



VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass

Division of Community Engagement Resources

Division of Community Engagement

2016

Empathy Activators: Teaching Tools for Enhancing Empathy Development in Service-Learning Classes

Robin Everhart

Virginia Commonwealth University

Katie Elliott

Virginia Commonwealth University, elliottkl@vcu.edu

Lynn E. Pelco

Virginia Commonwealth University, lepelco@vcu.edu

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/community_resources



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Downloaded from

http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/community_resources/42

This White Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Division of Community Engagement at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Division of Community Engagement Resources by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

Empathy Activators: Teaching Tools for Enhancing Empathy Development in Service-Learning Classes

Abstract

On February 5, 2016, 25 educators from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) and the University of Richmond (UR) gathered in Richmond, Virginia, for an annual service-learning workshop. This year's workshop featured Robin Everhart, PhD, VCU assistant professor of psychology, as keynote speaker. Jumpstarted by Everhart's research on student empathy, workshop participants explored the concept of empathy and collaboratively developed strategies for integrating empathy into the service-learning experience. This document grows out of Everhart's presentation and group discussions during that workshop and represents a collection of ideas generated.

Keywords

empathy, service-learning, higher education, community engagement, community, experiential learning, civic engagement, vcu, virginia commonwealth university

Disciplines

Higher Education

Authors

Robin Everhart, Katie Elliott, Lynn E. Pelco, Deborah Westin, Rowena Briones, and Emily Peron



EMPATHY ACTIVATORS

Teaching Tools for Enhancing Empathy Development in Service-Learning Classes

Prepared by Katie Elliott, Associate Director, Office of Service-Learning



VCU

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

Community Engagement

Contributing Authors

Robin S. Everhart, Katie Elliott, Lynn E. Pelco, Deborah Westin,
Rowena Briones, & Emily Peron

Additional Contributors

Holly Blake, Alexandra Byrum, Wanda Coffey, Amy Cook, Kimberly Davis,
Terry Dolson, Sylvia Gale, Kim Gower, Barbara Ingber, James Keck, Amanda
Lineberry, Jo Murphy, Cheryl Pallant, Michelle Peace, Dave Robbins, Sadie
Rubin, Evan Sisson, & Adrienne Volenik

Table of Contents

Background	2
Recommended Citation:	1
What is empathy? A working definition.....	3
Why is empathy important?	3
Service-learning and the development of empathy	3
Activating empathy in our classes	5
Strategy 1: Give students experiential opportunities for building empathy.....	5
Strategy 2: Incorporate empathy into students' reflection	6
Strategy 3: Teach the empathy toolbox	8
Strategy 4: Assess and reimagine classroom culture and design.....	9
Strategy 5: Add empathy to your learning objectives and graded coursework	11
Conclusion.....	12
References	12
Appendix: Recommended Readings and Resources.....	14
Videos, TED talks, & web resources.....	14
Popular articles, books, & other readings	14
Scholarly articles.....	14

Recommended Citation:

Everhart, R. S., Elliott, K., Pelco, L. E., Westin, D., Briones, R., Peron, E., & associates. March 2016. Empathy Activators: Teaching tools for enhancing empathy development in service-learning classes. Virginia Commonwealth University and University of Richmond, Richmond, VA. Retrieved from Virginia Commonwealth University, Scholars Compass, Division of Community Engagement Resources: http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/community_resources/

Background

On February 5, 2016, 25 educators from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) and the University of Richmond (UR) gathered in Richmond, Virginia, for an annual service-learning workshop. This year's workshop featured Robin Everhart, PhD, VCU assistant professor of psychology, as keynote speaker. Jumpstarted by Everhart's research on student empathy, workshop participants explored the concept of empathy and collaboratively developed strategies for integrating empathy into the service-learning experience. This document grows out of Everhart's presentation and group discussions during that workshop and represents a collection of ideas generated by our group. The document represents neither an exhaustive literature review nor compilation of all available techniques for increasing empathy in university students; but rather, we hope, a useful resource and toolkit for ourselves and others as we begin this important work.

What is empathy? A working definition

Empathy can be defined as “the ability to walk in another’s shoes” and take the perspective of another person. Along with elements of self-awareness, handling relationships, managing feelings, and motivation, empathy forms one part of Emotional Intelligence (Jonidou & Konstantikaki, 2008). Empathy contains two distinct components: a cognitive component and an emotional component.

Perspective-taking: Empathy’s cognitive component

Important to the process of developing empathy is the ability to understand how other people may be affected by a situation, as well as understanding that there may be other perspectives to a situation (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000).

Compassion: Empathy’s emotional component

Empathy also has an affective component, in that an individual often feels compassion for another and becomes motivated to understand that person in a new way (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000).

