

2

Radical empathy positions us to engage and connect with our students while also staying grounded in our role and responsibilities as educators.

Radical Empathy in Teaching

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Whether teaching online or in a campus classroom, a significant part of the teaching life includes interacting with and responding to students. We respond to student comments and questions; their written work, exams, and presentations; their enthusiasm or lack thereof; and sometimes the personal joys and tragedies they share with us. We structure the course, the conversations, and the assignments and within this learning environment, we engage with a range of students who have various levels of motivation, preparation, insight, ability, positivity, negativity, and commitment.

As we seek to understand and educate our students, and assess their work, we experience empathy, “a complex cognitive-affective skill that allows us to ‘know’ (resonate, feel, sense, cognitively grasp) another person’s experience” (Jordan 2010, 103). Empathy is part of the experience of teaching and is often present in our interactions and relationships with students as we (and they) seek to teach and learn the material, understand each other, and move through the course. Teaching and learning involve “a dance of responsiveness” (Jordan 2010, 4) and understanding this phenomenon helps us balance support and standards, role boundaries, and the power of connection in teaching and learning.

In this chapter, we challenge tacit ideas about empathy that pervade both our larger culture and the teaching domain, and we suggest a more nuanced consideration of empathy in teaching and learning. We begin with an overview of Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), the theoretical foundation for this chapter and then review relevant teaching literature. Next, we explore the complexities of empathy in the context of teaching and learning. We consider why empathy is important in teaching, why it is sometimes difficult to feel empathy with certain students or in particular situations, and the pull we sometimes feel with students who are in crisis or even those who influence us more than we expect. Finally, we describe relevant stances and strategies for faculty including reflective approaches for use before and after specific interactions and in the midst of engagements with students.

Relational Cultural Theory

Prevailing western theories of psychological development have emphasized the importance of increasing autonomy, independence, and enhancing the ability to “stand on one’s own two feet.” Growth has typically been portrayed as a one-way process; knowledge and skills are seen as being transmitted from one person who has specific skills and holds power to other persons who are less skilled, less developed, and hold less power. The broader cultural investment in competitive, individualistic advancement is firmly entrenched in educational practice. Often competition and self-interest are put forward as intrinsic to human nature. The core importance of relatedness and responsiveness to one another and the desire to engage in growthful relationships—these ideas are overlooked in the prevailing cultural narrative.

Engagement in relationship is based on mutual empathy. Modern neuroscience now informs us that we are hardwired for empathy (Banks 2015). We resonate with one another. The pain of social exclusion registers in the same area of the brain (the anterior cingulate) as the pain of physical injury, starvation, or loss of oxygen. Connection is so essential to our wellbeing and to our very survival that the brain is wired to respond in the same way and in the same place to social exclusion as it does to life-threatening physical pain. In mutual, growth fostering relationships we experience what Jean Baker Miller (1986) called “the five good things”: zest, worth, clarity, knowledge of self and other, and desire for more connection.

Education as Relational Practice

RCT has also gained traction in the higher education context as scholars have considered the role of relationship in mentoring and teaching. Studies show that undergraduate students perceived mentoring relationships to be important for success (Beyene et al. 2002) and engagement in mentoring also resulted in higher self-esteem and less loneliness among college-age women (Liang et al. 2002). In the graduate context, Gottshall (2014) found significant correlation between mentoring and positive psychological health, as indicated by decreased depressive symptoms, increased self-esteem, and life satisfaction while McMillan-Roberts (2014) established that faculty mentors helped doctoral students develop a scholar-practitioner identity. Looking specifically at meaningful academic relationships between master’s students and professors, Schwartz and Holloway (2012) found evidence of The Five Good Things (Miller 1986), as both students and professors reported increased energy, boosts in sense of worth, increased understanding, the ability to keep moving in their work, and a desire for more connection. In a related study, students reported that single meaningful interactions with faculty (even interactions that were not part of longer-term ongoing relationships) helped the students move through their work,

develop scholar-practitioner identity, and value and develop academic relationships (Schwartz and Holloway 2014).

