practice, along with illustrative examples of authentic teaching practices across domains of teaching, within the uniquely relational discipline of family science. In doing so, we hope to support instructors in the use of intentional, authentic teaching practices as one means of improving student learning outcomes.

Keywords: Authenticity, Authentic Teaching, HDFS, Higher Education, Reflexive Teaching

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In college classrooms, instructors do far more than simply deliver content; they create engaging and supportive learning environments, foster meaningful relationships with and among students, and guide students in the process of personal and professional development. With its focus on understanding relationships, translating research to practice, and making positive impacts on people's lives (Allen & Lavender-Stott, 2020; Grzywacz & Middlemiss, 2017), the field of family science is well-positioned to offer valuable insight into one factor in the broader scholarship of teaching and learning: the influence of authentic relationships on student learning outcomes. In this manuscript, we describe how the authentic self of the instructor – bringing who we are as people into the family science classroom – can serve as a strategic tool to improve our teaching practices and our students' learning. Authenticity in the classroom must be understood as a relational construct. As stated by Cranton and Caruseta (2004), "it is only through relationships with others that authenticity can be fostered" (p. 8). While authenticity originates internally through self-awareness and critical reflexivity, the act of teaching is inherently relational, and the strategic use of an instructor's authentic self invariably considers how one's self will impact relationships with students. We aim, therefore, to (a) highlight the importance of authentic teaching practices on classroom relationships and student learning outcomes, and (b) equip family science instructors with practical approaches for exploring and integrating their authentic selves into their teaching.

In this article, we operate under several assumptions that should be made explicit. First, we believe that instructors care about their students; they feel invested in their students' general well-being and their academic, personal, and professional development. Second, we assert that the person or self is inseparable from the instructor. Teaching is not merely a transfer of knowledge, but a holistic process where the self of the instructor (i.e., values, qualities, beliefs, experiences, social locations) inevitably informs teaching practices, irrespective of the instructor's awareness of this influence. Finally, we assume that humans cannot meaningfully engage in relationships, establish genuine connections, or experience closeness with others without interacting in an authentic manner (i.e., interacting as ourselves).

What is Authentic Teaching?

Several scholars have proposed similar, but distinct, conceptualizations of authenticity in teaching. Cranton and Caruseta (2004) describe authenticity as "a multi-faceted concept that includes at least four parts: being genuine, showing consistency between values and actions, relating to others in such a way as to encourage their authenticity, and living a critical life" (p. 7). Kreber et al. (2007) provide a multidimensional view of authenticity that emphasizes the importance of horizons of significance (i.e., things that are deeply important to society as a whole or things that truly matter within a specific discipline). Outside of these conceptual definitions, Johnson and LaBelle (2017) found that students perceive authentic instruction to include instructor approachability, passion, attentiveness, capability, and expertise, while describing inauthentic instructors as unapproachable, dispassionate, inattentive, incapable, and disrespectful. More abstractly, Johnson and LaBelle (2017) also report that students describe sincere, benevolent intent on the part of the instructor as a central factor of authentic teaching. Conversely, college instructors report that they demonstrate authenticity through openness (defined as honest, transparent disclosures and actions) and a growth mindset, and that being authentic allows them to model humility, connect with and empower students, and bring course concepts to life (LaBelle et al., 2023).

While these perspectives on authentic teaching offer valuable insights, many existing descriptions overlap with conceptualizations of good teaching practices (e.g., being capable and demonstrating expertise), rather than being framed as a distinct, unique construct. Indeed, LaBelle et al. (2023) note that it is unclear if instructors "were actually being authentic, or were simply liked or disliked by students" (p. 63). Furthermore, factors such as being passionate (Johnson & LaBelle, 2017) could mean that instructors can only demonstrate authentic teaching practices when they are truly passionate about the course content. Do passion, attentiveness, approachability, or capability, alone or in combination, constitute authentic teaching? What if an instructor is quieter, in terms of their personal characteristics, or is teaching a subject they are less passionate or knowledgeable about? Or could it be that the salience of one's identity as an instructor facilitates or amplifies authenticity, in that instructors more easily engage in authentic teaching practices when their identity as an educator is active and aligned with their values and beliefs (Morris, 2013; Williams, 2014)? Collectively, this begs the questions: what truly differentiates authentic teaching from inauthentic teaching? How do we assist instructors in becoming more authentic? Further, what if an instructor is authentic, but not helpful to students – how should that be navigated?

