Reflecting and Developing Empathy in Community Engagement Courses

Dr. Stephanie May de Montigny, Anthropology
University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

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: 84).
-Affective: Affective sharing or emotional empathy
-The "Imaginative Leap" (Krznaric 2014) – Imagining being in another's situation (Halpern as quoted in Hollan 476)

Why develop empathy?
    -"nurture a compassionate disposition" (Fry and Runyan 3)
    -helping behavior
    -increased sensitivity to others (Batson, 2011a as quoted in Fry and Runyan 3)
    -"prosocial behavior," moral behavior
-altruism, empathic action (Fry and Runyan 1; Gerdes, et al 86)

Methods

-I explored using a series of reflexive 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-flection" (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 2019.)

-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
    -50 sophomores with a wide range of majors
    -Community Partner: Lighted School House, after school program at Oshkosh area 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 Miravida 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).

Past (Reflecting on, reassessing, redefining past beliefs, preconceptions, actions)	Present (Impact on: self, beliefs, behavior, relationships)	Future (Envisioning one's own future)
Reflects on prior views	Recognizes prior views as preconceptions, misconceptions or stereotypes	Visualizes/imagines one's own future;
Drew on own past childhood experience to understand and empathize w/ children or elders	Expands understanding of others, children or elders	Imagines one's own future contributions
	Challenged own views/ preconceptions/ misconceptions/ expectations	Re-evaluates or expands one's career possibilities
Reflects on past social relationships	Thinks about current social relationships	Expects to act differently towards other people in the future
	Reflects on societal beliefs, attitudes, views	Expands one's plans for volunteerism, community involvement
	Critiques or challenges societal beliefs, attitudes, views	
	Observes changes in self-understanding; Better understands self; Learned about self	
	Recognizes impact of the experience on self	
	Recognizes own limitations	
	Discovers one's own interests, likes, talents, abilities	
	Recognizes one's own contributions (in or outside of current project)	
	Recognizes speculation, limits of own knowledge, observations	

Results

-Percentage of students at each level of empathy:
ANT 300
Novice: 21%
Intermediate: 50%
Advanced: 29%

ANT 225
Novice: 80%
Intermediate: 20%
Advanced: 0%

Developed the following empathy scale based on analysis of student papers:

Empathy scale		
Novice (emerging)	Intermediate	Advanced
Recognizing (marked by identifying, pointing out)	Understanding (marked by describing, discussing)	Deeper understanding (marked by giving evidence, examples); and Imagining (marked by reflecting on oneself and one's own life as shaped, motivated, or impacted by the others' perspectives, experiences, conditions)

- Developed the following categories and coded student papers for level of empathy demonstrated in the following areas (ranked yes, partial, or no). On this basis, gave each paper an overall ranking of Novice, Intermediate or Advanced in demonstrating student's development of empathy.

Novice	Intermediate	Advanced
Recognizing Preconceptions (Self Awareness):		
Recognizes that one has preconceptions, stereotypes, beliefs	Describes what those preconceptions (beliefs) were, how they were learned/constructed	Gives evidence (such as anecdotes) of those preconceptions
Challenging Preconceptions (Self Awareness, Understanding others' experiences):		
Recognizes that one's preconceptions were challenged	Describes the thoughts/beliefs that now replace (or modify) those preconceptions/beliefs	Gives evidence/examples of the moment conversation, event, activity, interaction, that challenged the preconceptions and inspired the new thought
Recognizing and understanding empathy:		
Recognizes that one developed greater empathy	-Recognizes and discusses own development of empathy; -Shows general understanding of what empathy is; -May discuss how to develop empathy	-Demonstrates intermediate level knowledge; -Shows more thorough understanding of empathy; -discusses specific details or examples from real world experiences that show how they developed empathy
Recognizing common ground with others (Self awareness, understanding others' perspectives):		
Recognizes similarity or common ground with others	Describes bases for similarities or common ground	Imagines self in other's position; what one's life would be like
Recognizing, understanding other perspectives:		
Recognizes that others' perspectives exist	Demonstrates/describes understanding of rationale/reasons underlying others' perspectives; Acknowledges legitimacy of others' perspectives	Imagines one's own life if motivated by those underlying reasons or rationales; or inspired to empathic action (compassion) based on new understanding(s) (see also Gerdes, et al.)
Recognizing positionality (Self awareness):		
Recognizes others' or own positionality; that one's life's conditions and experiences shape one's positionality, perspectives, beliefs; that perspectives are not universal	Recognizes both others' and own positionality; Demonstrates understanding of conditions that shape others' positionality and how their perspectives and actions are shaped by those experiences	Imagines self in other's position; what one's life would be like under similar conditions; -Gives evidence and examples that show how one developed understanding of positionality of oneself and others; -Inspired to empathic action (compassion) based on new understanding(s)

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 least 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 in ANT 225 this spring semester (2019), should provide a closer basis for comparison.

Works Cited

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