Empathy in Teaching

While there is little empirical literature regarding empathy in university teaching, the topic was addressed as early as 1953 when Rector suggested “it may be hypothesized that one of the important factors in the achievement of educational goals is the extent to which students and instructors are able to predict, or to project themselves into the responses of each other” (p. 175).

Researchers have also explored the related concept of caring in university teaching (Rossiter 1999; Mariskind 2014). In addition, empathy has emerged as important in studies that did not explicitly focus on empathy. Woolhouse (2002) found that students expected their dissertation supervisors to show empathy (among other relational characteristics), while O’Meara, Knudsen, and Jones (2013) established that doctoral students and faculty saw empathy as one of the important emotional competencies in doctoral mentoring and advising relationships. And researchers exploring instructor responses to student confusion and frustration with online courses concluded that “professors who are learning to teach online need to be aware that their students will need some empathic messages, not just feedback on the course content” (Burford and Gross 2002, 12).

From Empathy to Radical Empathy

The conventional focus on empathy in educational relationships, like in many hierarchical relationships, is on the professor conveying to a student (or a group of students) some version of, “I sense what you are feeling.” This is appropriate in that faculty have some degree of responsibility for student well-being whereas students do not have a responsibility for faculty well-being, aside perhaps from bringing basic civility to the learning environment. However, we propose that empathy is deeper and more complex than acknowledging the feelings of another person. For the student to see, know, and feel the professor’s expression of empathy, the professor’s expression cannot be simply a rote statement. For the expression of empathy to have an impact, to bring about change, the student must sense that the professor has been touched, impacted, or influenced, even slightly, by the student’s situation. A mutually empathic statement maintains or generates connection and real support. Students feel less alone, more effective, and develop a sense that they matter to the other person. Empathy that produces change and growth in both people goes far beyond a warm and fuzzy feeling of closeness or being understood. It is the vehicle for deep learning and acknowledgement of the power of relationship

where both people experience growth. The power to change in connection is at the heart of radical empathy. This idea is echoed in the concept of intellectual mattering (Schwartz 2013). We convey intellectual mattering when we tell our students that their thinking or their questions have sparked our interest, deepened our learning, inspired us, or, in some other way, contributed to our lives as teachers. These kinds of interactions increase student motivation, aspiration, and confidence and enhance students' sense as partners in their own learning (Schwartz and Holloway 2012, 2014).

For example, a student emails a professor to say "I don't know if I can do this master's program. I can't handle the technology and I think I'm going to quit." A professor who thinks he needs to maintain his relational distance and place in the hierarchy might respond, "Keep trying, everyone gets it eventually." While that is encouraging to some degree, it leaves the student alone in her struggle and that isolation can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy. A different professor who feels secure in sharing her own vulnerabilities and is more willing to connect might respond, "I think I get what you are saying, when we first switched to this system it wasn't intuitive for me and I felt lost—it was embarrassing because I feel like I should just know how to do this. I got help from IT and after a few sessions it came much more naturally. I encourage you to sign up for some help and to be patient with yourself." The second response is not only more individualized, but it acknowledges that the student is not alone in her struggles with technology and the teacher herself has had similar struggles; this response serves the dual purpose of letting the student know that her difficult experience touches something within the professor who can relate it to her own experience and it provides her with a role model who has overcome a similar challenge.

In another example, a Latino student in a class discussion on racism shares his experience of being followed around a store by a salesperson. A professor who thinks she must maintain distance from her students might thank the student for sharing and move on in the discussion. However, a professor who is willing to show that she has been touched by the student's story might pause and reflect aloud, noting how it pains her to know that this student deals with racial profiling. This professor could go even further if she is secure enough to reveal that she learns from her students. She could disclose that even though she has read about racial profiling and taught about it for years, that her visceral understanding of the pain caused by racial profiling has deepened by hearing this story from the student. Radical empathy involves radical acceptance of vulnerability, an openness to being affected by one another. Clearly, as educators we should not focus on our own growth in the midst of exchanges with students. However, to work from a place of radical empathy, we must remain open to learning from our students and to acknowledging that learning.

Challenges

When Empathy is Difficult. As educators, we are not expected to experience deep connection or empathy with every student in every interaction. At times, we do not feel any particular resonance with a student or we are not moved by a student's expression of stress. Moments of deep, mutual understanding or breakthrough are powerful and often treasured. But not all interactions are characterized by empathic resonance. Not all interactions evoke a deeper response.

