



Artifacts of Empathy: Cultivating, Identifying, and Assessing Students' Development and Written Articulations of Empathy in a Community Engagement Course

ABSTRACT

This research recounts a scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) project aimed at facilitating students' empathic development while also offering ways to identify and assess students' written expressions of empathy. I ground this work in an exploration of the many processes labelled as empathy and the reasons for including empathy as a course learning outcome. While participating in the Lighted School House program, I explored using progressive, or stacked, writing reflections to help students build, recognize, and articulate their own empathy. I conducted a close reading of final reflection papers in two offerings of a second-year community engagement course (in 2017 and 2019) in which students worked with an afterschool program in local elementary and middle schools. This enabled me to identify features of student writing—the evidence or “artifacts”—that illustrated their understanding of empathy, others' perspectives, and positionality. To assess the depth and complexity with which students articulated their empathy, I devised a scale to identify these written expressions as novice, intermediate, or advanced. The analysis showed the importance of using an “imagine-other” perspective rather than merely imagining oneself in another's situation, valuing others to inspire empathic action, and using conversation as a powerful tool for developing empathy. The project points to pedagogical practices that encourage students to employ effective conversation and listening skills in community engagement. This research suggests ways to help students better express their empathy by revising prompts and rubrics to clarify the particular empathic processes targeted and to foster strong writing skills.

KEYWORDS

empathy, writing reflections, community engagement

INTRODUCTION

Questions abound about what empathy is and whether empathy can cure whatever ails individuals, our society, and world. Is there an empathy deficit or gap (Aizkalna 2019, 29; Bazalgette 2017; Cuzzo et al. 2017, 61; Krznic 2014)? If so, how do we fill it? How do we define empathy, communicate its value to our students, and help them cultivate it? Here I sort through a variety of cognitive processes categorized under empathy to consider which may serve as viable course learning outcomes. I also explore how we can assess whether our students have achieved a meaningful degree of empathy. As Barbara Jacoby (2015) states, “We should not assess or grade the content of students’

feelings. Rather, we should assess how authentically and deeply students think about their feelings” (40). As part of a scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) research project for the Wisconsin Teaching Fellows and Scholars (WITFS) program, I explored using progressive, or stacked, writing reflections to help students develop, recognize, and articulate their own empathy. Then I looked at “artifacts” (Manarin 2018) within their writing that demonstrated the nuance of students’ empathic expressions.

I examined two offerings, one in 2017 and the other in 2019, of my community engagement course offerings: Anthropology 225 Celebrating Culture Through the Arts. As a general education requirement, the course enrolls up to 50 students, most in their second year at university. These students learn about art and performance around the world. Then, at a federally funded after-school program, they lead local elementary and middle school children in related activities. The children come from varied ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, learning abilities, behavioral challenges, and home lives. My students aim to help the children learn about other cultures, celebrate their own backgrounds and identities, and build self-esteem. I have taught this course 13 times since 2014 and have observed students writing about empathy. But I wanted to see them achieve greater depth.

To assess students’ written expressions of empathy, I closely read their final reflection papers. Then I “coded” these papers; in other words, I tagged or labelled places where students discussed or illustrated various empathic processes. These included processes discussed below such as: cognitive and affective empathy, understanding others’ perspectives from “imagine-self” and “imagine-other” vantage points, understanding positionality, valuing others, and expressing motivation towards empathic action. I then assessed students’ written examples on a scale based on criteria that I determined to represent novice, intermediate, and advanced expressions. In the resulting analysis, student narratives showed the utility of both “imagine-self” and “imagine-other” perspectives while also demonstrating the pitfalls of relying solely on one’s own view to understand others. They demonstrated how valuing others can inspire empathic action and underlined the importance of conversation to promote empathy. The strongest articulations of empathy employed effective writing strategies, such as supporting arguments with evidence from experience. This research points to the usefulness of several pedagogical practices to help students develop, recognize, reflect on, and articulate their empathic development. These include crafting conversational questions, fostering listening skills, clarifying particular empathic processes as learning outcomes, and using specific language on prompts and rubrics to emphasize empathic processes and strong writing skills.

IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY

Why include empathy as a course learning outcome? Scholars point to the many diverse contributions of empathy to, for example, broader society, interpersonal interaction, and student academic achievement (Batson 2009, 11; Feshbach and Feshbach 2009, 86, 87, 91; Gerdes et al. 2011, 123; Hoerr 2017; Read 2019). Empathy leads to deeper understandings of others’ life experiences, greater involvement in social change and civic engagement, and increased tolerance of difference (Gerdes et al. 2011, 123). Researchers assert that empathy reduces conflict and decreases prejudice and discrimination (Feshbach and Feshbach, 87; Stocks and Lishner 2012, 37). Empathy encourages emotional competence and prosocial behavior like cooperation, sharing, donating, and altruism (Batson 2009; Batson 2011; Feshbach and Feshbach, 86; Stocks and Lishner, 36; Stocks, Lishner, and Decker 2009). While empathy nurtures “a compassionate disposition” and sensitivity to others (Fry and Runyan 2018, 3), it can lower aggression and other antisocial behavior (Feshbach and Feshbach, 86; Decety 2011, vii).