To begin to answer these questions, we revisit a component of the definition of authenticity proposed by Cranton and Caruseta (2004), who stated that authenticity shows "consistency between values and actions" (p. 7). This can effectively differentiate between authenticity and inauthenticity; if an action is in alignment with the core of someone's being (i.e., who they are as a person or their values and beliefs), it is inherently authentic. Thus, rather than attempting to define certain typologies of authentic teaching (e.g., passion, attentiveness), we argue that to be authentic teaching requires alignment between actions and oneself (e.g., values, beliefs, experiences, etc.).

In making this claim, we acknowledge that it is entirely possible that something may be authentic to an instructor, but also unhelpful and/or inappropriate in the context of teaching or relationships with students. Many of us will be able to recall experiences, as students, in which instructors overshared personal or inappropriate information. As such, we advocate for critical reflexivity, self-awareness, and deliberate practice as means of demonstrating authentic teaching while maintaining appropriate boundaries with students and ourselves.

In justifying this approach to framing authentic teaching, we draw lessons from the fields under the broader umbrella of psychotherapy. As instructors and marriage and family therapists, we frequently see parallels between client-therapist relationships and instructor-student relationships. Both are built on a foundation of trust wherein one individual occupies a hierarchical position of power, authority, or expertise, while the other seeks guidance, knowledge, or personal growth (Flückiger et al., 2018; Frymier & Houser, 2000; Strachan, 2020). Both also share common goals of fostering development, insight, and empowerment in the context of a safe and supportive environment (Flückiger et al., 2018). Psychotherapist authenticity is rooted in humanistic traditions and can generally be defined as the genuine, congruent expression of the therapist's true self within the therapeutic relationship, which includes an alignment of behaviors, words, and emotional presence with one's internal experiences and values (Burks & Robbins, 2012; Wampold et al., 2017). Therapeutic authenticity also involves a balance between being genuine with clients and maintaining appropriate boundaries; authenticity is not simply about sharing personal information. Rather, it is demonstrated by being transparent, genuine, and responsive in ways that align with the client's needs and therapeutic goals (Burks & Robbins, 2012). We believe that within teaching, as within psychotherapy, authentic practices (e.g., self-disclosure, among others) should be a deliberate process; that is, instructors should always possess a clear internal rationale as to why an authentic practice will benefit their students and their learning.

Thus, we propose that authentic teaching in family science is the ongoing process of intentionally and critically bringing oneself (e.g., personal values, qualities, beliefs, experiences, social locations) into teaching practices and relationships with students, done in a manner that (a) demonstrates consistency between oneself and one's actions and (b) is in alignment with broader educational goals related to student learning. This conceptualization of authentic teaching highlights several key factors of authentic teaching already established within the scholarship of teaching and learning: genuineness, self-awareness, critical reflexivity, and congruence of values and actions (Burks & Robbins, 2012; Cranton & Caruseta, 2004; Kreber, 2010). Genuineness, in the context of authentic teaching, refers to being true to oneself and presenting oneself honestly in the classroom; it also involves appropriately and deliberately sharing personal experiences and perspectives relevant to the subject matter and student learning (Cranton & Caruseta, 2004). Self-awareness is the ability to recognize and understand one's self (i.e., one's values, qualities, and beliefs), and how they influence teaching practices, perceptions of, and interactions with students (Cranton & Caruseta, 2004). Critical reflexivity is an extension of self-awareness and involves the iterative process of inward evaluation and reflection regarding one's motivations, reactivity, emotional experiences, social location, assumptions, and teaching practices, with the goal of identifying areas for improvement and/or making deliberate decisions about teaching practices (Brookfield, 2017; Feucht et al., 2017). Finally, congruence of values and actions is demonstrated in consistency between one's teaching practices and oneself.

