

Learning Strategies for Empathy Through Poetry

Preface to Instructors:

This lesson plan is meant for undergraduate college classes but may need some adaptation for different grade/ability levels. For a three-hour class, this lesson may be able to be completed in one session, but for a class that meets for a shorter duration more than once a week, this lesson may be more suitable if it's divided into two sessions, giving students the writing prompt as homework and returning to share their work in the next class period.

Check In:

Ask everyone what color they're feeling today and why. Asking them to explain is necessary because our associations with colors are subjective. Example: one person may say they're feeling red today because they're feeling loved and supported, while someone else may say they're feeling red because they feel angry.

Empathy Overview:

We all experience color in different ways and assign our own meaning to each shade. While some may associate blue with sadness, others may find it a soothing and relaxing color they associate with feeling calm or at peace. Anger may feel red, but so could love, warmth, or happiness. We each have a unique inner world that is shaped by our upbringing and experiences and we express parts of it every time we communicate with someone else.

Defining Empathy

As writers, we often use figurative language to express ourselves. Devices like metaphors help make abstractions like hope, fear, regret, or joy more tangible and accessible to everyone outside the writer's mind, so we can understand something of what they're feeling. (Ask if anyone wants to define empathy and then ask the class why they think empathy is important). The ability to understand and share someone else's feelings is called empathy, and it's important because it helps us connect with others and strengthen our relationships. [Research](#) also shows that empathy limits aggression, reduces social prejudice, increases academic success, and makes people more productive, cooperative, and respectful.

Empathy V.S Sympathy

Empathy is often confused with sympathy. (Can anyone define sympathy?) While similar, sympathy is less focused on connection and is more about an individual's feelings of pity or sorrow for someone else without really understanding their position. Sympathy is acknowledging that someone is going through a difficult time while empathy is an attempt to actually understand how that person is feeling.

Research: Empathy Through Reading

Research shows that empathy can be fostered through reading, writing, and listening. Reading fiction trains us to develop and use empathy, to understand, or at least imagine, how other people think and feel. "[Researchers at Emory University](#) in Atlanta, US, say that fiction tricks our brains into thinking we are part of the story. The empathy we feel for characters wires our brains to have the same sensitivity towards real people. [Carnegie Mellon University studies](#) discovered that when you get lost in a book your brain lives through the characters at a neurological level." [An experiment](#) done by teachers in Malta suggests that engagement with poetry, especially poems written by authors in a minority or other stigmatized group, has the ability to help readers challenge their preconceptions and be more sympathetic of those who are different from them.

Research: Empathy Through Writing

Writing can help us convey our own thoughts and feelings, but it can also help us explore experiences we may not have had before. Romantic poet John Keats coined the term "chameleon poet" to describe the act of a writer stepping outside of themselves in order to write with empathy, and his idea of "negative capability" is about being able to consider all points of view and write characters who align with the writer's beliefs as well as characters who oppose them.

Research: Empathy Through Listening

When we listen deeply, we are giving our full attention to the person speaking, not daydreaming or thinking about what we want to say when they're done talking. We can't have empathy without listening because we can't truly understand what someone is going through if we're not paying attention.

Empathy Building Strategies

There are several [strategies for building empathy](#): being curious about strangers, being a good listener, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, seeking experiences that allow us to see the world through the eyes of others, and challenging prejudices by searching for what we have in common with people who are different from us. Poetry fosters curiosity about strangers, as poems are usually written by strangers, and engaging deeply with a poem allows the reader to practice deep listening. Sharing our work and receiving feedback makes us vulnerable, while reading poetry allows us to see the world through the eyes of someone else and teaches us to challenge our thinking. By challenging ourselves to regularly seek experiences that encourage us to be curious about others, listen deeply, be vulnerable, see through someone else's eyes, and focus on what we have in common with others, we can build an empathy practice that will strengthen our ability to empathize.

Short Activity:

Turn to a partner and talk for five minutes. Try to find at least three things you have in common. Avoid obvious similarities: you're all students, you're all in this class, and you all go to this school, etc.

If there's time, ask if a few groups want to share what they found.

Reflect:

- How did it feel to do the activity? (annoying, fun, ran out of time, etc.)
- Did you find any connections that surprised you?

Maybe take a break here to stretch, have a snack, etc.