Building empathy can move someone from a blame-the-victim mentality towards a desire to help (Stocks and Lishner 2012, 37). While people tend to justify their own behavior by pointing to external factors, they often explain others' behaviors via internal attributes like personality traits or dispositions. But asking someone to empathize with another shifts their focus to external factors just as they would focus on when explaining their own behavior. This “reversal of attributional biases” then encourages a higher value and improved attitude towards others and reduces derogation and blaming the victim (Stocks and Lishner, 36–37).

At an interpersonal level, empathy encourages conflict avoidance or management, improved communication, increased relationship satisfaction, and greater consideration of one's partners' wants and needs. Yet using one's own perspective to assess how another will react to a situation can be inaccurate—especially if the individuals are substantially different or the observer is experiencing a strong emotion that affects their judgement (Stocks and Lishner 2012, 36).

Researchers have shown that empathy has a range of positive impacts on learning from indirect effects fostered by prosocial behaviors to more direct influences on academic achievement in areas like reading, spelling skills, grade point averages, and critical thinking (Cuzzo et al. 2017, 61; Feshbach and Feshbach 2009, 87; Ragupathi, Yeo, and Loy 2022, 2). For example, empathy helps children better share and experience their own feelings and imagine themselves in the roles of characters. This then leads to better reading comprehension and recall (Feshbach and Feshbach, 87). When schools promote “caring communities,” they enable students to increase scores on higher-order reading comprehension measures. And when teachers show empathy for their students, at the secondary and post-secondary levels, students' greater acceptance and higher self-esteem improves their learning (Cuzzo et al., 61; Feshbach and Feshbach, 88). While some of these studies refer to children, the implications for learning likely transfer to the post-secondary level. Cuzzo et al., in particular, outlines the benefits of empathy for post-secondary students (61), and Ragupathi, Yeo, and Loy point out the importance of empathy and self-knowledge to post-secondary students' critical thinking (16). More research would be required to better understand these issues at the post-secondary level.

THE MANY “THINGS CALLED EMPATHY”

Although scholars outline many benefits to empathy, they don't always agree about what it is. In the expansive, diverse, and interdisciplinary literature on empathy, the definitions vary tremendously (Cuzzo et al. 2017, 64; Feshbach and Feshbach 2009, 92; Gerdes, Lietz, and Segal 2011, 84; Lopez-Perez et al. 2013; Read 2019). Some definitions appear partial (Aizkalna 2019; Bloom 2014; Constantini 2019), others presumptive (Gerdes et al. 2011, 111). The “semantic fuzziness” surrounding empathy generates different “measurement techniques,” making it difficult to define and assess empathy (Gerdes, Lietz, and Segal 2011, 84; Hall and Schwartz 2019). Due to this variability in terminology, Batson (2009) advised, “The best one can do is recognize the different phenomena, make clear the labeling scheme one is adopting, and use that scheme consistently” (8). The work of C. Daniel Batson and his students, David Lishner and Eric Stocks, provides an especially comprehensive account of the many cognitive processes labelled or likened to empathy.

While researchers have referred to “a broad range of perceptual, cognitive, affective responses” as empathy, these processes are distinct psychological states with different effects (Batson 2009, 3; Stocks and Lishner 2012, 32). Batson identified eight separate “things called empathy” including:

- knowing another's internal state, thoughts, and feelings;
- matching another's neural responses;
- feeling as another feels;
- “projecting” oneself into another's situation;
- imagining how someone else thinks and feels;
- imagining how one would feel in someone else's place;
- feeling distress at witnessing another's suffering;
- and feeling for someone who is suffering (Batson 2009, 4–8).

Scholars often parse empathy into affective and cognitive processes. Stocks and Lishner break down affective empathy into four processes:

- feeling what another is feeling;
- experiencing distress when perceiving another's suffering;
- feeling for another—meaning feeling some type of emotion congruent with another's situation but not necessarily identical to the other's emotion;
- and matching another's neural responses (Feshbach and Feshbach 2009, 85; Gerdes et al. 2011, 112; Read 2019, 3; Stocks and Lishner 2012, 33–34; Stocks, Lopez–Perez, and Ocejja 2017).

Of these processes, matching and evoking distress seem untenable or undesirable as learning outcomes. While empathic distress might spur action on another's behalf, its capacity to help understand others seems dubious (Batson 2009, 8–9, 11; Feshbach and Feshbach 2009, 87). Feeling as another feels might shift one's focus towards one's own discomfort instead of someone else's (Batson 2009, 10). Hence, one might be motivated to reduce that negative emotion by escaping the situation and avoiding whoever is in need (Bloom 2016; Lopez–Perez et al. 2013; Stocks and Lishner 2012, 34). However, empathic concern, a type of affective empathy that arises from feeling empathy or compassion for another, seems more achievable and productive.¹

Unlike affective empathy, cognitive empathy may be considered more intellectually-based rather than emotional. Often referred to as perspective-taking, cognitive empathy denotes “the ability to identify or understand what another is thinking in a specific situation” (Aizkalna 2019; Cuff et al. 2016; Hall and Schwartz 2019, 233; Krznaric 2019; Stocks and Lishner 2012, 33). The process emphasizes sensitivity to how another's situation affects them, focusing less on knowing another's thoughts and feelings (Batson 2009, 7).

