

# Empathy in the Classroom

## Student Recognition and Perceptions of Empathy as Teaching Strategy

Dr. Desiree Wiesen-Martin, Association Professor – Sociology, Criminology, & Anthropology

### Introduction

#### Decline in Empathy

Researchers have identified a decline in the empathy of college students. Konrath and colleagues (2011) found decline in most of the subscales of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index with the sharpest declines occurring in empathic concern and perspective taking.

#### Empathy Impacts Learning

Instilling empathy in undergraduate students allows instructors to positively influence their student's level of understanding, comprehension, and retention of the course material (Latshaw 2015; Ghidina 2019).

#### Lack of Explicit Empathy Inclusion

While some disciplines, such as nursing, have started to include the development of empathy as part of the curriculum (Engbers 2020), many do not. The lack of explicitly identifying empathy as an outcome goal may not be reflective of the position an instructor has toward empathy development. Rockwell and colleagues (2019) notes that most of the instructors they interviewed did not explicitly state empathy as a teaching goal, but almost all the faculty indicated that they hoped the course, or the style of teaching impacted the empathy of their students.

#### Research Questions

- 1) Do students experience the use of empathy-based teaching strategies?
- 2) Do students perceive these strategies as empathy-based?
- 3) Do students perceive empathy as a valuable for learning subject matter?
- 4) Do students perceive development of empathy as useful for their career?

### Methods

#### Defining Empathy

Empathy is the ability to feel an appropriate emotional response to a person's moods, feelings, or attitudes (affective) and the ability to understand another person's moods, feelings, or attitudes (cognitive).

#### Data Collection

A questionnaire was used to determine whether students were being exposed to empathy-based teaching strategies, whether those students recognize the teaching strategy as empathy-based, and if students perceive value in empathy-based teaching strategies. After the project was approved by the UWRF IRB an email invitation was sent to students who had achieved sophomore status and were enrolled in majors that fall within the social sciences, humanities, and education. The invitation was sent at the beginning of the Spring 2022 semester.

#### Sample Size and Demographics

111 students completed the informed consent process. Of the 111 students 85 had completed 75% or more of the questionnaire.

#### Sample Demographics

- 95% white
- 81% female
- 70% had not attended another university of college
- 22 average age
- 46% senior standing

### References

Konrath, Sara, Edward O'Brien, and Courtney Hsing. 2011. "Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students Over Time: A Meta-Analysis." *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 15(2): 180-198.

Rockwell, Ashley, Chris Vidmar, Penny Harvey, and Leanna Greenwood. 2019. "Do Sociology Courses Make More Empathic Students? A Mixed-Methods Study of Empathy Changes in Undergraduates." *Teaching Sociology* 47(4): 284-302.

### Results

55.29% of the students reported that their professors **DID use empathy-based teaching strategies, but 89.41% identified that the faculty did not make it clear that the strategy was empathy-based.**

#### Empathy-Based Strategies Identified by Students (N=85)

Strategy	%
Material about individual experiences	75.29
Material about group experiences	71.76
Reflective writing	57.65
Simulations/Activities	54.12
Did not experience	9.41

86% of students who identified experiencing one or more of the above (N=77) identified they agreed or strongly agreed that the strategies are useful for understanding course material.

#### Student Perceptions of Empathy (N=85)

	% Agree or Strongly Agree
<b>Valuable for Learning</b>	
Understanding subject matter	91.76
Affective	90.59
Cognitive	95.29
<b>Useful for Career</b>	
Affective Empathy	96.47
Cognitive Empathy	97.65

### Conclusion

While slightly more than half of the respondents identified that the faculty used empathy-based teaching strategies students may not identify some teaching strategies as empathy based because the faculty member is not explicitly identifying the strategy as empathy-based.

Students overwhelmingly identified empathy as valuable for learning course content and that cognitive and affective empathy would be useful in their careers. This is consistent with educators who have identified the benefits of instilling empathy for learning outcomes as well as outcomes outside of the educational institution.

These findings suggest that more disciplines may want to consider how empathy could be used in the curriculum or explicitly identifying where empathy is already being taught in the curriculum.

Research suggests there are faculty who see the benefit of instilling empathy and students see a benefit of having empathy instilled, universities may need to identify empathy instillation as a course outcome. This begs a larger conversation on how the teaching and learning of empathy could be assessed as a course outcome.

### Acknowledgements

This project was sponsored by the Wisconsin Teaching Fellows and Scholars (WTFS) program. Thank you for the support, Valerie Barske and Heather Pelzel.

UNIVERSITY OF  
WISCONSIN

River Falls