However, when we sense a deep disconnection or frustration or anger, we have a responsibility to explore these feelings and responses because as noted previously, our disconnection can detract from the learning context. This is not to suggest that we strive to never have a negative emotion regarding a student, but rather that we seek to recognize these human responses and manage them thoughtfully rather than reactively. The same student behaviors that frustrate some faculty have no effect on others. For example, many teachers have had the experience of giving a student an extension for what seems like a plausible delay such as a sick child or crisis at work, only to be asked several more times for extensions for other seemingly-believable stories of crisis. At some point, the student's stories seem less believable and we begin to think we are being taken advantage of. This is particularly frustrating for some instructors, while others do not feel bothered by it but simply stop giving extensions. Similarly, some teachers feel frustrated or angry with students who do not follow instructions on assignments while other teachers mark the assignments accordingly and keep grading without distress. Some faculty report having strong responses to particular student affect such as perceived arrogance or entitlement while for other instructors, these students evoke no emotional charge. As humans engaged in the social interaction of teaching, we are all likely to experience some subset of student behaviors and affective states that trigger our own emotions. Our task is to identify these challenges and then learn to recognize them in the moment.

RCT teaches us that even in strong positive relationships, disconnection happens (Jordan 2010). People in relationship misunderstand each other, or are less able to be present, pressured by demands from many sources. There are disconnects and disappointments. Students and teachers may feel tension around maintaining awareness and appreciation of the other's role. Learning to work through relational disconnection is yet another growth area for many of us who teach and is a process we can role model for our students.

Self-Disclosure and Boundaries. In general, in situations where one person has more authority or power than the other, the more powerful person may limit their displays of emotion and self-disclosure. Revealing emotion or disclosing may be seen as exposing vulnerability. In addition to avoiding vulnerability, the more powerful person may be concerned that

showing emotion or disclosing may lead away from the focal task of serving the needs of the student. This line of reasoning falls into the dichotomous thinking that only one person can benefit from an exchange, that one is either “giving” or “receiving.” RCT suggests that real growth is mutual. Growth most powerfully happens at the edge of vulnerability, where there can be uncertainty and complex feelings.

We need to ask persistently: What is in the best interest of the student? If non-disclosure contributes to a growing relationship at a particular moment, then that would be the path to follow. For example, should faculty share their experiences of professional disappointments and failures? Harriet notes that she shares her experiences of submitting articles to journals with students, seeing it as an opportunity to role model being active professionally, dealing with critical feedback, and the inherent ups and downs of successes and failures in being an active scholar-practitioner. So sharing the specific story of an article that was rejected and how she used the feedback to revise it and submit it to another journal can provide an important example for students. However, she recalls one experience wherein the feedback from a reviewer was condescending and aggressive and she was initially upset. She chose not to share that story at that time because she thought that if students sensed her raw emotion, they might become more concerned with her well-being than with ways in which the story could inform them. Later, when she felt more settled, she shared the story with students. The point is that if the disclosure seems likely to pull students’ attention away from their own learning, then it seems unlikely to serve the students and their growth.

We grow at our edges. What many call “boundaries” are actually places of intense interaction, liveliness, and growth. It is only when we see boundaries as necessary protectors, containers, screening out and defending against the encroaching surround, that we begin to pull back from the learning that can occur at these places of distinctness and intense interaction. Being open to being acted upon by one another exposes us to vulnerability and also allows us to reach our greatest potential. Mutual responsiveness leads to change and growth in each person involved. When we try to maintain an image of ourselves (e.g., “I am empathic, a truly tuned in teacher”) we set up boundaries (“I am this, not that”). Image management takes us out of relationship. And, boundary maintenance can also cut us off from others. Some role boundaries, however, are inevitable and desirable as they help protect against abuse of power. Role boundaries describe expectations in professionally defined situations, and these expectations support safety and growth. Professors have the responsibility to support the student’s role as well as to attend to their own clarity and professional standards. In one study, several faculty and their former students recalled interactions that could be described as working close to the boundaries as opposed to holding on to firm and distancing boundaries (Schwartz 2011). For example, a faculty member remembered visiting an off-campus community mental