Here arise notions of social empathy, positionality, and an imagine-other perspective. Social empathy refers to understanding others within a wider context: in particular, “the circumstances of other people's living conditions in the context of broader educational, health, and socioeconomic structures and institutions” (Gerdes, Lietz, and Segal 2011, 85). Developing social empathy targets better understanding of disparities, inequalities, discrimination, and injustices to engender better informed action and social justice (Gerdes et al. 2011, 117; Segal 2018).

Social empathy points to the concept of positionality. The term positionality appears in many disciplines and often indicates how factors of one's social position (such as power, privilege, race, gender, education and training, and so on), as a researcher, author, or otherwise, shape one's understanding of observations, experiences, and others' perspectives. Positionality also points to the “situated nature” of knowledge and identity (Kohl and McCutcheon 2015, 751; Lam 2022; Launius and Hassel 2022; Lee 2015; Melton 2019).

Whether cognitive or affective, empathy is described often as taking an “imaginative leap” (Batson 2009, 6; Krznaric 2014; Hollan 2008, 476). Yet the imaginative leap comes in two varieties: the “imagine-self” perspective—imagining how oneself would feel in another’s place; and the “imagine-other” perspective—imagining how someone else thinks and feels in a certain situation (Batson 2009, 6–8). Batson argued against conflating the two as other authors often did (7). Similarly, Stocks and Lishner (2012) state that these two processes “have different emotional, motivational, and behavioral consequences” (32). I see value and challenges to both these processes as course learning outcomes.

On the one hand, an imagine-self perspective can help build a bridge of understanding with someone else. One envisions how another feels based on one’s own values, goals, and circumstances (Stocks and Lishner 2012, 32). As Batson (2009) pointed out, imagining-self could “give one a lively sense of what the other is thinking and feeling,” and doing so may be essential if the other’s situation is “unfamiliar or unclear” (10–11). Imagining-self could orient one’s feelings towards another and generate “a more sensitive response to the plight of members of stereotyped out-groups” (Batson, 10–11). On the other hand, projecting oneself into another’s situation could lead to inaccurate interpretations of others’ views (Batson, 10–11).

An imagine-other perspective resonates more with social empathy and positionality since it envisions “what another is thinking and feeling” based on the other’s situation, values, goals, resources, and so on (Stocks and Lishner 2012, 32). Nevertheless, one could imagine-other based on “erroneous beliefs about the other’s state” and thereby fail to provide “sensitive care” (Batson 2009, 10).

Rather than perspective-taking, Batson (2011) saw perceiving need and valuing another’s welfare as more important to motivating empathic concern and altruism (33, 44). He argued that one need not imagine how another thinks and feels nor recognize similarities between oneself and another to perceive their need and value their welfare. Indeed understanding someone else’s perspective did not guarantee that one would value them or empathize (42–43). Yet Batson acknowledged that perspective-taking could increase empathic concern and activate “the valuing path” (44). Indeed, since valuing was more characteristic of close, long-term relationships, fostering perspective-taking, he argued, likely would be more effective in short-term situations (like a community engagement course) to “induce empathic concern” (45).

From these explorations, I sifted through students’ reflection papers for examples of understanding empathy, perspectives, and positionality. I looked for instances of both an imagine-self and imagine-other perspective, hoping to discern a “valuing path” that inspired empathic action.

METHODS

To assess how students articulated their empathic development, I examined final reflections papers in two renditions of the course: spring 2017 (45 students) and 2019 (44 students). In both classes, the guidelines and rubrics for the final papers prompted students to describe examples from their experiences at the community partner site in order to illustrate how they developed their empathy, understanding of multiple perspectives, and positionality. Following Jacoby’s advice, I was not assessing student’s feelings but examining their writing for the ways they articulated empathy. Certainly, my results are shaped by my own limitations as the instructor and sole researcher in this project. My analysis is based on a close reading of students’ narrative examples from their written final reflections. I also lend insights from teaching this course 13 times over the past nine years.

In the 2019 version of the course, I included three progressive writing reflections before the final paper. For each reflection, students handwrote responses on a worksheet in class. Borrowing Jacoby’s concept, I created a “pre-lection” to serve as a baseline. It included questions that would

capture students' initial expectations. Mid-semester I gave the students a second short reflective writing assignment with a simple, open-ended prompt, "Reflect on your first visit to the elementary school for [the afterschool program]. Write about your first impressions from this visit, your thoughts, reactions, and so on." Then the third reflection included questions that prompted them to compare their earlier expectations and impressions to their experiences (see Table 1 below). As they wrote responses to the third in-class reflection, students had the worksheets with their written responses to the pre-reflection and second reflection.