It is important to note that critical reflexivity and self-awareness must take into consideration one's own social locations (e.g., race, gender, class, sexuality, citizenship, and ability) and their accompanying degrees of power and privilege. Social locations impact the experiences, priorities, and assumptions held by instructors, interact with the social locations held by students, and inform teaching practices (Pugach et al., 2019). Ongoing critical reflexivity regarding one's social locations is not only a matter of fostering equitable learning environments, but of authentically using instructor and student social locations as avenues for empowerment, learning, or connection. Many instructors, however, hold marginalized identities, and the overarching sociopolitical, cultural, and historical contexts associated with those identities must be considered when deciding how to engage authentically with students. Some authentic teaching practices (e.g., disclosure of LGBTQ+ identity, family composition, political affiliation, citizenship status, etc.) may pose significant risks to instructors. Moreover, some authentic teaching practices (e.g., sharing personal experiences) may not feel comfortable or appropriate to instructors, depending on their cultural background. We recognize and emphasize the necessity of discretion in disclosure as well as variation in how instructors implement authentic teaching practices. We do not advocate for instructors taking undue risks so as to engage in authentic teaching practices. Instead, we encourage instructors to select and utilize authentic teaching practices that feel appropriate to their personal preferences and the broader educational, institutional, and sociopolitical contexts.

Authentic Teaching & Student Learning Outcomes

In considering the value of authentic teaching, the relationship between authentic teaching and student learning outcomes is a critical consideration. Student learning outcomes are the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that result from being exposed to educational content (Allan, 1996). These outcomes can vary by discipline and frequently include far more than simple content mastery or the development of skills that students will use professionally. Indeed, instructors understand the unique role they play in the lives of their students; they provide support, guidance, encouragement, and often feel a responsibility to help their students grow in ways that transcend the delivery and consumption of course content. In fact, instructors frequently describe their role of facilitating students' personal and professional development (e.g., professional communication, critical consumption of material, self-

advocacy, a sense of ethical responsibility) as of comparable importance to facilitating content mastery (Freeman et al., 2024; Porter et al., 2025). As such, we conceptualize student learning outcomes as encompassing factors of both personal and professional development.

Authentic teaching practices have been associated with positive student learning outcomes. Students are more likely to report greater learning when they feel that their instructors genuinely care about them and are approachable and attentive – with these qualities being components of authentic teaching (Liu, 2021; Strachan, 2020). However, the relationship between authentic teaching and student learning outcomes is not linear but is mediated by two factors: the student-instructor relationship and student engagement.

Authenticity & Student-Instructor Relationships

Historically deprioritized within the context of higher education, research has increasingly identified the essential role of student-instructor relationships in the learning and development of students (Hoffman, 2014; Pychyl et al., 2022). Students learn more effectively when they report a strong, positive relationship with their instructors (Hoffman, 2014) and report benefits to their personal well-being when they feel that their instructor genuinely cares about them (Liu, 2021; Strachan, 2020). As noted previously, authentic teaching practices that communicate care and concern are perceived by students as being supportive, and these instructors are viewed as more approachable (Johnson & LaBelle, 2017), a particularly important factor given the concerning rates of social isolation, loneliness, and mental health concerns among college students (Lipson et al., 2022).

Authenticity, Student-Instructor Relationships & Student Engagement

While the relationship between student engagement and improved learning outcomes is relatively well established, student engagement is a multifaceted construct. Xu et al. (2023) operationalize student engagement to include dimensions that are behavioral (e.g., participation, attendance), emotional (e.g., feelings of connection, belongingness, and excitement), cognitive (e.g., investment in learning, perceived value of content), and agentic (e.g., active, proactive, and collaborative learning experiences). Engaged students are more likely to achieve higher academic performance, exhibit greater persistence in the face of challenges, and develop a deeper understanding of the material (Groccia, 2018; Xu et al., 2023).

