Reflecting and Developing Empathy in Community Engagement Courses

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Research Questions

- Community engagement courses often aim to help students develop empathy, but do students achieve the level of empathy desired through real-world experiences alone?
- How can instructors help students develop deeper, more nuanced empathy?
- How can we help students recognize their own development of empathy and the associated transformations in their knowledge and thinking?
- Should instructors assess students’ development of empathy? For a grade? For fulfillment of course learning outcomes? If so, how?

Background

Defining empathy:
- Cognitive:
  - Understanding the perspectives and experiences of others
- Self awareness (Gerdes, et al. 85)
- Social empathy – understanding others’ living conditions in wider context (Gerdes, et al. 85)
- Affective: sharing emotional or physical experiences
- The “imaginative leap” (Krznaric 2014) – Imagining being in another’s situation (Halpern as quoted in Hollan 470)

Why develop empathy?
- “Nurture a compassionate disposition” (Fry and Runyan 3)
- Helping behavior
- Increased sensitivity to others (Batson, 2011 as quoted in Fry and Runyan 3)
- “prosocial behavior,” moral behavior
- altruism, empathic action (Fry and Runyan 1; Gerdes, et al 85)

Methods

- I explored using a series of reflective writing assignments to help students build deeper, more meaningful empathy. The reflections were inspired by Barbara Jacoby’s work (2015) in which she explains that critical reflection should be “continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized” (p. 27).
- Rather than rely solely on a final reflexive writing assignment as I had in the past, I implemented three reflections at the beginning (a “pre-reflection” (Jacoby 2015), middle, and end of the course.
- The three reflection assignments were intended to prompt students to examine their own preconceptions, reflect on their progress, and ultimately look back on their previous reflections to recognize how their understandings had changed.
- Reflections were tailored to course content.
- I ran the series of reflections in the fall course, ANT 300, Global Landscapes of Aging. ANT 225 (spring 2017) did not include any reflections other than in the final paper. (I chose ANT 225 Spring 2017 because its content most closely resembles ANT 225 in Spring 2018.)
- Students received the same prompt for the final reflection paper in both classes.
- Compared final written reflections in ANT 300 with those from the past ANT 225 (Spring 2017) that did not include the new assignments.

The courses

Anthropology 225 Quest III Celebrating Culture through the Arts
- A general education requirement
- 10 sophomores with a wider range of majors
- Community Partner: Lighted School House, after school program at Oshkosh elementary and middle schools
- Students led children in activities related to art and performance around the world

Anthropology 300 Global Landscapes of Aging
- Upper level Anthropology elective
- 21 students, sophomore to senior
- Community Partner: Bethel Home rehabilitation center of Mirador Living senior living facility
- Students participated in activities and games, spent time with residents, and conducted a life-history interview

Analysis

- Close reading of student final reflections suggested the coding categories below.
- Coded for whether the student paper demonstrated the following thought processes (ranked: yes, partial, or no).

Results

- Developed the following categories and coded student papers for level of empathy demonstrated in the following areas (ranked yes, partial, or no).

Conclusions

- Students in the course without the series of reflections displayed more limited, superficial development of empathy.
- Students in the course with the series of reflections demonstrated deeper, more advanced levels of empathy.
- The analysis suggested that looking for thought processes identified here should prove an effective way to assess students’ development of cognitive and affective empathy. As Jacoby stated, “We should not assess or grade the content of students’ feelings. Rather, we should assess how authentically and deeply students think about their feelings” (2015: 40).
- Revising assignment guidelines, prompts, and rubrics along these lines may help students better develop empathy and reflect on their own learning.
- The analysis suggested that a series of tailored reflection assignments gave students the opportunity to examine their own preconceptions, reflect on their progress, and ultimately look back on their previous reflections to recognize how their understandings had changed. As a result, students demonstrated more advanced levels of empathy in their final reflections.
- Making the “imaginative leap” was the level most often achieved, suggesting that it is a more advanced level of empathy.

Further Questions

- Did the different characteristics of the courses affect the scores such as: where the students were in their college career, (in other words, more or less advanced students coming into the course with different skill levels), reasons for taking the course (general education requirement vs. elective), self-selection for interest?
- How did the community partner population (elderly vs. children) impact the results? Students working with children often recognized a common ground or differences by comparing to their own childhoods. To a much greater degree, students working with elders imagined their own futures as if they had to face the same conditions. The latter had greater success in making an “imaginative leap.”
- Did the nature of the immersion experience affect the results? Students working with the elders did a life history interview whereas students working with the children did not. Is this a more effective means to achieve deeper empathy than participation alone?
- Running the reflections is ANT 225 this spring semester (2019), should provide a closer basis for comparison.

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Works Cited