Table 1. Comparison of reflection assignment prompts

Pre-reflection	Third Reflection
What do you think your experiences in the schools will be like? What do you look forward to? What do you worry about?	How would you compare and contrast working at [the after school program] with your initial expectations in terms of the experiences you anticipated?
What do you envision the children will be like? What kinds of backgrounds, strengths, and challenges do you expect they may have?	How would you compare and contrast working at [the after school program] with your initial expectations in terms of what the children would be like?
What similarities and differences do you think you may have with the children with whom you're going to work? How do you think the experiences of the children might compare to your own childhood and education?	Compared to what you expected at the beginning of the course, how have you found similarities and differences with the children? What have you learned about how their experiences compare and contrast to your own childhood and education?
How do you think this experience will affect you? What do you think you will gain from it?	How has the experience affected you, and what do you think you've gained from it compared to what you first expected?

These written reflections prepared students for the final one which they typed and included in their final class paper. The reflections themselves were scaffolded to prompt progressively more depth in their exploration and more connection to their real-world experiences—this may be seen in the rubric for the final reflection provided later.

I did not assess the earlier progressive reflections. Rather I examined the final typed reflections that students turned in at the end of the semester in both classes (2017 and 2019). I read these last reflections closely and marked each paper with "codes" or labels corresponding to the various processes. For example, whenever I saw a student writing about empathy or describing an example that showed empathy, I would write a word in the margin to flag it. I likewise marked, or coded, for instances of recognizing others' perspectives, positionality, imagine-self, imagine-other, and empathic action.

My coding process closely resembled that described by Manarin (2018) and Vivanco (2017). In the humanities, close reading involves paying careful attention to what authors say and how they say it (Manarin 2018, 100). Drawing on her own experience as a literary scholar, Manarin promotes close reading as a productive method for SoTL work. She outlines how to interpret students' learning by looking for evidence in the patterns, variations, and details of their writing (101–102). In these "artifacts," one can see "traces of all sorts of things" (102). In my research, these written "artifacts" constitute "traces" of students' empathic development.

Coding enables one to look across all the papers for themes, patterns, and connections, as well as variations and illustrative examples. Various forms of coding are used in fields ranging from the humanities to the social sciences. In cultural anthropology, ethnographers use forms of coding to

process data documented in their written fieldnotes and interview transcripts (Vivanco 2017, 130–32). Coding typically involves identifying topics and patterns in written work and flagging these with condensed terms, labels, or codes (often a word or two). Sometimes this is done with computer software, sometimes by marking papers by hand with words, labels, or codes written in the margins. As I favor the tactile and hands-on experience of working with paper, I personally prefer the latter method.

Coding is an iterative process; in other words, it develops and evolves over successive readings (passes or sweeps) of the papers. Manarin (2018) and her fellow researchers started with a deductive approach, using a rubric with a priori categories to examine student writing. However, they found that the writing did not fit their rubric, so their analysis turned into an inductive process in which they had to describe what they saw (105). In the process, she said, “We highlighted, underlined, used colored sticky notes, wrote in the margin, wrote in journals, drew patterns . . .” (106). Writing, too, becomes part of the evolving analysis (104).

Coding develops through each successive reading. As new codes emerge, one must go back to earlier papers to look for them. An initial sweep through the papers may begin with “open coding” for any topic that arises (Vivanco 2017, 130). Once a range of codes is identified, they can be organized into categories and subcategories on a coding list to help see connections and further refine subsequent sweeps into more “selective” and “focused coding” (132).

Through my iterative coding process, I devised a scale to assess the depth and complexity with which students wrote about each process. There are, however, problems with ranking the cognitive processes of empathy in terms of higher-order thinking. In the Feshbachs’ hierarchy of cognitive skills, the ability to “discriminate and label the feeling of others” came first, second was “taking into account others’ needs when responding to social conflicts,” and third was “examining a conflict situation from the perspective of another person” (Feshbach and Feshbach 2009, 86). However, Batson and Stocks and Lishner question attempts to hierarchize the cognitive processes of empathy. Indeed, in my research, students sometimes showed empathic practices that I categorized as more advanced without demonstrating practices labelled as intermediate.

In another respect, students’ written expressions of empathy pointed to skills for writing good academic papers and strong arguments in general (Graff and Birkenstein 2021; Hairston, Ruszkiewicz, and Friend 1999; Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz 2022). Indeed, the scales that I devised bore some similarities to the rankings of cognitive operations and learning in Bloom’s taxonomy—recognition, comprehension, application, synthesis, and evaluation. As these operations increased in complexity, so did making connections and use of evidence (Anderson and Krathwohl 2001; Bloom 1994 [1956]; Nilson 2015, 25–34).

With these issues in mind, I identified students’ written expressions in each category (understanding empathy, recognizing positionality, and understanding others’ perspectives). While these processes intertwined, I teased them apart for the sake of analysis. Examples follow in the results section below. Novice or emerging expressions merely recognized or identified a particular process while showing minimal depth of understanding. In terms of empathy, perspective, and positionality, a novice expression would merely recognize a concept but would not describe it nor give evidence from real-world experience pertaining to its development. One might recognize one’s own or another’s positionality but typically not both.

At the intermediate level, writers demonstrated more significant and consistent understanding of key concepts through their description and summary. Whether speaking of empathy, positionality, or perspective, written expressions at this level went beyond mere recognition to describe how the writer developed in this area. They might draw on course content to define terms.

