

Lesson 1.6 Empathizing with Others



TO THE TEACHER

Enduring Understandings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Empathy involves not only <i>understanding</i> how another person is thinking and feeling (taking their perspective) but also <i>vicariously feeling</i> what the person is feeling.• Empathy is important to creating meaningful relationships, a caring community, and a just society.
Essential Questions	<p><i>What is empathy?</i></p> <p><i>Why is empathy important?</i></p> <p><i>How can we enhance our ability to empathize with others?</i></p>
Objectives	Students will be able to <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use perspective taking to enhance their experience of empathy.• Identify ways to overcome obstacles to empathy.
Key Term	Empathy
Lesson Synopsis	This lesson explores the experience of empathy and how students can enhance their empathic abilities. Students fill out a brief questionnaire that asks them to rate their level of empathy for people in a variety of situations. They then discuss their responses, revealing what enhances and what impedes their empathic ability. In small groups, they create guidelines for overcoming obstacles to empathy.
Background Information	<p>In its simplest form, empathy arises automatically as a vicarious experience of what another person is feeling. Even infants feel empathy when they cry spontaneously at the sound of another infant’s crying. As we mature, so does our capacity for empathy. As young children, we progress from merely identifying others’ feelings based on facial expressions to discerning what others might be thinking about their situation. In later childhood, we begin to develop an even greater level of empathy, by imagining how we would think and feel if we were in the other person’s shoes. This latter form of empathy requires effort and is not always easy.</p> <p>We naturally feel more empathy for those we feel closer to or who are more like us. Lack of familiarity and perceived differences can impede our ability to empathize. How we overcome these obstacles is an important question for society as a whole. In the classroom, it is a question best addressed constructively by eliciting student ideas rather than providing a prescribed list of solutions.</p>

<p>Teaching Tips</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you speak with students, listen for the feelings behind their words. • Reflect students' feelings by saying <i>It sounds as if you're feeling _____</i>. • As you guide and engage students in problem solving and conflict resolution, encourage them to identify how others are thinking and feeling. • Regularly reflect on what it was like being an adolescent, and draw on this awareness to empathize more with your students. • Periodically sit in a student's desk after or before school and envision how that particular student experiences class.
<p>Preparation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write essential questions on the board. • Have Koosh ball handy. • Copy Handouts 1.6.1 and 1.6.2.
<p>Recommended Resource</p>	<p>Goleman, Daniel (1995). <i>Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ</i>. New York: Bantam Books. (Chapter7)</p> <p>Chapter 7, The Roots of Empathy, provides a precise and compelling overview of the development of empathy—becoming attuned to others' thoughts and feelings—and the costs of misattunement.</p>



LESSON OUTLINE

Think-Pair-Share: What is Empathy?

(10 minutes)



empathy: understanding how another person is thinking and feeling, and vicariously experiencing what they are feeling

Write **Components of Empathy** on board.

◆ Indicate essential questions on board.

What is empathy?

Why is empathy important?

How can we enhance our ability to empathize with others?

Let's tackle the first question. We have talked about what it means to take another person's perspective. Turn to a partner, and see if you can answer the following question:

- **What is empathy?**

[After students have shared in pairs, ask the question again and discuss as a class.]

The simplest and most widely used definition of **empathy** is *understanding how another person is thinking and feeling*. Empathy contains another component: *feeling what another person is feeling*. This is what moves empathy beyond perspective taking.

◆ Write Components of Empathy on board.

Empathy has three components. They consist of the ability to

- Recognize how another person is feeling.
- Take the person's perspective (stand in their shoes).
- Feel what the person is feeling.

◆ Ask students to share a time when they felt empathy.

[After providing an example of a time when you felt empathy, invite students to share examples.]

Levels of Empathy

(15 minutes)

Pass out **Handout 1.6.1:** Levels of Empathy.

◆ Have students fill out Handout 1.6.1: Levels of Empathy.

Our level of empathy often varies with the situation. In this handout, rate the degree of empathy you feel for the person described in each situation.

◆ Ask students how and why they rated each item on the handout.

[Discuss each item. If you do this in sequence, you may want to ask students to hold up fingers to show their level of empathy for each item, and then choose a few students to talk about their choice of rating. Alternatively, you could first ask students to reveal the items on which they rated themselves the highest and why. Then ask about the items on which they rated themselves the lowest and why.]

(The following questions may help students understand their ratings.)

- What did you notice about your responses?
- What situations elicited the most empathy in the class as a whole? Why do you think that is?
- What situations elicited the least empathy in the class as a whole? Why do you think that is?
- How many of you felt more empathy for students you knew or were friends with than with students you did not know or did not have much in common with?
[Note that we tend to empathize more with people to whom we are similar or close.]
- How many of you felt less empathy for the teacher who was upset about the test than for the student who was on academic probation?
[They may feel more empathy for the student because they are also students and can understand the student's plight.]
- How many of you felt more empathy for those of your gender?
[Once again, similarity encourages empathy.]
- How many of you felt more empathy for situations you have experienced yourself (e.g., moving away)?
[It's easier to put yourself in that person's place if you've experienced the same thing.]