A common theme within the student engagement literature, while not always explicitly named, is the way in which instructors facilitate student engagement relationally. Some components of student engagement (e.g., feelings of connection, belongingness) are overtly relational in nature (Xu et al., 2023), while others can be strongly influenced (for better or worse) by the quality of instructor-student relationships (e.g., perceived usefulness, interest, caring, and investment in learning; Frymier & Houser, 2000; Liu, 2021; Strachan, 2020). Instructors who have strong relationships with students can utilize this relational currency to catalyze engagement where students might otherwise withdraw or "check out" from the course material (Hoffman, 2014; Strachan, 2020).

Central to the relationship between authenticity and relationships are the consistent findings linking instructor authenticity with student feelings of trust, safety, and closeness in addition to perceptions of openness, honesty, and approachability in relationships (Cranton & Caruseta, 2004; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; LaBelle et al., 2023). In short, when instructors are authentic, they increase the potential of strengthening relationships with students (Johnson & LaBelle, 2017; Wang, 2016). Strong student-instructor relationships contribute to learning environments built on trust, respect, and open communication where students can take risks, ask questions, and engage deeply with the course

material (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Strachan, 2020). Relatedly, students who felt their instructors were genuinely interested in their learning were more likely to be engaged in classroom activities (Frymier & Houser, 2000; Hoffman, 2014).

Authentic Teaching & Family Science

While relevant to teaching in all disciplines, authentic teaching is particularly relevant and important to teaching family science. A guiding principle in family science is a "clear and cogent commitment to making a positive difference in human lives" (Grzywacz & Middlemiss, 2017, p. 547) and instructors, therefore, place great emphasis on helping students translate science into policy and practice and understand humans within their familial, social, community, and sociocultural contexts (Allen & Lavender-Stott, 2020). Furthermore, family science requires facilitating the process of engaging students with complex, often controversial, topics related to family dynamics, risk and protective factors, diverse family structures, and systems of oppression. To do this, instructors of family science often want their students to be able to understand micro and macro influences on individuals and families, take multiple perspectives, engage in critical thinking, evaluate sources or information, and embrace cultural humility. Authentic teaching provides an avenue for facilitating these elements of family science teaching and models for students ways of being that can benefit them in their professional careers.

Authentic Teaching Practices

As noted previously, by engaging in authentic teaching practices, family science instructors can foster stronger instructor-student relationships which can, in turn, increase student engagement, with both factors being associated with positive student learning outcomes. Strategic and thoughtful use of self of the instructor represents a mechanism for enacting authentic teaching. This, however, requires a not-so-simple task: we must know who we are and connect that to our teaching. In the remaining sections, we provide practical recommendations for (a) authentic identity exploration in the context of teaching and (b) authentic teaching practices.

Authentic Identity Exploration

To know oneself is a highly abstract concept and, unsurprisingly, difficult to operationalize. We view several distinct, but interconnected components as being related to the holistic construct of one's authentic identity: values, qualities, beliefs, and experiences. These four factors reflect our review and synthesis of recurring themes found throughout authentic teaching literature (e.g., Cranton & Caruseta, 2004; Kreber et al., 2007). While scholars frequently reference these elements individually, we organized them into this four-factor framework to comprehensively operationalize the abstract concept of "authentic identity" into a tangible tool for reflection. To facilitate practical use, we then took the four factors and, again using the authentic teaching literature (e.g., Cranton & Caruseta, 2004; Kreber et al., 2007) as a conceptual guide, created a tool for exploration and personal reflection (Table 1). This tool, which includes a variety of self-reflective questions, is our attempt to facilitate the process of reflecting on the components of one's authentic identity (i.e., values, qualities, beliefs, experiences). By naming authentic components of one's self, generally, instructors can take subsequent steps to increase alignment between authentic components of self and teaching practices. We encourage readers to consider and reflexively journal (e.g., Boyd & Boyd, 2005) about their answers to the questions in Table 1 within the context of the overarching question: to what extent are these factors (values, qualities, beliefs, experiences) present in my teaching? This deliberate alignment allows for the use of self in an authentic manner in a variety of teaching contexts.