Regarding positionality, an intermediate expression would demonstrate understanding of individuals' life conditions and experiences and how they shaped perspectives and actions. Intermediate expressions recognized not only their own positionality but that of others as well. In terms of perspective, an intermediate expression would demonstrate and describe what those other perspectives were, the underlying rationale or reasons, and might even acknowledge the legitimacy of others' perspectives, even if the writer didn't agree with them.

Advanced expressions showed still deeper understanding of concepts like empathy, positionality, and perspective through describing specific details or examples from real world experiences. Thus, these expressions demonstrated the stronger writing skills of supporting one's argument with evidence. I considered understanding perspective and positionality to be advanced if the writer imagined themselves in another's position; in other words, they speculated about what one's life would be like under similar conditions. Advanced examples also showed some recognition that others' life circumstances and experiences could lead them to have perspectives different from the author's own (in other words, imagining other). Writers also fell into the advanced category if they talked about being moved to empathic action based on their new understandings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Empathy

In terms of understanding empathy, a novice or emergent expression might state that the writer recognized others' emotions or perspectives without explaining further. For example, a student might say, "I developed more empathy," or "I was able to empathize with my students." While limited, novice expressions of empathy were valuable as they showed some recognition of others' feelings and perspectives. As one student said, "I found a new respect for teachers who teach in elementary schools every day. I can only imagine the amount of energy it takes them to work with children every day."

Expressions at the intermediate level showed a general understanding of empathy and described how the writer developed it, as in the following excerpt from a student:

This experience has provided me with a better understanding of the empathy I have towards others, which I think is an important thing when working with children. You need to be able to put yourself in their shoes to figure out why they are reacting the way they are or to maybe find a better way to help them understand something.

At the advanced level, students showed a deeper understanding of empathy, often applying concepts from class. They discussed specific details from their community engagement experiences that showed how they had developed empathy. The following narrative conveys the richness of an advanced expression of empathy.

On my second visit to ___ Elementary, I met a 5th grade girl, named ___. Our activity for the day was to decorate our portfolios with pictures of things that were important to us. Most of the children in the group, cut out pictures of dogs, food, sports, video games, parents, or siblings. ___ had most of these, but one of her pictures stood out to me as I was making my way around the table to look at all the children's pictures. ___ had a family on one side of her portfolio and then on the opposite side, all by itself was a[n] infant boy. So I sat down next to ___ as I had done with some of the other 4th and 5th graders and asked what she had put on her portfolio and why. As she made her way

around her portfolio, she showed me flowers, a dog that was just like hers as she had exclaimed, a family with a young boy and girl and a few other pictures. She didn't tell me anything about the infant boy though, so I asked her if she liked babies or if she had a baby cousin. ___ turned to me this time and explained she had two brothers, but on[e] had passed away as a young infant. My heart instantly sank, all I could do was apologize to her. I felt empathy for her as I have lost a few family members and family friends before; however, it wasn't the same as losing a sibling. Her next words gave me hope in her staying positive. ___ told me, "It's okay he is in a better place now." Losing a sibling may be one of the hardest things to endure, maybe this hardship will play a role in her behavior.

Through conversation about the child's artwork, this student was able to gain a better understanding of the life experiences that shaped the child's point of view. This then prompted the student's affective empathy, particularly in feeling distress due to a similar experience. She then engaged in a degree of empathic action by telling her she was sorry. This example may be used as a model of a productive conversation that helps gain greater insight into another's perspective. Below, I will discuss some suggestions for how instructors may encourage such discussions.

Perspective

I looked for written expressions of both imagine-self and imagine-other perspectives as described earlier. The latter signifies not merely relying on one's own perspective but also considering how others' perspectives were shaped by their circumstances. At the novice level, students recognized that other perspectives existed but did not explain in depth nor give detailed description about how they came to understand them. A typical response might look like the following, "I got to experience how different people interpret information."

At the intermediate level, students went beyond merely recognizing others' perspectives to describing the process more fully. They might show an understanding of the rationales or reasons underlying others' perspectives or acknowledge their legitimacy, even if they didn't agree with them. For example, one student said, "Cognitive empathy played a huge part in this [the field experience] because I had to look at things from an intellectual level and realize that everyone has their own perspective."

At the advanced level, students demonstrated how they achieved greater understanding of others' perspectives by describing examples from their experiences. The following is an example of the depth and detail of such a response.

One last recurring theme that I picked up on at school was the ways children express themselves. One student we had would not stop talking to me about Batman. I didn't mind it, I like Batman too. I started to become concerned when I noticed his artwork. He had a few drawings of people shooting guns at other people. I thought this might not be ok so I asked him to explain it to me before I let someone know. He told me he was drawing a scene from a Batman movie and that the guns were some sort of batarang gun. I didn't know if I should believe him at first but then I thought about it a little more. I figured this kid couldn't stop thinking about Batman. It was probably one of the only things on his mind since he woke up so it made perfect sense that he needed to draw it and let it out of his brain.