health group coordinated by a student (this was not part of a formal site visit or part of any formal department program, this was an informal exchange). The professor described her clear intentions in visiting the group, that she was there as a guest and not as an expert as she saw this as an opportunity for her to learn about this distinct community as well as to be a possible resource for young professionals. Her approach echoes radical empathy as she worked close to the boundary, extending her work beyond the typical confines of the classroom, remained open to learning from the student, and also maintained her sense of her professional role. Findings in this study revealed that working close to the boundaries enhanced both student and faculty learning and created relational connection that facilitated greater student intellectual risk-taking and scholar-practitioner development.

Beyond the Scope of Our Role. Empathic responsiveness with students can present another set of challenges. Occasionally, a student seeks support from a professor with a situation that is critical or intense enough that the student more appropriately should see a counselor. Professional development with all faculty can provide a solid foundation for these kinds of encounters, helping faculty recognize the signs that a student needs counseling. University counselors can also educate faculty regarding how to momentarily support a student in crisis until the student is connected with the counseling center. And finally, counselors can also educate faculty as to the most effective process by which to refer a student to counseling to increase the likelihood that the student will connect and follow-through. We also remind faculty that even when a student is not in immediate crisis, the depth or scope of a student struggle may be beyond the range of the faculty role and expertise and a referral to counseling would be most appropriate and helpful for the student.

Balancing Empathy and Rigor. While it might sound counterintuitive, we propose that empathy can help faculty maintain rigor and standards. Student resistance and defensiveness in response to critical feedback is often an attempt to avoid feeling shame (Vierling-Claassen 2013). Many students have internalized early experiences of wrong answers as failures without opportunity for growth and have experienced public humiliation in the midst of these failures (such as doing math in front of classmates). These experiences can embed feelings of shame, a sense of being unworthy of belonging or connection in one's social worlds. Given the essential nature of connection as discussed previously in this chapter, avoiding shame may be seen as a survival technique. Students who lack confidence or know they do not understand course material may withdraw, act out, or dismiss feedback to avoid shame.

Radical empathy where there is mutual impact alters the distribution of power, and it vastly rearranges the dynamics of isolation and shame. To see that one "matters," that one can "move" another person, that one can have an impact is a powerful shame-dispelling force.

When we open ourselves to empathic responsiveness, we surrender the illusion of unilateral growth. We acknowledge that we are interdependent in our learning and our meaning-making.

Responsiveness is not the same as reactivity or full self-disclosure. Responsiveness is the basis of give-and-take interactions; it is the opposite of imposing static patterns or holding on to power over others. It involves shared power, power with others to contribute to change and to be accessible to change.

Students who learn to see assessment as an opportunity for growth rather than an indication of failure are more likely to be open to critical feedback. By showing empathy with students who make an effort and by appropriately sharing stories of our own experiences of using feedback to improve work, we can help students shift from seeing assessment as a binary, possibly shame-inducing experience to seeing assessment as essential to learning. This is radical empathy.

At the same time, students who fail to complete work or who do not exhibit an understanding of the material must be held accountable. We are not suggesting that to be empathic is to demand less of students. Instead, we seek to balance radical empathy with our commitment to our role responsibilities and to our disciplines and institutions. When we are at our most effective, we are able to communicate to students when their work falls short and at the same time, convey that we understand that the work can be challenging and that we care about their success.

Application

The following section provides strategies that educators can implement in the moment as we experience disconnections and lack of empathy. In addition, we provide questions for deeper reflection regarding our relational style and experience.

When We Feel Disconnected. Feeling distant from a student, distracted, or disproportionately annoyed are signs that we have lost connection. Three steps can help us try to understand the moment and regain connection: notice, pause, and try to reconnect.

Notice. Feelings such as anger, frustration, and even boredom can keep us self-consumed. *Noticing* these feelings and seeing them as a sign that we have disconnected is a first step toward reconnection.

