

**From:** [Center for Faculty Innovation](#)  
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**Subject:** Teaching Toolbox: Can Empathy Be Taught in the Classroom?  
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## **Can Empathy Be Taught in the Classroom?**

**by Peter Eubanks**

A few weeks ago, I led a workshop on the importance of teaching empathy in the classroom and explored together, with enthusiastic workshop attendees, some ways in which we might incorporate empathic thinking in our classrooms. What follows below is a brief summary of some of our discussions over the course of the workshop.

Recent studies underscore the need for teaching empathy in our university classrooms. A meta-analysis of 72 different studies of empathy of some 14,000 college students over three decades ([Konrath, 2010](#)) shows that today's college students have experienced a 40% decline in empathy since 1979. Similarly, [Twenge & Foster \(2010\)](#) have found that today's college students score higher on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory than any previous cohort since 1982.

Two popular learning taxonomies include empathic thinking as an important element of teaching. The first comes from L. Dee Fink's book, [Creating Significant Learning Experiences \(2013\)](#). Fink's taxonomy of learning includes two categories related to empathy: Human Dimension and Caring. By "Human Dimension," Fink means learning about others, service learning, a broader concept of the Other (to include not only other people, but also animals, the environment, processes, institutions, etc.) and empathy (which he defines as an awareness of the feelings and concerns of others). By "Caring," he means the process whereby students "may find that people different from themselves— in terms of age, gender, ethnicity religion, nationality, or whatever— are good people and that the process of understanding and interacting with them can be an exciting and enriching experience" (56).

The second comes from Wiggins and McTighe, in their [Understanding By Design \(2005\)](#). They include empathy in their "Six Facets of Understanding" and describe it this way: "Students have to learn how to open-mindedly embrace ideas, experiences, and texts that might seem strange, off-putting, or just difficult to access if they are to understand them, their value, and their connection to what is more familiar" (99).

So what kinds of learning activities can we create to foster an increase in empathy among our students? Here are 10 real examples of what instructors at JMU and elsewhere are doing to encourage empathic thinking:

- From a British National Exam: "Romeo and Juliet, Act 4. Imagine you are Juliet. Write your thoughts and feelings explaining why you have to take this desperate action."
- A history professor asks her students to write an essay or a journal entry from the point of view of those in the past who did not believe in the popular election of United States Senators.

- A French professor asks his students to prepare debate points either supporting or disagreeing with the ban on the headscarf in the public schools in France.
- A sociology professor asks her students to prepare a 15-minute presentation on how race influences the educational opportunities of students in South Africa.
- Students in a political history course are asked to film their own re-enactment of a '60s-era Vietnam War protest.
- A biology professor has his students write a short essay explaining the point of view of a past scientist whose theories have now been discredited.
- Students in an environmental science class participate in the lavender harvest at a local farm in order to develop empathy for the environment and sustainable practices.
- Engineering students engage in listening activities that increase their ability to respond to a client's needs/wishes.
- Health Sciences students visit a nursing home and conduct interviews with the elderly about major life events (marriage, children, careers, etc.).
- Education majors engage in service learning by working with local refugee children in an after-school program.

As we can see from the list above, empathy can be taught across the curriculum, no matter the particular discipline or field of study. This list is, of course, by no means exhaustive; any activity that encourages students to consider the world from another's point of view will help to stem the tide of narcissism that scholars have identified among college students and can help them to become active and enlightened citizens. Considering the divisiveness that all too often pervades our public discourse, an emphasis on empathic thinking seems particularly medicinal for our culture today, and as instructors we have a unique opportunity to foster the kind of dialogue that can engage in this vital form of thinking.

*About the author: Peter Eubanks is an associate professor of French and a teaching faculty associate with the Center for Faculty Innovation. He can be reached at [eubankpj@jmu.edu](mailto:eubankpj@jmu.edu).*