Taken together, these two components create empathy and empathic ability. In addition, empathy’s two components—this compassion and the ability to understand how a person may be affected by their situation—is often what leads individuals to want to help others and to *act* to help them.

Understanding what empathy is—and what it *isn’t*—is a necessary starting place, both for us as educators and for our students. Perhaps most important, we must reconceive empathy as a *skill*, rather than as a personality trait or virtue. Empathy is often constructed as a have-or-have-not personality trait (e.g., “she’s such an empathic person” or “that professor isn’t at all empathetic”), yet this both misconstrues and undervalues empathy. Instead, empathy should be viewed as a *learnable skill*: an ability or set of abilities that can be developed, taught, practiced, and cultivated. This conceptual shift is key to understanding why and how empathy should be incorporated into our classrooms and syllabi.

We must reconceive empathy as a **skill**, rather than as a personality trait or virtue.

Why is empathy important?

Conflict and isolation between individuals and groups negatively impact our societies at local, national and global levels. Empathy can combat this social isolation and conflict by helping people relate to others in ways that promote cooperation and unity (Konrath, O’Brien & Hsing, 2011). In her 2011 book, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, religious scholar Karen Anderson argues that compassion and empathy are not only crucial ingredients for the wellbeing of cultures but also foundational paths to happiness for individuals. Anderson’s research on ancient and modern religions indicates that the majority of human religions emphasize compassion and empathy as keys to individual enlightenment and as the true test of spirituality. Whether as a tool for avoiding interpersonal and intercultural conflict or as a path to a more fulfilling and happy life, empathy appears to be a critical concept that deserves close consideration. Furthermore, there has been a recent trend toward declining empathy among college students (Konrath, O’Brien & Hsing, 2011), perhaps due, in part, to an increase in social media use and society’s focus on success.

We suggest the time is right for instructors to focus on empathy both within and outside of their classrooms. As we will describe, this focus on empathy can be tailored depending on the academic focus of the course and the comfort level of the instructor. Integrating empathy into a course can range from simply defining the term for the students to asking students to self-assess their own empathy and work, as part of the course, to increase it. We ask that instructors be open-minded and creative as they begin to nurture an important skill within their students and themselves.

Service-learning and the development of empathy

As both a pedagogical and practical approach, service-learning provides an ideal platform for developing empathy. As a pedagogy, it emphasizes reciprocity and balance between student learning and addressing real community needs, offering opportunities for guided

experiences in the community and reflection on those experiences. In practice, students in service-learning courses encounter social issues firsthand and often recognize other people's needs, struggles, or levels of despair for the first time (Goleman, 1995).

Through direct and indirect service, students are exposed to new situations, people who are unlike themselves, communities they have not seen nor participated in before, and real-world implications and instances of social issues they may have never before considered or only learned about in classrooms. For many students, these service experiences challenge their preconceived beliefs and create cognitive dissonance. One way students may resolve this dissonance is by reconsidering their attitudes and views about the individuals they are serving—a resolution especially likely when they are guided by peers and professors to reflect on their views and the dissonance they are experiencing (Wilson, 2011). As Everhart (in press) notes, "coming face to face with another person's situation in a service-learning setting can evoke changes in empathy." The experiential component of service learning offers students an opportunity to be exposed to situations that call for empathic ability, and the reflective component offers instructors an opportunity to enhance students' development of that ability.

In fact, we might see service-learning as offering a ready-made Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) for empathy-building. A concept introduced by developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), the ZPD can be understood as the distance between what is known and what is not yet known—but can be mastered with scaffolding and guidance. Through guided experiential and reflective learning activities, instructors can create scaffolding for the development of empathy in their students, enabling them to develop empathic skills beyond what they could reach on their own.

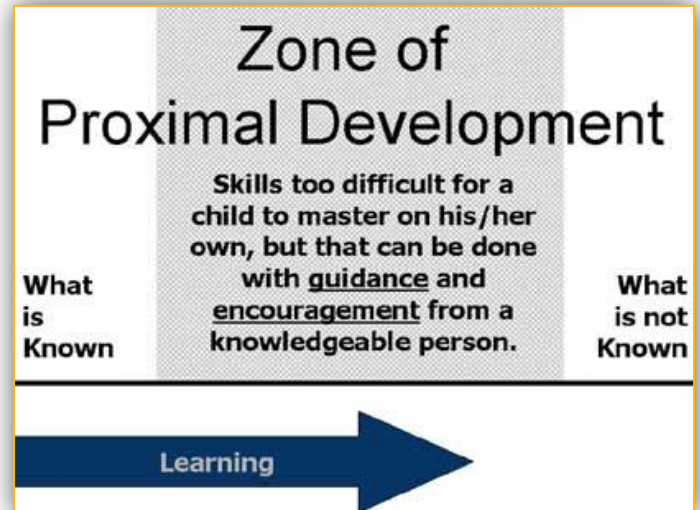


Figure 1. Zone of Proximal Development. (McLeod, 2012)