In this preceding narrative, the student overcame his own assumptions by talking to the child in order to uncover the meanings behind his artwork. As Batson (2011) mentioned, understanding others' perspectives can activate the valuing path and motivate empathic action (33, 44). This instance demonstrates the value of pushing past an imagine-self perspective to employ an imagine-other perspective to better understand someone else's point of view (for related pedagogical strategies, see Hoerr 2017, 45, 47). At the same time, the response employed a strong writing strategy by supporting the argument with evidence.

Positionality

At the novice level, students identified their own positionality or another's. For example, one student in the class wrote, "Working with the [after school program] taught me more about understanding where other people come from, and how things have different meanings to different people." Like other processes, they did not go beyond merely recognizing positionality.

At the intermediate level, students acknowledged both their own and others' positionality and how wider conditions affected them. Like this student, some were able to interrogate their own privilege:

Looking back at my time with the Lighted School House, it has taught me many life lessons. Growing up in a small town is both a blessing and a curse. . . . This experience has really made me take a step back and develop empathy towards a lot of these children, and really show[sic] me how good I had it growing up.

At both intermediate and advanced levels, students might rely on speculation to identify children's feelings—in other words, they applied only an imagine-self perspective. For example, one student said:

It was easy for me to [empathize] with the students who were a bit more quiet because I was a very shy student when I was a child. I realize that sometimes shy kids may have a hard time being included.

While recognizing a common experience might help build a bridge of understanding, relying solely an imagine-self perspective might prevent one from seeing a different point of view. Another student illustrated the conundrum:

I did not correctly comprehend the artwork of some of the kids until I asked them about it and they explained it to me. If that didn't occur, I would have used my own culture and thoughts to interpret their art which would have been very different than what they had learned that day.

The experiences with the children often prompted students to reflect on themselves, their own positionality, social relationships, and personal histories, and the ways their past experiences shaped their views. Scholars have argued that such "self/other-awareness" is important to developing empathy and allows one to temporarily identify with another while not confusing self with other (Cuff et al. 2016, 149; Gerdes et al. 2011, 112; Hall and Schwartz 2019, 235; Hoerr 2017, 43). The imagine-self perspective was still valuable because it also helped students make connections with others. As one student explained:

I needed to realize what I was capable [of] before I was able to figure out how I was able to help them. Realizing who I am, and knowing what I am able to do definitely helped me while engaging with these students. For example, ___ was a slower reader than his peers and he was struggling and felt bad when he wasn't able to read something fast enough. When I was younger, I was also slower at reading than any of my classmates. By knowing that about myself, I was able to connect with ___ better and help him in a way that I thought would have benefited him.

At the advanced level, students articulated a deeper understanding of positionality by explaining details from the experience with the community partner. Expressions at this level typically showed greater effort to employ an imagine-other perspective. As one student explained:

I also learned how to see situations from multiple perspectives. The children came from all different backgrounds, and unlike myself, some came from families [without] two parental figures. By talking to them, I got an insight into their perspectives and tried to see the situation from their points of view when making decisions. For example, one of the boys, ___, did not respond well to authority and after talking to him I learned that his father was not in the picture. Rather than get frustrated when he did not listen I would try and see the situation from his perspective and be patient.

Rather than rely on his own views, this student learned by talking to the boy how his perspective was shaped by his life circumstances. He was able to the imagine-other and adapt his empathic action so that it suited the child. Similarly, some students found their assumptions and preconceptions challenged when they realized that the children's situations prompted them to see things differently.

Empathic action

Students' efforts to empathize with the children could activate a valuing path and motivate them towards empathic action. This harks back to Batson's (2011) argument; while valuing another's welfare was more important than perspective-taking in motivating empathic concern (33, 44), imagining another's thoughts and feelings could nevertheless activate a "valuing path," especially in short-term situations (45). In other words, some students came to care about the children and their welfare and wanted to make things better for them. This might appear in a desire to help children, how they expected to interact with others in the present and future, or how they would incorporate empathic action into their careers.

The following account shows how recognizing the children's emotions prompted a desire to respond in the moment:

We entered the gym and I noticed that one of my 3rd graders, ___, was playing basketball by himself, so I joined him. His face lit up as soon as he saw me walk his way. We shot around and I asked him about what his favorite sport was and what positions he enjoyed playing . . . Asking ___ about what he enjoyed made him happy because everyone likes to talk about themselves and what they enjoy. Knowing this and going up to him and talking to him about him. He loved it and it made me feel good too.

Another student expressed how recognizing positionality and taking an imagine-other perspective changed the way she acted towards others:

My experiences in this class also gave me a new perspective on how I treat others. In the past, I blindly accepted and followed the idea of treating others how I want to be treated. I now realize that I have been inadvertently contributing to environments where stereotype threat [a concept covered in class] thrives. The field study help [sic] me become more conscious of my own identity as well as the biases and stereotypes that plague others. As I learned about new cultures, I found my thought processes shifting and becoming less judgemental[sic] and more centered around self-reflection. This allowed me to practice empathy towards others and view multiple perspectives without making assumptions. I had previously considered behaviors like grabbing and interrupting to be rude, but I now understand the importance of analyzing the root of an action without speculating.