In summary, we tend to empathize more with people who are

- Of our gender.
- Close to us in age.
- Our friends.
- People we like.
- In a situation we have experienced.

Discussion:
Why is Empathy Important?
(5 minutes)



◆ **Lead a discussion of why empathy is important.**

[You may want to use the Koosh ball for this discussion.]

- **Why is empathy important?** (Empathy leads to acts of compassion and unselfishness, helps people treat others the way they themselves want to be treated, creates a caring environment.)
- **How might a greater degree of empathy affect our school environment?**
- **How might a greater degree of empathy affect your community?**

Building Empathy (15 minutes)



◆ Have small groups come up with five ideas for increasing empathy.

Our answers on the Levels of Empathy handout show how perceived differences can create barriers to empathy. At these times, we need to make an effort to feel empathy. In groups of 3–4, discuss the following question and come up with at least five ideas.

- **How can we enhance our ability to empathize with others, especially when we perceive that they are different from us?**

[Have groups share their ideas with the class, and write them on the board or an overhead.]

Wrap-up (< 5 minutes)



- What did you personally learn or gain from today's lesson?

Homework



Pass out **Handout 1.6.2: Reflecting on Empathy.**

◆ Pass out Handout 1.6.2: Reflecting on Empathy.

In this assignment you will write about a time when you felt empathy for someone.

[If you have time, read through the questions and ask students if they have any questions about the assignment.]

Homework Follow-up (5-10 minutes)



◆ Ask students to share experiences with empathy.

[Ask if anyone would like to share their experience of empathy and their responses to the questions. Summarize the common elements of different students' experiences.]



LESSON EXTENSIONS

Literature Link:
"Laughter"
 (from *The House on Mango Street*)



In "Laughter," Esperanza describes how she and her sister Nenny are alike. They also appear to be tuned into each other's thoughts and feelings. Discuss this vignette in light of what students discussed in the lesson.

- **How does having common experiences lead to an increased sense of empathy?**
- **Does Esperanza feel different from Rachel and Lucy or similar to them? How can you tell?**
- **Might her ability to empathize with Rachel and Lucy grow? How?**

Writing Window



Ask students to write a vignette about a relationship in which they often think and feel the same as the other person. Why do they empathize with this person? What is the quality of their relationship?

Next have students write about a time when they found it difficult to empathize with someone. What were the obstacles to empathy? Were they able to overcome the obstacles? If so, how?

Emotional Mimicry

Making the facial expression associated with an emotion can induce you to feel that emotion. Counselors often assume the facial expressions of their clients. This is called emotional mimicry, and it helps them to feel empathy for what their clients are going through. Ask students to practice emotional mimicry with their friends and family members, being careful not to appear to mock their emotions. Afterwards, ask them if emotional mimicry helps them to better understand the experiences of others.

Blind Walk

A Blind Walk, also known as a Trust Walk, offers students an opportunity to experience a disability. Have student pairs take turns experiencing moving with the loss of sight. One person in each student pair is blindfolded, and the partner leads her or him on a walk around campus. After 15 minutes, students should switch roles and complete another walk. Afterwards, the class should discuss their experiences. How did it feel to not be able to see? How did it feel to trust your partner? How did it feel to guide someone?

Heroic Altruism

Empathy forms the basis for altruism. Altruism is acting unselfishly as a principle of action. Heroic altruism (1) is directed toward helping another, (2) involves a high risk or sacrifice to the actor, (3) is not done for an external reward, and (4) is voluntary. Research and write about an historical example of heroic altruism, such as those who rescued Jews and other persecuted people in the Holocaust during World War II.

Levels of Empathy

Empathy includes recognizing how another person is feeling, taking that person's perspective, and feeling what that person is feeling. On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being low and 5 being high), rate the level of empathy you feel for each person in the following situations.

1. A student you don't know is suspended from school for something he didn't do.

1	2	3	4	5
low empathy				high empathy

2. A close friend is grounded by his parents for a week.

1	2	3	4	5
low empathy				high empathy

3. A student in one of your classes says she feels sad because her family is moving soon.

1	2	3	4	5
low empathy				high empathy

4. You hear that a student you barely know has to move to another city in the middle of her senior year.

1	2	3	4	5
low empathy				high empathy

5. Your teacher is sad and disappointed because the class did poorly on an important test.

1	2	3	4	5
low empathy				high empathy

6. A student you know is on academic probation and can't play on the football team.

1	2	3	4	5
low empathy				high empathy

7. A student you don't have much in common with is being bullied by an upperclassman.

1	2	3	4	5
low empathy				high empathy

8. Your mom or dad had a bad day at work.

1	2	3	4	5
low empathy				high empathy

9. A friend's dog died.

1	2	3	4	5
low empathy				high empathy

HOMEWORK: Reflecting on Empathy

In this assignment you will write about a time when you *empathized* with another person (you felt what they were feeling). If you have a hard time thinking of a personal experience, you may interview a family member about a time when he or she felt empathy.

Describe the situation.

What caused you to empathize with the person?

In what ways did you identify with the person's situation and feelings?

How did this experience affect you?

Did you do anything as a result of feeling empathy? If so, what did you do?