Activating empathy in our classes

Instructors interested in cultivating their students' empathy levels will, of course, want to know how they might do that. What are practical strategies for teaching empathy, creating a more empathic classroom, and cultivating students' long-term empathy growth? Though we believe that service-learning classes offer a starting point for heightening empathic ability, simply incorporating service into a class is not enough to truly develop students' empathy skills. Instead, we encourage instructors to consider integrating one or more of the following five strategies to complement the service and community-engagement activities:

- Give students experiential opportunities for building empathy.
- Incorporate empathy into students' reflection.
- Teach the empathy toolbox.
- Assess and reimagine classroom culture and design.
- Add empathy to your learning objectives and graded coursework.

The following sections will outline these five overall approaches for activating empathy in your classes and provide practical ideas for implementing each one.

Strategy 1: Give students experiential opportunities for building empathy.

Giving students opportunities to go into the community for service may be the most powerful tool for building empathy. *Direct service* (service done on-site, in the community) has a particularly strong impact on the development of both compassion and perspective-taking abilities, due in part to the cognitive dissonance that occurs when students come face-to-face with situations that challenge their preconceived beliefs. However, *indirect service* (such as creating products websites, marketing materials, or research reports for community partners) can also foster empathy development, especially when students have a chance to meet and talk with their community partners.

Instructors who wish to enhance students' empathic ability should consider ways to cultivate experiential occasions for empathy, whether their students are engaging in direct or indirect service with their community partners. For instance, an instructor may choose to invite a community liaison to speak to students in class; the liaison can help students understand the community they will go into and the needs that community has identified for itself. Whether the students will engage in direct or indirect service, extending the experience across time and geography can help scaffold the students' understanding of the community and the service experience as something done *with* the community, rather than *for* it. If students are doing direct service in the community, it is especially helpful if they can meet with the same person at the service site and in the classroom.

In a pilot study of undergraduates in a Human Services Fieldwork course, Everhart (2015) identified five types of incidents critical to students' increase in empathy. These critical incidents, which emerged across a variety of field placements, included occasions when the students:

- Observed the emotional experiences of others.
- Were given more responsibility at their service site.
- Learned more about the people being served.
- Discovered a personal connection with others.
- Experienced a challenge to their previous thoughts about a situation.

These critical incidents may be seen, Everhart (in press) suggests, as "key ingredients of empathy development" and can be useful as instructors plan students' service with community partners. In addition to the five critical themes, Everhart also identified specific factors that promote empathy development and factors that challenge it. (See Figure 2 at the end of this section.) Instructors might utilize these factors and critical incidents in a variety of practical ways with both their students and community partners.

With students:

Instructors may use the five critical incidents to focus class discussions, during students' work at the service site or or even before it begins. Incorporating them as a "lessons learned' introduction to empathy ... [might] enable students just beginning their service-learning course to think about how these factors may help or hinder their empathy development," particularly if students have a chance to brainstorm and consider them collectively (Everhart, in press). Articulating and discussing these critical incidents with students may also help bolster their confidence and encourage them to seize opportunities for new experiences at their service sites.

With community partners:

It is also beneficial for instructors to communicate with leaders at the community partner level about the kinds of experiences that might be helpful for students. While it is of utmost importance to respect the partner's needs (and not assume our empathy-building agenda trumps those), communicating about activities that enhance empathy could "ultimately benefit both students and the individuals that are served at their placement sites" (Everhart, in press). For instance, if instructors discuss with community partners the idea that students may develop greater empathy when they are given more responsibility at their service site or have opportunities to learn more about the individual people they serve on-site, partners may be willing to give students small opportunities to take responsibility or have open-ended conversations with people at their service site. Even seemingly small or insignificant responsibilities, such as asking a service-learning student to walk an elementary school class to the lunch room, can activate empathy. Similarly, learning more about an individual's background and personal life can help move a student from sympathy to empathy.

Even seemingly small or insignificant responsibilities, such as asking a service-learning student to walk an elementary school class to the lunch room, can activate empathy.

Table 2. Factors in student reflections that promoted or challenged development of empathy

Factors tied to promoting empathy development	Factors that challenged empathy development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Getting to know individuals over time ▪ Gaining more confidence in ability to do the work well ▪ More hands on experiences and direct interactions with people ▪ Stop and think about what the implications of that person's life would be for the student ▪ Surprised to experience increases even when not directly involved with individuals at site ▪ Knowing more about a person makes it easier to increase level of empathy, even when this is indirect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Feeling like one should be building empathy in a certain scenario even when they may not be ▪ Focusing more on sympathy versus empathy in initial interactions ▪ Harder to develop empathy when not direct contact ▪ Difficult to understand the perspective of others or the situations that people may be in ▪ Situations in which students did not believe teachers were working hard ▪ Situations in which students questioned why an individual was at a particular site (e.g., food distribution, anxiety clinic)

Figure 2. Factors that promoted or challenged empathy development. (Everhart, in press).