Pause. Once we notice these emotions, the next step is to *pause* and ask “what is going on here for me?” In this brief reflection, we might gain insight such as noticing that this is the kind of student behavior that triggers us or that we are projecting feelings about something unrelated. We are not going to be perfectly connected and have mutual empathy with all students all of the time. But by noticing when we are disconnected and reflecting in the moment, we can move from being reactive to being intentionally responsive, a much more constructive place from which to teach.

At times, we are open to connection and sense that the student has disconnected. We must work to honor their disconnection as a possible protective strategy to limit vulnerability. For example, a student might seem to shut down in the midst of a conversation about a group presentation. The student may be experiencing a deeper vulnerability and feel a need to self-protect. In these situations, it is important to honor the student's temporary need for disconnection and continue to provide a safe environment for the student to move in and out of complex feelings.

Try to Reconnect. Sometimes, simply recognizing that we were consumed by our own feeling state, we are able to regain presence with the student. Other times, we might need to search for one positive characteristic of the student, the moment, or self that can help us reconnect. For example, while I may be annoyed with a student, I may also be able to recognize that fact that despite her attitude, she *did* show up to meet with me per my request. Or if in that moment, I cannot find anything engaging about a student, I might remind myself that I aspire to offer all students my commitment to their learning. By finding empathy or resonance, I can resume teaching from a more connected place.

Further Reflection. Because we want to be good educators, we may find discomfort in admitting that we have negative feelings toward a student and thus we might become defensive and seek sanctuary in the power of our position. However, RCT encourages us to engage with the feelings of disconnection to seek to understand them more deeply. What is going on here for me? What might be going on for the student? What is going on in this relationship? Reflecting on these questions can help us understand a particular situation more deeply and we can then apply this learning in the future when we sense a growing disconnection.

Additional Strategies

When Feeling Overwhelmed by Student Emotion. Working with students who are in the midst of crisis, anger, or deep sadness brings an additional challenge to the work of connected teaching. When we experience mutual empathy with a student, we may find that the student's life challenges or emotions begin to overwhelm us. Noticing these feelings is very important for our own resilience and longevity in the profession. Once we notice our own feelings of anxiety or being overwhelmed, there are several questions we can ask to help us differentiate and find relational clarity. How can I stay in connection but not take on or get lost in the student's anxiety, anger, or sadness? Are there aspects of what I'm feeling that began as the student's emotion in regard to their own experience that I have now taken on? If I am experiencing anxiety, anger, or sadness that seems to be rooted in my own experience, what might this be about? By trying to stay present with the student and also locate the source of the emotion state and disconnection, I can seek to differentiate, find relational clarity, and remain

connected (or reconnect). This process is often complex and we sometimes benefit from processing this later with a trusted colleague.

Reflecting on Our Own Connection and Disconnection Patterns. Deeper reflection positions us to more quickly identify when we lose empathic connection so that we can respond with greater intentionality. A first step is to seek to understand my experiences and perceptions of various kinds of challenging interactions and relationships. When do I start to disconnect? Are there times when I typically begin to blame other people for my emotions or experiences? What are my typical (perhaps unconscious) strategies of disconnection (e.g., revert to a power-over position, talk a lot or very little, try to end the interaction)? This clarity will then help us to recognize more quickly when we have moved out of empathy and we can then move back toward connection. This deeper work is an ongoing process in which we continue to learn and refine our practice.

Self-Empathy. A robust review of self-care strategies is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, an exploration of radical empathy in teaching would not be complete without acknowledging the importance of self-empathy. We need to practice self-empathy when we disconnect, misunderstand, make a relational mistake, or feel tired. Practicing self-empathy and self-care models for students that empathic failures and disconnections are undeniably part of the human experience and that it is our response to these moments that is key. Practicing and modeling self-care and self-empathy is not only important for our students but also for our own well-being. Strategies such as consulting confidentially with a trusted colleague, exercise, and meditation will help us increase self-awareness and rejuvenate for the journey of teaching.

Conclusion

Radical empathy calls on us to be open to being effected by our students. This openness positions us to engage mutually with our students. At the same time, we maintain our awareness of and commitment to our role boundaries, the implicit contract and responsibilities of teaching, and the standards of our department and discipline. The fundamental question is how can I keep trying to move both of us into growth and learning?

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