Another student showed how valuing the children's welfare motivated him to empathic action in his own future career. He said:

Now that I have seen some of the struggles these children face each and every day, it makes me feel obligated to help . . . A lot of the children there were born with the odds stacked against them, and seeing how happy they were regardless, makes me feel as if I need to do everything that I can to help even those odds out. When I become a Police Officer, I will take this experience with me, and will use it to be able to better understand and help other children in this society with the same struggles.

These responses brought together the notion that understanding others' perspectives can promote valuing the other and can prompt empathic action. But they also underline the idea that one should not solely rely on their own assessment of another's situation as this can be inaccurate. Rather, one should work to understand another's evaluation of their own circumstances and the action they would advocate. Certainly, in each of these examples, the richness of their writing comes through in the detailed descriptions derived from real-world experience.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Conversation and listening skills

Student papers repeatedly demonstrated that conversation, often over artwork, enabled them to gain deeper insight into the children's thoughts, feelings, and life circumstances. This echoed David Guss' (1990) observation that making baskets with the Yekuana people of Venezuela provided an entrée to learning about their culture. While this area deserves further discussion, instructors may consider using art activities, or other material such as photographs or objects, as a springboard for discussion. As a student said, "Some days you could tell when someone was having a hard day, and that was the time I would connect and listen to them talk about their day." Hollan (2008) pointed out that achieving empathy requires intersubjective dialogue (476). Stocks and Lishner (2012) also observed, "Humans are quite adept at communicating what they are thinking and feeling, and one often needs to simply listen carefully to the other in a nonjudgmental manner to gain accurate knowledge of his or her internal states" (34). This student's narrative illustrated this point:

A good example . . . was on day six when the kids had to draw something in nature from a different perspective. One boy, ___, was busy drawing grey and black scribbles all along his paper. I thought he was just taking it as a joke and was not actually following the lesson but I sat down anyways and asked him about what he was drawing. He stopped to look up from his work and explained to me that him and his family enjoy going camping a lot. His favorite activity to do when going camping is to have everyone sit around the campfire, talking and listening to music, and eating smores. I told him that that sounded like a great idea, but what did a page full of grey and black scribbles have to do with making smores? He answered that sometimes it gets really windy and the fire starts smoking superbad, and that the grey and black scribbles are suppose[sic] to represent the smoke covering up his family from a bird's eye perspective. I was completely impressed . . . If I would have just glanced at the piece of artwork and not ask[sic] ___ what it was supposed to be, I never would have known how clever the drawing actually was, nor what it truly signified and meant to him and his family traditions.

Conversation also enabled students to build rapport and establish connections with the children. As one student explained, "Once they gained our trust, they would talk to us, tell us stories, ask for help, watch us as we led class, and much more." Another student tied communication to positionality and subsequently with student success; "I believe communicating and engaging with a student is the best way to help them succeed because you never know what a child can be [going] through outside of school." These narratives emphasized that conversation should accompany observation to best generate empathy in community engagement experiences.

Suggestions for guiding students in fostering good conversations may be found in the literature on empathy (Krznaric 2014), overcoming stereotype threat (Steele 2010), and ethnographic interviewing (Lassiter 2005; Vivanco 2017). Steele's research suggests that approaching conversations as learning experiences can improve discussions by defusing any tension arising from fears of being stereotyped (207). Instructors can foster better conversations by encouraging students to cultivate reciprocal dialogue and act as an "interested enquirer" rather than an examiner or interrogator (Krznaric, 102–103). In ethnographic research, such techniques build rapport, trust, and social connection. Certainly the degree of dialogic reciprocity should be carefully considered so that it is appropriate for particular groups, like children, and focuses on participants rather than researcher.

I would argue that ethnographic research methods should be considered a "signature pedagogy" (Chick, Haynie, and Gurung 2012; Gurung et al. 2009). Ethnographic interviewing, in particular, emphasizes carefully constructing questions and cultivating attentive listening skills (Vivanco 2017, 4–6). More specifically, questions should be phrased so they encourage people to talk rather than reply with short or one-word answers. One can promote rich discussion by using "how" and "why" phrasing, keeping questions open-ended, and preparing follow-up questions. Questions should be phrased appropriately for particular audiences, in this case, children. I instruct my students to begin their introductions with an interview game. They create cards that the children can choose containing questions like, "If you had a super power, what would it be?" When reflecting on a question about favorite colors, one student recounted, "They cared for colors so much that they put time into their top three favorite color schemes and their least favorite colors. So this made me wonder what the difference was between me and them . . . I realized that something as basic as colors can have a much larger meaning to others than the meaning that I have for the object."

Both ethnographic research methods and research on empathy emphasize cultivating listening skills. Krznaric (2014) sees both fostering conversation and radical listening as crucial to reducing what he identifies as “the global empathy deficit” (103). In the classroom, this may involve explicitly reviewing listening skills required in different situations, practicing concentration, and being present and attentive to what another is saying (Krznaric, 108; Vivanco 2017, 68–9). In addition, one may check one’s interpretation with an interlocutor through paraphrasing or otherwise reflecting back what they have said (Krznaric, 110; Vivanco, 69). This provides not only a powerful tool to check meaning but also to empower research participants by involving them in the interpretation process (Lassiter 2005).