Strategy 2: Incorporate empathy into students' reflection.

A second key strategy for enhancing empathy is to incorporate empathy-related questions into students' reflection activities. Reflection, as is widely discussed in the literature on experiential learning theory, is critical to students' ability to grasp and transform experience into learning (Kolb, 1984; see also Baker et al., 2002). Service-learning, like other forms of experiential learning, "facilitates students' creation of knowledge through a spiraling learning cycle of experiencing, reflecting, observing, and acting—all within the context of the learning environment and topic" (Fraustino, Briones, & Janoske, 2015). Just as reflection facilitates learning and encourages meaning-making in experiential learning more generally, instructors can also use reflection to scaffold students' development of empathy, as well as their awareness and value of empathy as a skill. Though there are many possible ways of weaving empathy into reflection exercises, here are several recommended approaches:

Empathy self-assessment

Instructors can help raise students' awareness of their own empathy levels and development by having students complete an empathy self-assessment at the beginning and end of the semester. When Everhart (2016) used empathy self-assessments with her undergraduate students, she asked them to first read Wilson's 2011 article, "Service-learning and the development of empathy in US college students," which outlines three levels of empathy:

1. *Shock*: Students feel shocked by the social and economic circumstances of the individuals they were serving.
2. *Normalization*: Students begin to see an individual's circumstances as normal, identify commonalities with others, and to break down an "us" versus "them" viewpoint.
3. *Engagement*: Students begin to recognize why things are the way they are for individuals at their placement and to attribute problems to systemic issues instead of blaming the individual.

Everhart's students were then asked to determine their current level of empathy and write a short reflective paper assessing their level of empathy. They were also asked to describe: why they identified with that level of empathy; how their service-learning placement could contribute to their development of empathy, including which interactions would be useful; what changes they expected to see in their level of empathy throughout the semester; and why or how they would determine whether their level of empathy had developed during the semester. Self-assessments were shared in class and used as a reference point for future discussions of empathy throughout the semester. At the end of the semester, students were again asked to evaluate their empathy levels and reflect on whether, how, and why their empathy had changed over the semester.

Empathy what?

Adding an empathy focus to existing reflection assignments (formal or informal) is a relatively simple way to scaffold empathy and students' self-awareness of their empathic ability. Many service-learning instructors already use the well-known "What? So what? Now what?" heuristic for reflective writing (Driscoll, 2007).

We suggest instructors consider adding an "Empathy what?" section to this model. Incorporating prompts directly related to empathy into reflection activities can be a powerful tool for boosting students' awareness and level of empathy, whether students are reflecting formally or informally, in writing or discussion, with faculty or peers. Like reflection more generally, empathy-focused reflection prompts may be tailored to a specific course or kind of reflection. Here are two possible thinking and writing prompts for generating empathy-focused reflection:

- For a class that keeps reflective journals or turns in informal reflective writings throughout a course, an instructor might ask students to write "one to two solid paragraphs that describe how your empathy is evolving

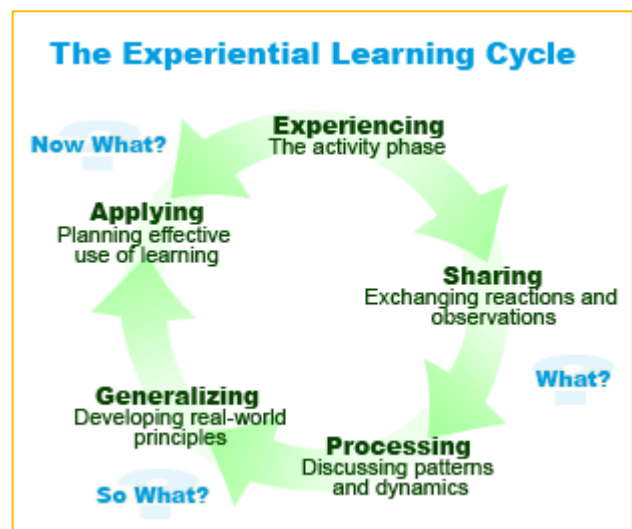


Figure 3. Reflection in service-learning classes. (University of Minnesota, 2011)

and/or being challenged in your placement. You may wish to build off your empathy self-assessment” (Everhart, 2016).

