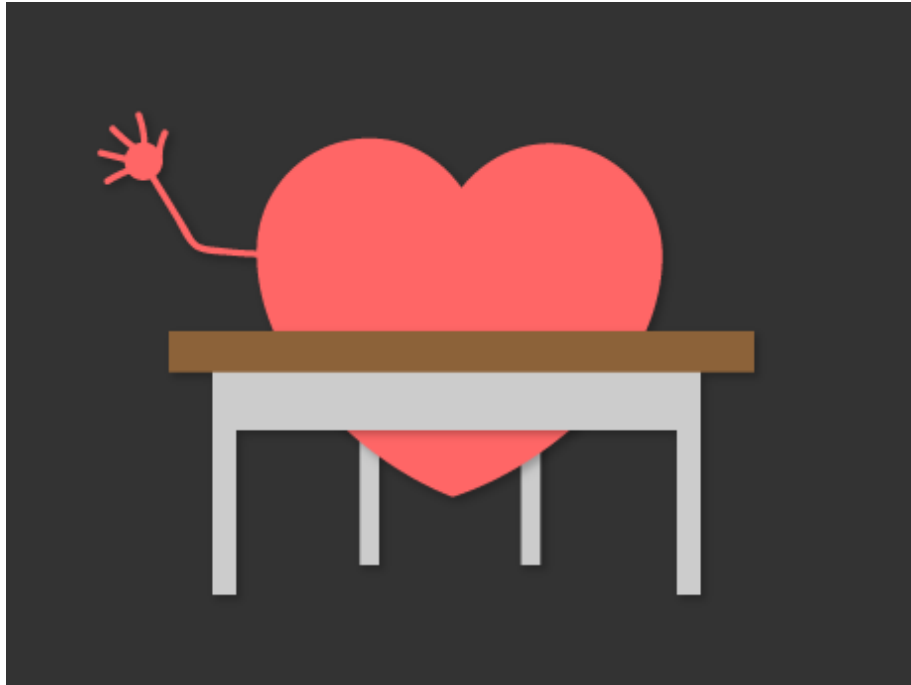


Teaching Empathy: Are We Teaching Content or Students?

edutopia.org/blog/teaching-empathy-content-or-students-terry-heick

2/10/2015



Right near the core of education, just past tolerance and just short of affectionate connectivity, is the idea of empathy. University of California Berkley's [Greater Good Science Center](#) explains empathy:

The term "empathy" is used to describe a wide range of experiences. Emotion researchers generally define empathy as the ability to sense other people's emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling.

What Empathy Is and Is Not

Empathy is often confused with sympathy, which is a pretty extraordinary error depending on how tightly wound you are about these things (and whose definitions you stand behind). [Dr. Brené Brown](#) offers a divisive take on the difference: "Empathy fuels connections, sympathy drives disconnection."

This contrasts with [Dictionary.com](#), which explains:

Both empathy and sympathy are feelings concerning other people. Sympathy is literally "feeling with" -- compassion for or commiseration with another person. Empathy, by contrast, is literally "feeling into" -- the ability to project one's personality into another person and more fully understand that person.

Dictionary.com marks just a slight discrepancy between the two -- sympathy requires less movement and merging of emotions, while empathy is entirely that.

The chemistry, subjectivity, and nuance of language aside, there is a clear handle for us as teachers. However large you see the distinction, they certainly have very different tones. Empathy is based in compassion, while sympathy is based in analysis.

Greater Good continues, clarifying:

Contemporary researchers often differentiate between two types of empathy: "Affective empathy" refers to the sensations and feelings we get in response to others' emotions; this can include mirroring what that person is feeling, or just feeling stressed when we detect another's fear or anxiety. "Cognitive empathy," sometimes called "perspective taking," refers to our ability to identify and understand other peoples' emotions. Studies suggest that people with autism spectrum disorders have a hard time empathizing.

Ideally, empathy would be the net effect of experience, which in classrooms is a matter of both process and knowledge. Students would learn to empathize rather than be taught to empathize, as a symptom of what they know. Why this is important is a matter of implication and language. Teaching someone to feel what others feel and sit with emotions that aren't their own couldn't be any further from the inherent pattern of academics, which is always decidedly *other*. Teaching always begins with detachment -- learn this skill or content strand that is now apart from you. Empathy is the opposite -- it starts *in* the other, and finishes there without leaving.

Formal Education vs. True Connection

In your classroom, there are dozens of natural sources of empathy. But what about authenticity? There's nothing worse than "schoolifying" something that a child actually needs to know. So much of great teaching is about packaging content so that students recognize it as something they need to know and can actually use, rather than something to do "because I said so, and you don't want a zero, do you?"

Here's one way to consider it. Without empathy, you're teaching content instead of students. The concept of teachers as primarily responsible for content distribution is a dated one, but even seeking to "engage" students misses the calling of teaching. To teach a child is to miss that child. You must understand them for who they are and where they are, not for what you hope to prepare them for. "Giving knowledge" and "engaging students" in pursuit of pre-selected knowledge are both natural processes of formal education -- and both make empathy hard to come by.

So where to start doing something different? How *should* you "teach it"? How will you know it when you see it? Is it different for different content areas, grade levels, genders, socioeconomic backgrounds, nationalities, or some other "thing"? Is this new-age mumbo jumbo, or a precise tool for a progressive teacher? How has the push of digital and social media into learning spaces emphasized the need for empathy -- or naturally reduced it?

Is empathy a skill that can even be taught, a "competency" that you should bullet-point in your lesson plan, something that requires pre-assessment? Or is it something fuller, something more persistent and whole? Scotty McLennan, the Dean for Religious Life at Stanford University, suggests:

Expressing care for another is not an innate ability present more naturally in some people than others, but rather a skill that can be taught and nurtured through a supportive educational environment.

The Human Face of Understanding

But pushed farther, it's not hard to see that empathy is both a cause and effect of understanding, a kind of cognitive and emotional double helix that can create a bridge between classroom learning and "real-life" application. Getting started with empathy in the classroom is a matter of first grasping it as a concept, strategy, and residual effect of knowledge and perspective. Heading over to [Teaching Tolerance](#) and ordering a bunch of posters and DVDs may be unnecessary -- at least at first. Internalizing how the idea of empathy can reframe everything that happens in your classroom -- your reason for teaching -- is a shift that will suggest a world of possibility for teaching lessons, activities, and strategies.

More than anything else though, empathy is a tone. Broken into parts, it is about self, audience, and purpose. It helps students consider:

- Who am I?
- Who is "other"? And how? In what functions and degrees?
- How do we relate? What do we share?
- What do they need from me, and I from them?

This leads to a staggering and often troubling question for all of us: "What should I do with what I know?"