Table 1

Exploratory Questions for Values, Qualities, Beliefs, and Experiences

Component of Self	Exploratory Questions
Values *Guiding, underlying priorities which shape our worldview, morals, belief system, and decision making in teaching.*	What impact do I want to have on people? What do I return to when making difficult decisions? What helps me decide whether something is morally right or wrong? If someone were to describe what I stand for, what would I hope they would say? What do I feel compelled to uplift, protect, or support? Why? What feels non-negotiable in my life?
Qualities *Characteristics and traits intrinsic to our personalities and the ways we act/interact with students and others; descriptors.*	How would the people I've felt most seen by describe me? What kind of energy do I bring into relationships? How do I tend to respond when people are struggling? When I feel the most like myself, how do I act? How do I tend to behave when I feel at my most comfortable?
Beliefs *Opinions, convictions, and/or philosophies about the world, course content, or students themselves; inherently cognitive.*	What causes growth or change in people? What holds people back when they want to change? What responsibilities do people have to others? What leads people to be well? What gives life meaning?
Experiences *Events or encounters which have left some meaningful or relevant effect on the instructor; influence values, qualities, and beliefs.*	What encounters have changed how I view people or the world? What moments have felt like new chapters in my life? How does my social location influence my priorities, inform my beliefs/values, or interact with social locations held by others? What are the "aha!" moments in my professional development? When have I stepped outside my comfort zone, and had it work out?

Authentic identity exploration is not a simple task or possible to fully complete; it must be understood as an ongoing, iterative process. As people and as instructors, we learn, change, and develop. To engage meaningfully in knowing oneself requires acknowledgment that this process is ongoing. Yet, to know oneself does not inherently allow for authentic actions (i.e., the alignment of oneself with actions) or authentic teaching practices. To do so requires ongoing self-evaluation and, in a teaching context, deliberate implementation (i.e., critical reflexivity).

Critical Reflexivity

In the context of teaching, critical reflexivity involves the iterative process of inward evaluation and reflection regarding one's motivations, reactivity, emotional experiences, and teaching practices with the goal of identifying areas for improvement or making deliberate decisions about teaching practices (Brookfield, 2017; Feucht et al., 2017). In Table 2, we hope to extend the thinking about Table 1 (which explored authenticity more generally) into the context of the family science classroom. To do so, we have listed a series of reflexive questions, both general and applied, that may be helpful for instructors who hope to develop deliberate use of authentic teaching practices. Should any reflexive questions reveal useful insights in the form of general areas for growth or discrepancies between current and authentic teaching practices, we hope these insights can be used to further align current teaching practices with one's authentic self in a deliberate manner. Some instructors may benefit from the use of these questions in a consistent, structured manner (e.g., in meetings with peers/mentors, prior to a new class/semester, or in a weekly teaching journal).

Authentic Teaching Practices

Having explored the components of the authentic self and the continuous process of reflexive teaching, we turn now to the practical application of these concepts in the classroom. It is important to emphasize that authentic teaching extends far beyond specific interpersonal behaviors such as friendliness or humor. Our authentic self can be intentionally woven into every facet of teaching (e.g., course structure, instructional methods, assignment design, classroom climate and policies, and assessment and feedback). In considering authentic teaching practices, it is also worth noting that instructors are increasingly expanding the notion of authentic teaching beyond the classroom. Examples include participating in campus events with students, using digital tools (e.g., podcasts, blogs, vlogs) to engage with course content (e.g., Conroy & Kidd, 2023), and utilizing social media as a means of sharing their research and engaging with students (Perez et al., 2023).

While our goal is to provide instructors with tangible tools for implementing authentic teaching practices within their family science classrooms, it is counterintuitive to offer specific examples of "authentic" teaching practices as authenticity is, by its very nature, unique to each instructor. What is authentic for one instructor may not resonate for other instructors; thus, any attempt to provide a prescriptive list of "authentic teaching practices" contradicts the individualized process of enacting one's own authentic approach. Despite this challenge, Table 3 offers illustrative examples of authentic teaching practices. These are not intended as a universal checklist but rather as examples and catalysts for individual reflection and innovation. We encourage instructors to consider these prompts and examples in light of who they are (i.e., the components of self) and through the lens of ongoing critical reflexivity.