- A class that incorporates written reflection assignments both pre- and post-service might incorporate bookended questions on reflection: asking at the beginning of service, “What behaviors do you exhibit that you believe express empathy?” and at the end of service, “How have your behaviors regarding empathy changed since your service experience?”

Expectation examination

An additional strategy instructors might use is to ask students to articulate and examine their own expectations. As with the empathy self-assessment, students should be asked to identify and articulate their own expectations at the both the beginning and the end of the semester, and to reflect upon the change in their expectations and understanding. Since self-awareness is a threshold skill for perspective-taking, as well as an integral component of Emotional Intelligence, assignments that develop self-awareness also help enhance students’ empathy development.

Instructors will recognize, of course, that “expectations” is an open-ended term, and that students’ expectations may extend broadly. Expectation examination, for instance, could include the students’ expectations of service or service-learning, of their service site or community partner, of the individuals they will work with, of social issues or the reasons for them, of empathy itself, and so on. Any of these focus areas, and many others, could offer powerful opportunities for heightening awareness and self-understanding. It is up to instructors to choose the area or areas of focus for the expectation examination.

Strategy 3: Teach the empathy toolbox.

A number of related skills fall under the umbrella of empathy and empathic ability, including active listening, empathic communication, cultural competency, entertaining complexity, and respect. Instructors can help students develop empathy, in part, by helping them identify and understand the skills related to it. An especially powerful strategy may be to help students consider how empathy operates as a skill in your particular discipline and identify those empathy-related skills that are valued most highly in your field. Health professionals, for instance, may see empathic communication as a threshold skill for their field, which could indicate that instructors should focus deeply on that skill as part of their empathy development objectives. One helpful approach may be to teach these skills as an “empathy toolbox,” wherein instructors select the most important skills for their discipline and incorporate them into their syllabi as skills to learn and practice in the course. Here, for instance, are several key skills you might include in your empathy toolbox:

Empathic listening and communication

Listening may be the ultimate empathy tool, especially when we use high-empathy skills such as active listening and non-defensive communication. To add empathic communication skills to students’ empathy toolbox, instructors may need to include reading and discussion about the skills, as well as opportunities to model and practice them in action. (A specific example of an active listening lesson is described in the next section, “Strategy 4: Assess and reimagine classroom culture and design.”) Here are a few resources to learn more about active listening and how to increase your own and your students’ active learning skills:

- TED talks, including:
 - Julian Treasure’s “Five ways to listen better” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSohjYQI2A>)
 - Ernesto Sirolli’s “Want to help someone? Shut up and listen” (https://www.ted.com/talks/ernesto_sirolli_want_to_help_someone_shut_up_and_listen?language=en).
 - You can also browse additional TED talks on listening (http://www.ted.com/search?cat=talks&per_page=12&q=listening).
- Skills You Need: Active Listening <http://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/active-listening.html>
- The Teach-Back Method, from the Health Literacy literature: the teach-back method <http://www.teachbacktraining.org/assets/files/PDFS/Teach%20Back%20-%2010%20Elements%20of%20Competence.pdf>
- Radical Non-Defensiveness: <http://www.psychologylounge.com/2010/12/08/radical-non-defensiveness-the-most-important-communication-skill/>

Cultural competence

Cultural competence refers to the level of skill needed to engage with or provide service to people of various cultures. Equally important at the individual and institutional levels, cultural competence can be seen as the skills and characteristics that support interactions in diverse cultural contexts (Bennett, 2011). Four key features are included in the cultural competence concept—awareness, attitude,

knowledge, and skills—each of which may be seen and taught as empathy skills in their own right. As instructors, for instance, we can activate awareness and attitude development by making room for readings and discussions with and about diverse cultures. Instructors who want to cultivate curiosity and interest in cultural differences should also consider include teaching, modelling, and providing opportunities to practice mindfulness of cultural issues, including such things as gender, race, age, sexual preference, religion, and language (Hammer, 2015). A wide variety of cultural competence educational materials are available online. A few free resources include:

- University of Washington Intercultural Competence Toolkit
<http://www.bothell.washington.edu/globalinitiatives/resources/intercultural-competence-tool-kit>
- American Psychological Association's Multicultural Training Database
<http://www.apa.org/apags/governance/subcommittees/cultural-competency.aspx>
- National Center for Cultural Competence
<http://nccccurricula.info/culturalcompetence.html>

Cognitive complexity

Another key skill in the empathy toolbox may be the ability to tolerate and embrace cognitive complexity. In order to practice empathy as both perspective-taking and compassion, individuals must be able to entertain complexity: to see similarities without imagining individual lived experiences to be the same; to understand that situations, social issues, and even individuals are complex and without simple definitions or solutions; and to accept that simplicity is not the end goal. Instructors may want to incorporate complexity as a focal point for class discussions and reflections, particularly the ways that complexity matters in that discipline. Some resources for starting conversations about entertaining complexity include:

- <https://hbr.org/2011/09/learning-to-live-with-complexity>
- <http://www.amazon.com/Complexity-Education-Inquiries-Learning-Teaching/dp/0805859357>
- <https://prezi.com/otykjb8i7vzb/empathy-cognitive-complexity-and-communication/>
- https://www.ted.com/talks/daniel_kahneman_the_riddle_of_experience_vs_memory?language=en
- <https://www.ted.com/topics/complexity>



Strategy 4: Assess and reimagine classroom culture and design.

