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COMMENTARY

Balancing empathy: Can professors have too much?

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Kath et al. (2021) encouraged instructors to practice self-awareness and work on understanding how their expectations and behaviors may affect their ability to foster an inclusive classroom. Furthermore, they recommended that instructors be cognizant of the variety of diversity in terms of surface-level and deeper-level characteristics of students. The authors briefly discuss the promotion of empathy through perspective taking among students. We believe that this strategy can also help instructors foster an inclusive learning environment. Although Kath et al. (2021) recommended excellent guidelines that instructors could practice, we highlight an important concern that instructors should recognize when fostering an inclusive environment. Specifically, excessive empathy and a failure to recognize its limits may lead to impaired decision making and performance (Gino et al., 2013; Waytz et al. , 2013) . In this commentary, we discuss the advantages and disadvantages of empathy in the classroom and provide recommendations for finding the right level of leniency and accommodations for instructors. We do so by outlining important, relevant empirical and theoretical research and offering best practices that can help instructors develop empathy for an inclusive learning environment while simultaneously maintaining academic rigor. We would like to note here that we are not rooting against practicing empathy. However, instructors should be cautious in its use to avoid compromising the quality of education or academic standards, especially when the possibility of unfair treatment is present.

Practicing empathy

Perspective taking is a cognitive attempt to understand one's viewpoint, but empathic concern more specifically refers to an emotional response to another's challenge (Longmire & Harrison, 2018). These strategies lead to different outcomes, which makes it imperative to distinguish them in order to understand the contingent effects of each. For instance, Madera et al. (2010) found a positive relationship between perspective taking to develop empathy and a positive attitude toward diverse coworkers. Engaging in high levels of perspective taking can lead people to discover long-term solutions and focus on underlying issues (Longmire & Harrison, 2018). On the other hand, when perspective taking is limited and empathic concerns are high, individuals are more likely to help the target in ways that are quick fixes but not necessarily effective. Moreover, power has been shown to inhibit perspective taking, which calls for more effort from instructors to foster these skills. Leaders who engage in perspective taking are more likely to make decisions with procedural and distributive justice. We argue that acting in a just manner will lead professors to help struggling students without forfeiting the academic standards that are necessary for higher education.

Thus, we encourage instructors to use a perspective-taking strategy to practice empathy. It is essential to talk to students and understand their perspective rather than imagining how they feel. We encourage simple and straightforward methods of asking students what they want. For

instance, instructors can administer an anonymous pulse survey a few weeks after the semester begins to investigate whether any modification in the class structure would help them learn better. Moreover, instructors can create an online open-ended survey and include the survey link in the class syllabus or the learning management system (e.g., Blackboard, Canvas), which could act as a virtual feedback drop box wherein students can communicate their concerns and requests when necessary. In addition to encouraging students to voice their opinions, instructors can leverage the fact that they used to be students and recall what helped them learn better. However, it is important to note that individuals in power (i.e., professors) may not always be able to channel empathy from their previous experiences. Therefore, professors who grew up with a high amount of privilege need to remember that their students may have struggles that they did not have to endure (e.g., financial struggles, family conflict, discrimination).

Downsides of empathy for instructors

Although empathy is an essential factor in leading and inducing positive attitudes toward diversity, failing to identify the right level of empathy may lead to negative outcomes. For instance, demand for empathy in the workplace can lead to compassion fatigue, which in turn can lead to burnout and turnover intentions (Sung et al., 2012). Moreover, empathizers may begin to feel dissatisfied if they do not receive reciprocal emotional support (Toegel et al., 2013). Moreover, empathic individuals are more likely to experience burnout if they do not receive positive responses from students (Dutton et al., 2014). Therefore, it is important for instructors to recognize their empathetic limits and practice self-care to avoid fatigue and burnout. We strongly encourage instructors to take frequent breaks from the strenuous mental effort of understanding their students' needs and then address students' concerns with compassion rather than indifference (Waytz, 2016). It is also important for instructors to communicate expectations with students and encourage them to regard the classroom as a professional workplace and respect other students as well as the instructor.

Individuals need to conserve their cognitive resources to continuously empathize with multiple people (Halbesleben et al., 2009). Limitation of resources may result in an uneven investment of empathic concerns, which benefits insiders more than outsiders. Instructors may get emotionally drained and burdened by demands from some students and may not be able to cater to other students. This imbalance could also create a work–family conflict for the instructors wherein their negative affect may spill over into their personal lives and family dynamics (Halbesleben, 2009). We encourage instructors to reflect and recognize their limits and ensure that they do not sacrifice their emotional well-being when helping students (e.g., avoid responding to student emails during the weekends). This helps set expectations that students should prepare and ask questions regarding an assignment or exam well in advance.

Finally, empathy can impede the ethical judgments of individuals. Research has shown that empathy can inhibit whistleblowing on fellow employees (Waytz et al., 2013) and increase one's tendency to cheat (Gino et al., 2013). Instructors with increased empathy may be less critical of students' work and, thus, not as helpful in educating their students in necessary areas of improvement. An uneven distribution of empathetic concern toward one group of students compared with the others could result in preferential treatment where instructors could feel more empathy toward some students than toward others (Prinz, 2011). Empathizing strongly and staying loyal to a group may result in displaying extreme resentment toward the other group (Waytz & Epley, 2012). For instance, instructors may grade some students more harshly than others. This could lead to significant differences among the students in a classroom. Instructors should be aware of their individual biases to avoid empathizing only with a selective group of students (Prinz, 2011). Students who do not receive empathy from instructors may perceive a violation of procedural justice in the classroom, especially if they perceive unfairness in the grading system

(Chory-Assad, 2002). Consequently, students may indulge in counterproductive behaviors (Greenberg & Alge, 1998) such as sharing academic materials without permission or reducing effort in the classroom. We recommend that instructors practice blind grading to help them avoid biases that may influence the process. Moreover, instructors should communicate this practice to the students to ensure that they understand that the grading process is fair.

Conclusions

Whereas empathy is essential to inculcate an inclusive learning environment, it is extremely important for instructors to recognize informed and efficient ways to empathize. Instructors should practice self-awareness and find the level of empathy that not only helps maximize the learning experience of all of the students but also helps students maintain their own well-being. Empathizing with a certain group of students more than the others could inadvertently become a tool for favoritism or bias in the classroom. Therefore, it is important for instructors to engage in conscious empathy in order to maximize its benefits. We hope that instructors will find the suggested practices useful in finding that balance of empathy without compromising on academic rigor.

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