Pre-Discussion:

- Just because we have things in common with each other doesn't mean we won't disagree. We can have healthy disagreements, but sometimes things can get ugly, and we may say things we don't mean. Friends fight, families fight, partners fight, but interpersonal conflict tends to be much smaller in scope and affects fewer people. Sometimes there are larger, yet good natured, conflicts like those between sports teams or school rivalries. What are some other examples of conflict?
- What do you associate with war?
- Do you think physical conflict is ever justified?
- Who do you think is the most affected by war? (Soldiers, officers, civilians, governments/nations, etc.?)
- Discuss context surrounding the Vietnam War and the Fall of Saigon, maybe watch a short video like this one: <https://youtu.be/og6bi3cgf5g>

Model Poem: "Aubade With Burning City" by Ocean Vuong

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/56769/aubade-with-burning-city>

Discussion Questions:

General Impressions:

- What do you notice about this poem?
- What details stick out to you the most?
- How does the poem make you feel?

Craft Questions:

- What role does color play in this poem?
- How does the poem play with space on the page, and what impact does that have?
- How does the use of enjambment create multiple meanings in the text?
- How does the juxtaposition of the lyrics from "White Christmas" with scenes of destruction create emotional impact?

Empathy Questions:

- What is the tone? (How does the speaker feel?)

- Think about the characters in this poem: the speaker, the unnamed male (he), the unnamed female (she), the soldier, the traffic guard, the shrieking children, the black dog, the chief of police, the nun, and her god. What purpose do they serve in the poem? How do you think each of them is feeling?
- Has your perspective on war/refugees changed after reading this poem?
- Is there anything specific in the text you can point to that caused you to feel empathy?

Discussion Reflection:

Historical Context:

During the [Fall of Saigon](#), American civilians and Vietnamese refugees were evacuated by helicopter. While Americans were generally assured evacuation by showing up at the airport, many refugees had to resort to paying for independent arrangements, often selling what property they had at a substantial loss in order to do so. Those who emigrated to the United States expected to find political and personal freedom on account of being anti-communist but were often held in detention centers for weeks or months.

Empathy and Reflection Questions:

- How would it feel to endure the event described in the poem and then be treated in such a way by your new country?
- How would it feel to leave your home for your own safety, and on short notice, knowing you probably wouldn't be able to return?
- Knowing the unpopularity of the Vietnam War, how do you think Vietnamese refugees were treated by their new neighbors?
- For a country that takes pride in being founded by white immigrants, America isn't as friendly to immigrants of color. How does the treatment of Vietnamese refugees compare to the current politicization of immigration from Mexico?

Writing Prompts:

Option 1: Write a poem using an existing text as a frame for your own, like Ocean Vuong uses the lyrics to "White Christmas." (heteroglossia)

Option 2: Write about what it might be like to immigrate to a new country.

Option 3: Write about a personal conflict you've had with someone from their perspective.

Option 4: Write about a time when you were shown empathy by someone or a time when you showed empathy to someone else.

Option 5: Choose your own adventure (don't feel constrained to the prompts, write about whatever you want)

Share:

Option 1: Ask for a few students to share their draft with the class, reminding everyone that it's still a draft and the classroom is a safe space.

Option 2: If there's time, or maybe at the next class session, sort students into groups of four or five (probably best to sort them by what prompt they chose) and ask them to pick their four favorite lines from their own draft to share with their group. Then ask them to arrange all the shared lines into one group poem. They may choose to connect these lines with anaphora, write new lines to bridge the gap, or any other technique to make one cohesive poem. Encourage creativity with arrangement on the page. Then ask student groups to share their group poem with the class.

Reflect:

Share Reflection:

- If using Share Option 1:
 - How did it feel to share and/or receive the work that was shared? Thank them for sharing.
- If using Share Option 2:
 - How did it feel to collaborate on a new poem using work from each individual?
 - Was it difficult to connect each person's lines, or did they mesh organically?
 - Despite being written by different people, did the lines have anything in common?
 - Was it scary to share such new work with each other? (Vulnerability)
 - Do you feel more connected with your group after this exercise?

Poem Reflection:

- How did Ocean Vuong's poem bring the Fall of Saigon to life?
- Was the experience of reading the poem different from learning about the event in the pre-discussion/short video?

Empathy Reflection:

- How did Ocean Vuong's poem encourage the reader to empathize with the Vietnamese who experienced the Fall of Saigon?
- How can we build our empathy practice in daily life? What strategies can we use?

Some articles on building empathy:

<https://www.verywellmind.com/how-to-develop-empathy-in-relationships-1717547>

<https://ideas.ted.com/5-exercises-to-help-you-build-more-empathy/>

<https://positivepsychology.com/empathy-worksheets/>