The classroom culture also impacts the development of empathy. Classroom design and set-up, the kinds of in-class activities, and the climate or group dynamic all contribute to classroom cultures that either encourage or discourage empathy development. Instructors interested in boosting empathy development should consider assessing the culture of their classes and imagining ways to make them higher-empathy spaces.

Classroom design

Something as seemingly simple as the layout of a classroom can send important messages about the importance of empathy in that class. Imagine, for instance, a typical classroom, organized into rows of desks: students sit facing the front of the room, oriented towards the instructor and, often, a multimedia screen. Such classroom setups convey beliefs about the nature of learning, the ownership of knowledge, and the relative importance of the professor, the other students, and the world outside the classroom. Reorganizing the classroom setup can aid perspective-taking and underscore who is worthy of listening to and learning from. You might consider the following ideas when planning your classroom design:

- Create small-group discussion or circling opportunities within larger classes.
- Give students opportunities to have conversations and work with partners, and encourage them to turn their chairs (or otherwise physically reorient themselves) so they can look each other eye-to-eye.
- As the instructor, sit amongst students instead of standing at the front of the room.
- Bring the “outside in” to the classroom by incorporating real people and stories into the course content.
- Take the class outside, if possible, to experience course concepts in the real world and understand the wider world itself is a classroom.

Even small changes like these can increase students’ engagement with each other and impact the overall messaging about the importance of compassion and perspective-taking in the class.

Class activities

When we understand empathy as a learnable skill rather than a personality trait, it becomes clear that it is also a skill that must be nurtured and practiced. Thus, instructors may want to incorporate activities both in and out of class that emphasize empathy, perspective-taking, and interpersonal engagement. Here are some ideas for activities that give students a chance to practice empathy or exercise their empathy muscle:

- Flipped Description Activity: A law professor uses this self-analysis activity to help her students practice perspective-taking. In it, students are asked to describe a client they worked with, then to describe themselves from that client’s point of view. This activity asks students to flip their perspective to change how they view the situation, helping them to both better understand other people’s perspectives and to understand the expectations and biases they themselves hold.
- Hands-on Skill Practice: An English as a Second Language teacher teaches active listening skills deliberately, by incorporating assigned readings about active listening skills and then giving students time in class to get and practice these skills with partners. Students read about specific behaviors of both engaged and unengaged listening, and role-play both types of listening. In class, students practice active, engaged listening. They are given a reflection prompt to discuss and take turns being the speaker and active listener; they then reflect on the experience and how empathic, engaged listening differs from unengaged listening.
- Personal Connections: Finding ways to make service experiences personally relevant to students can help them begin to develop compassion and to find entry points to other perspectives. Instructors might add informal discussions and/or writings to help cultivate a vested interest for the students. For instance, a 20-year-old student may not believe he or she has anything in common with someone twice their age; if instructors regularly challenge students to discover personal relevance, however, that student may find connections to a grandparent or older loved one, to a personal experience with injury or illness, and ultimately to their field of study.
- Understanding Implicit Bias: As we’ve discussed, self-awareness is an important foundation for building empathic ability, and learning to recognize and understand one’s own unconscious biases is key to that. Harvard University’s Project Implicit is a useful tool for uncovering these biases (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>). Its Implicit Association Tests (IATs) are short online quizzes that measure the strength of associations with evaluations; current IATs

target a variety of implicit biases, including tests on race, gender, age, sexuality, religion, weapons, and disability. Instructors may wish to incorporate one or more IATs—and reflection on what students learn from them—into their course activities.