Prompts and rubrics

This research suggests ways to construct prompts and rubrics to aid students in developing and effectively articulating their empathic development. (For further strategies, see Cuzzo 2017, 68–70; Hall and Schwartz 2019, 236.) To provide an example, Table 2 shows how my analysis informed changes in the guidelines and rubrics for the final reflection essay. The lefthand column in the following table shows the rubric for the final reflection paper in the 2017 and 2019 renditions of the course. The righthand column shows the revised rubric that I use now based on the outcomes of this research project; changes are highlighted in bold. These rubrics match the wording of the prompts used in the guidelines for the papers.

Table 2. Changes in the guidelines and rubrics for the final reflection essay

2017, 2019 Final reflection rubric	Revised rubric, 2023
<p>Draws on examples from ethnographic experience to thoughtfully and deeply reflect on and discuss: your experiences in the field; how you developed; your knowledge and empathy; teamwork, leadership skills, and intercultural competence to work with diverse people; understanding multiple perspectives, yourself, your future, sense of civic responsibility</p>	<p>Describes thoroughly and clearly concrete examples from ethnographic observations and experiences to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1: thoughtfully and deeply reflect on and discuss your experiences in the field; 2: discuss how these experiences challenged your preconceptions, stereotypes, and/or beliefs; 3: demonstrate understanding of cognitive and affective empathy and explain how you developed your empathy and understanding of others' perspectives and lives; 4: explain how you developed your understanding of yourself, your future, and your sense of civic responsibility; 5: discuss how you developed your skills in: teamwork, leadership, intercultural knowledge and competence in working with diverse people, critical thinking, adaptation, and problem-solving; 6: reflect meaningfully and thoughtfully on how you recognized: commonalities and differences between yourself and others; how positionality (yours and others') impacts one's experience and perspectives as well as your observations, social interaction, results, and written representation; 7: discuss your contributions to the children and your potential contributions to your community, society, and world in the present and future.

My research suggested that expanding and clarifying the language of prompts and rubrics can better convey the elements of the empathic processes that one wishes to target as learning outcomes. Similarly, specific terms can point to targeted skills and knowledge. In these ways, prompts and rubrics help students better develop, identify, and express their empathic development. The revised guidelines and rubric aimed to do so by drawing students' attention to certain skills and using enhanced vocabulary. For example, I wanted to encourage students to use the writing practice of supporting argument with evidence, so I moved and modified the prompt, "Describes thoroughly and clearly concrete examples from ethnographic observations and experiences to. . . ." I also replaced the general statement, "Does the paper discuss how you expanded your knowledge?" with more specific requests that targeted critically interrogating one's preconceptions and stereotypes. Finally, I added more specific skills like intercultural knowledge, critical thinking, adaptation, and problem-solving. I expanded civic responsibility under a separate heading about contributions.

To encourage students to reflect on and write more about positionality, I echoed the ways we had discussed positionality in class by describing it in more detail. In particular, the prompts outlined, "commonalities and differences between yourself and others; how positionality (yours and others') impacts one's experience and perspectives as well as your observations, social interaction, results, and written representation." In sum, I expected prompts and rubrics (as well as course content) would be more effective if they directly, clearly, and specifically explained the empathic processes that

constituted course learning outcomes. While I have not systematically analyzed the changes in students' final written reflections since these adjustments, I have been pleased with the results.

CONCLUSION

Reasons abound as to why we, as citizens of the world, should develop empathy skills. Yet the things called empathy also proliferate. Some empathic processes may work well as course learning outcomes while others, not so much. If we, as instructors, take on the task of facilitating students' empathic development, how do we do it, and how do we know if students have achieved a desirable level of empathy? This research considers writing reflections as a fruitful means for students to recognize, think about, and articulate the understandings of empathy, perspectives, and positionalities that they achieve in community engagement experiences. The same writing assignments may be examined for the "artifacts" of empathy or, in other words, the evidence of the nuance and complexity with which students write about their empathic development. Students' written expressions of empathy may be gauged by considering the depth and complexity in which they recognize and describe their own empathic processes and provide evidence to support their assertions. In doing so, students employ the same practices that characterize building strong arguments in academic papers. The narratives included here show that students more effectively articulated empathy when they engaged in conversation with community partners, in this case, children, and endeavored to use an "imagine-other" perspective. Students sometimes demonstrated inspiration towards empathic action, especially when understanding others' perspectives activated a "valuing path." This research suggests some pedagogical strategies which instructors can use to help students cultivate, recognize, and more effectively articulate their empathy including: crafting conversation questions, fostering listening skills; clarifying the empathic processes that constitute learning outcomes; and using specific language on prompts and rubrics to emphasize the components of empathy and strong writing practices.

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NOTES

1. I thank David Lishner for drawing my attention to empathic concern as a type of affective empathy, the distinction between imagine-self and imagine-other perspectives, clarifying positionality, and perspective-taking as a process versus assessing its accuracy as a learning outcome.

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ETHICS

Research was approved through the Institutional Review Board at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh.

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