Table 2

Reflexive Questions Related to Authentic Teaching

General Reflexive Questions

- When do I feel most like myself in the classroom? When do I feel like I'm performing a role?
- What aspects of *me* feel easiest to integrate into my teaching? Which feel harder? Why?
- Are there parts of myself that I hold back from students? What would happen if I didn't?
- What do I hope students think about me, and how does that align with how I present myself?
- What do I tell myself about who I *should* be as an instructor? Where does that idea come from?
- What parts of higher education feels aligned with who I am?
- What parts of higher education feels at odds with who I am? How do I address that tension?
- When do I feel the need to prove something while teaching? What am I trying to prove?
- How do I react when a lesson doesn't land? Why do I react that way? Is this common for me?
- How can I know when an authentic part of myself could benefit students?

Applied Reflexive Questions

- How might my specific components of self be used as a means of connecting with students?
- Which components of self may feel too personal to share in the classroom? Which would I like to share more frequently or explicitly?
- What existing barriers prevent some components of self from being present in my teaching?
- In what moments/facets of teaching do I notice a mismatch between my components of self and my actions, and how might I adjust this?
- When do I notice students responding most positively to my components of self, and how can I build on those moments?

Note. Components of self refers to values, qualities, beliefs, and experiences (refer to Table 1 for exploratory questions related to components of self).

Table 3

Illustrative Examples of Authentic Teaching Practices in Various Domains of Teaching

Teaching Domain	Reflective Prompts	Example Authentic Practices
Course Design *Content selection, organization, outcomes, sequencing, syllabus, etc.*	• Do any parts of the course design contradict my beliefs about learning? • Which parts of my course are inherited or automatic, and which feel deliberately chosen? • How might I modify my policies/syllabus to better align with my components of self?	• Select readings written by marginalized scholars (value: equity) • Structure assignments to build across the semester (belief: scaffolding) • Utilize questions that challenge assumptions or invite reflection (value: curiosity)
Instructional Methods *Lecture, group work, discussion, case studies, experiential learning*	• To what extent are parts of me revealed in the way I teach? • Do my values/beliefs conflict with the methods I use? • Am I teaching in ways aligned with my beliefs about learning?	• Use of more discussion formats and less traditional lecturing (belief: collaborative learning) • Use role plays or simulations (belief: experiential learning) • Share moments of uncertainty (value: honesty)
Classroom Climate *Relational, emotional, interactive environment of the class*	• Can students see the parts of me that prioritize connection? • Am I creating the kinds of relationships with and among students that I value? • Do my experiences as a student inform my classroom climates?	• Learn student names (value: connection) • Use anonymous mid-semester feedback and respond in class (belief: accountability) • Acknowledge class dynamics that feel off (value: relational attunement)
Policies & Structure *Attendance rules, deadlines, late work policies, participation requirements*	• Do my policies align with the effect I want to have on students? • Do my policies reflect what I believe about people?	• Use specifications or contract grading (value: equity) • Include multiple modalities for participation (value: inclusion) • Update/remove punitive policies (belief: motivating change)
Assessment & Feedback *Evaluation, rubrics, written feedback, formative vs. summative assessment*	• Do I assess learning in ways aligned with how people grow? • What parts of me are present in how I respond to student work? • How do my experiences of receiving feedback inform my practices?	• Ask students to set their own goals before receiving feedback (experiences: tailored feedback) • Utilize self-assessment (belief: reflective learning) • Use ungraded feedback points in major assignments (belief: formative feedback)

Conclusion

Instructors are not merely conveyors of academic content, but relational beings whose authentic self fundamentally shapes the learning environment. Authentic teaching in family science requires self-awareness, critical reflexivity, and attention to relational boundaries. Instructors who are willing to examine and intentionally integrate their *self* into their teaching possess a meaningful pathway to foster connection and engagement, support student growth, and improve student learning outcomes. Given the highly personal nature of teaching and teaching family science, this article has argued for a deliberate, reflective approach to teaching that embraces authenticity as a pedagogical strength. To encourage this approach, we have offered practical tools and examples designed to help instructors reflect on and integrate authentic teaching practices.

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