Classroom culture and group dynamic

Our classes, like our culture, tend to celebrate conquest rather than connections; our society values success in the sense of individual mastery and ownership, and our classes typically embody that value system. Think, for instance, of how we grade and what we privilege in class participation. Empathy, however, does not always fit neatly within this value system. It takes vulnerability to entertain the perspective of another person, to consider a situation from a point of view dissimilar to one's own, to evaluate one's own level of empathy and admit that there is room for growth. In order to make their classes high-empathy places, instructors will also need to find ways to create classroom cultures and dynamics that make room for such vulnerability. Strategies that instructors might try include:

- Giving class time to reading and discussing guidelines for respectful conversations
- Collaboratively creating a class contract at the beginning of the semester that outlines all students' expectations of each other
- Actively inviting and valuing (perhaps verbally or with grades) stories of vulnerability, failure, struggle, or personal growth—not just the typical success story of mastery and triumph
- Making room for the human experience by allowing emotional responses in the classroom space or sharing the way stories and experiences impact how we feel
- Modeling this vulnerability and empathic communication in your own demeanor in class and class communications

Strategy 5: Add empathy to your learning objectives and graded coursework.

To truly activate empathy in their students, instructors must treat empathy as a valuable learning objective. Whether it is explicitly named as such on your syllabus or teased out implicitly through class readings and activities, a final strategy—and indeed perhaps a last best practice—is to value empathic learning and self-connected learning as learning, and to seek ways to recognize and value it as a body of knowledge.

One way instructors may communicate the importance of empathy is via grades. While while we in no way suggest you grade students' empathy levels or empathy development, we do believe that it can be worthwhile to include empathy-related questions and thinking within graded assignments, whether those assignments are formal or informal. Student responses that describe not experiencing feelings of empathy are just as valuable and worthy of discussion as examples of empathy growth. While empathy-related questions will differ dramatically from class to class and discipline to discipline, instructors might consider:

- Adding required readings about empathy, skills in your discipline's empathy toolbox, or your community to the curriculum
- Incorporating perspective-taking components into research and writing projects
- Assigning informal writing (and valuing it as grade-bearing) geared towards empathy development, such as reflective writings or writings aimed at finding personal connections
- Incorporating discussions of empathy and empathic ability into your classes
- Sharing ways that empathy matters in your field or profession
- Gathering information about students' empathy development, such as from Everhart's empathy self-assessment (described earlier), and using that information to retool future classes for further empathy activation

To truly activate empathy in their students, instructors must treat empathy as a valuable learning objective.

Conclusion

As 21st-century universities increasingly become sites of community engagement, many educators are working to understand and teach the community-engagement skills they see as invaluable today. Instructors who teach service-learning or community-based learning courses are particularly invested in these efforts. As we have found, many service-learning instructors, including faculty members at our own universities, are interested in learning ways to increase their students' ability to empathize with others. As we strive to create inclusive spaces--in our classrooms, universities, and wider culture--that welcome all manner of diversity, empathy becomes increasingly critical. Instructors, we believe, can be instrumental in cultivating students' empathy and ability to understand the perspectives of and engage with the people with whom they interact both within and outside of the classroom. This paper stems from our collaborations during the spring of 2016 to study this topic and, while not an exhaustive listing of these strategies, provides an overview of techniques and approaches that we believe to be useful for raising service-learning students' levels of empathy. We hope you will agree, and we look forward to continuing this conversation.

References

- Baker, A. C., Jensen, P. J., & Kolb, D. A. (2002). *Conversational learning: An experiential approach to knowledge creation*. Westport, Connecticut: Quorum Books.
- Everhart, R. S. (2016, Feb. 5). Teaching tools to improve the development of empathy in service-learning students. [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1NVfZZ0AdSzUW4HLFLwlvvmm3kc0JDsmfuuxXLg457N8/edit#slide=id.p4>
- Everhart, R. S. (In press). Teaching tools to improve the development of empathy in service-learning students. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*.
- Fraustino, J. D., Briones, R., & Janoske, M. (2015). Can every class be a Twitter chat? Cross-institutional collaboration and experiential learning in the social media classroom. *Journal of Public Relations Education*, 1(1), 1-18.
- Galinsky, A. D., & Moskowitz, G. B. (2000). Perspective-taking: decreasing stereotype expression, stereotype accessibility, and in-group favoritism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 708-724.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam.
- Ioannidou, F., & Konstantikaki, V. (2008). Empathy and emotional intelligence: What is it really about? *International Journal of Caring Sciences*, 1(3):118-123. Retrieved from http://internationaljournalofcaringsciences.org/docs/Vol1_Issue3_03_ioannidou.pdf
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- McLeod, S. A. (2012). Zone of Proximal Development. Retrieved from www.simplypsychology.org/Zone-of-Proximal-Development.html
- University of Minnesota Center for Community-Engaged Learning. (2011). Reflection in service-learning classes. Retrieved from <http://www.servicelearning.umn.edu/info/reflection.html>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wilson, J. C. (2011). Service-learning and the development of empathy in US college students. *Education + Training*, 53, 207-217.

Appendix: Recommended readings and resources

Videos, TED talks, & web resources

Self-awareness and implicit bias: Learn about Project Implicit, a research project studying implicit bias and its impact, and take one or more of its short online quizzes:

- Take an Implicit Association Test: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>
- Learn about Project Implicit: <https://www.projectimplicit.net/index.html>

Five ways of understanding compassion: Listen to this TED Radio Hour podcast, “Just a Little Nicer” (recorded on Dec 19, 2014), that explores five different perspectives on compassion:

- <http://www.npr.org/programs/ted-radio-hour/371276520/just-a-little-nicer>

Outrospection: Watch a short, animated video by philosopher and author Roman Krznaric, who explains what he calls “outrospection” and how we can help drive social change by stepping outside ourselves:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BG46IwVfSu8>

Empathy, sympathy, and vulnerability: Watch Brené Brown’s 2013 discussion about the power of vulnerability and empathy to transform the way we engage and educate.

- Watch Brené Brown’s talk about “The power of vulnerability:” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXSjc-pbXk4>
- Watch an short, animated video (an excerpt from the full talk above), which focuses on the differences between sympathy and empathy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>

Popular articles, books, & other readings

Emotional intelligence: Read a short article about “The 7 Habits of Emotionally Intelligent People:”

- <http://psychology.about.com/od/personalitydevelopment/fl/The-7-Habits-of-Emotionally-Intelligent-People.htm>

Empathy and dark matter: Read a short article, “Seeing Dark Matter as the Key to the Universe—And Human Empathy,” described by one of our workshop participants as life-changing:

- http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lisa-randall/dark-matter-key-to-the-universe-and-human-empathy_b_8409976.html?

The Five Whys: Read a Wikipedia overview of the classic iterative questioning technique known as “The 5 Whys:”

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/5_Whys

VCU’s “Art of Nursing” program: Review materials about VCU’s “Art of Nursing” program, which explores the usefulness of art criticism—the ability to observe, interpret, and evaluate works of art—as a way to enhance nurses’ clinical reasoning and perceptual skills:

- <https://arts.vcu.edu/blog/the-art-nursing/>
- <https://arts.vcu.edu/blog/art-educators-team-up-with-nurses-in-research-project/>

Compassion, empathy, and the human experience: Read religious scholar Karen Anderson’s (also a featured speaker in the TED Radio Hour, “Just a Little Nicer,” referenced above) book about understanding and practicing compassion, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*:

- Purchase the book: <http://www.amazon.com/Twelve-Steps-Compassionate-Karen-Armstrong/dp/0307742881>
- Read a summary of the book: <http://www.multifaithcouncil.org/pages/12stepssummary.pdf>

Scholarly articles

Bennett, J. M. & Bennett, M. J. (2004). Developing intercultural sensitivity: An integrative approach to global and domestic diversity. In D. Landis, J. M. Bennett, & M. J. Bennett (Eds.), *Handbook of Intercultural Training*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Available online: http://pwr.uua.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Developing_Intercultural_Sensitivity.pdf

- Galinsky, A. D., & Moskowitz, G. B. (2000). Perspective-taking: decreasing stereotype expression, stereotype accessibility, and in-group favoritism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 708-724.
- Available online: <http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/psp/78/4/708/>
- Hammer, M. R., Bennett, M. J., & Wiseman, R. (2003). Measuring intercultural sensitivity: The intercultural development inventory. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 27(4), 421-443.
- Available online: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0147176703000324>
- Hedberg, P. R. (2009). Learning through Reflective Classroom Practice: Applications to educate the reflective manager. *Journal of Management Education*, 33(1), 10-36.
- Available online: <http://jme.sagepub.com/content/33/1/10.abstract>
- Hunt, R. (2007). Service-Learning: An Eye-Opening Experience that Provokes Emotion and Challenges Stereotypes. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 46, 277-281.
- Konrath, S. H., O'Brien, E. H., & Hsing, C. (2011). Changes in dispositional empathy in American college students over time: a meta-analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 15, 180-198.
- Available online: <http://psr.sagepub.com/content/15/2/180>
- Lundy, B. (2007). Service Learning in Life-Span Developmental Psychology: Higher Exam Scores and Increased Empathy. *Teaching of Psychology*, 34, 23-27.
- Mofidi, M., Strauss, R., Pitner, L. L., & Sandler, E. S. (2003). Dental students' reflections on their community-based experiences: the use of critical incidents. *Journal of Dental Education*, 67, 515-523.
- Vogt, M. A., Chavez, R., & Schaffner, B. (2011). Baccalaureate Nursing Student Experiences at a Camp for Children with Diabetes: The Impact of a Service-Learning Model. *Pediatric Nursing*, 37, 69-73.
- Wilson, J. C. (2011). Service-learning and the development of empathy in US college students. *Education + Training*, 53, 207-217.
- Available online: <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/full/10.1108/00400911111115735>