

Researching the Self: Autoethnography and Empathy in the University Classroom

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Abstract

This paper proposes a strong link between the practice of self-reflection and the growth of emotional empathy in university students. Importantly, the study occurs in the context of a capstone experience in the history major, combining both reflective activities and detailed disciplinary research to break down student barriers to learning as they move into their professional lives. The results of multiple administrations at the beginning and the end of the semester of the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire revealed a statistically significant increase in student empathic scores. Student weekly reflective journals, when assessed using a three-part rubric of “superficial,” “proficient,” and “advanced” categories, also demonstrated a substantial increase in the proportion of advanced expressions relative to superficial writing. Qualitative review of these journals and related reflective writing assignments revealed significant growth in student personal vulnerability as an entry point to authentic learning and empathy. Vital as a leadership skill, empathy also provides an important indicator of student metacognitive engagement with their intellectual and emotional changes during their youth that will be helpful in their following lives.

Keywords

empathy; autoethnography; reflection; pedagogy; university teaching

Introduction

The pressing need to decolonize knowledge gained from systems of exploitation necessitates authorial vulnerability in writers and teachers who study regions affected by outside domination. As one of those writers, I have long struggled to comprehend why and how my own background and experiences shape my actions and my findings in research. In other words, the self is present in all research, whether intended or not, and honest analytical work can emerge powerfully from this starting point. Those researchers who are willing to engage those connections stand to be even more successful and credible as thinkers and even leaders. It was that realization, spurred in part by the remarkably self-reflective examples of Achebe (2002) and van Klinken (2019), that formed the basis for the research presented in this study.

University-level teaching requires significant empathy to engage students from vastly different backgrounds and holding widely varying interests. However, the paradigmatic practice in the university history classroom for decades ignored this requirement, instead focusing on the transmission of knowledge by an expert instructor in a unidirectional lecture. Fortunately, the discipline has moved substantially in recent years to recognize the real possibilities of a classroom environment focusing on deep engagement with historical fact, understanding the lived experience of historical persons, and delivering critical analysis skills rather than simple course coverage (Antonelli-Carter, 2020; Nokes & Kesler-Lund, 2019). The discipline thus provides great opportunity for developing and understanding empathy in students through a process that allows them to connect more completely with the discipline. Removing barriers to disciplinary engagement encourages students to accept and even embrace the trepidation that comes with advanced learning and entrance to the professional world.

As Forrest et al. (2012) have proposed, a “healthy uncertainty” in the university classroom generates a productive struggle of students “coming to know” (p. 718). Their research revealed five guidelines to help students feel safe and involved without the comfort of constant instructor guidance: reliance on known skills, increased responsibility, working in small teams, the maintenance of a regular rhythm, and the incorporation of instructor reflection. Building from this approach, I designed and delivered a capstone or culminating history course for fourth-year university students that paired disciplinary research with self-reflection, simultaneously lowering student fears about their disciplinary and professional skills while building their ability to understand the views of others. In short, the course encouraged students to reflect on themselves in the context of a world inhabited by others. The results from that course indicate a significant increase in student empathy connected to self-reflective practices, an important pathway toward the development of future leaders in virtually any professional domain.

Centering Empathy Autoethnographically

As Barbuto and Bugenhagen (2009) as well as Gregory and Levy (2011) have found, empathy is a crucial element of success in superior-subordinate and mentoring relationships. Subordinates are more likely to engage in productive and community-building practices when in an environment that they see as nurturing and responsive to their needs, necessitating a community of leaders willing and able to engage in empathic behaviors (Kalshoven et al., 2013). In a related finding, Kelly and Bhangal (2018) have also described the power of reflection and an understanding of life narrative as components of leadership development, therefore encouraging practitioners to challenge both internal and external assumptions, which is a crucial skill in competitive and hierarchical environments. High-stress occupations such as professional military service, for example, require inclusive leadership practices in an environment where leaders have the space and the skills to release their own tensions, a process that recent research (Ascioglu Onal & Yalcin, 2017; Wei et al., 2016;) has indicated may occur more easily for those who have already developed strong empathic capabilities. The difficulty, however, lies not in recognizing the importance of empathy but in defining and measuring where it begins and ends.

Investigators since the foundational work of Davis (1983a; 1983b) have struggled to deliver categories of empathy that remain both observable and measurable. For the most part, researchers in the next several decades found that empathy operates both cognitively and emotionally. While

both indicate concern for the fate, views, or thoughts of another, Davis's research focused on the emotional reaction to the state of another, commonly known as compassion. Cognitive empathy, on the other hand, remains more abstract and difficult to measure, manifesting as creative or imaginative capacity to place oneself in the position of another. Wang et al. (2003) developed a "scale of ethnocultural empathy (SEE)" from multiple studies of undergraduate students that they believed measured the more specific ability to empathize with the thoughts, feelings, and actions of people from different ethnic or racial groups. Their findings, derived from several sub-studies employing a questionnaire probing behaviors toward people of other groups, related that students with greater previous experience facing discriminatory behavior were more likely to empathize with others. Mallinckrodt et al. (2014) then tested and combined the SEE with other measures of empathy to develop their own scale for measurement of this intercultural capability. Rasool et al. (2011) conducted a larger-scale study of ethnocultural empathy among secondary and university students in Sweden that employed both the SEE and Davis's (1996) Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), an extensive measure of emotional empathy, to compare respondent willingness and understanding of the ideas, thoughts, and feelings of others. Their findings indicated substantial overlap between ethnocultural, cognitive, and emotional empathy, calling into question whether these measures are truly distinct. In any case, none of these studies made any empirical effort to study changes in emotional empathy brought on by external stimuli beyond basic experience, nor did they employ methodologies that would help to track such change across educational events. Measuring changes to empathy over classroom events had to be sufficiently simple and short to allow for multiple executions in a time-constrained environment. In designing my own study, given my lack of formal training in psychology, it made sense to track and measure the more widely understood emotional empathy as an accessible trait in students. The trick came in finding an appropriate tool to measure changes.

In an effort to create just such a simple measure to capture emotional empathy, Spreng et al. (2009) conducted factor analysis on a number of different empathy measurement tools, including the SEE, IRI, and a host of others, and derived what they have termed the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ). The tool focuses on the expression of emotional empathy, on caring for and experiencing the emotional, rather than rationally intellectual, position of another. The TEQ thus offered me a heavily referenced, quantitative measure of emotional empathy that I could employ on multiple occasions to measure changes in student empathy without disrupting the flow of a university history course. The historical discipline, moreover, also offered significant opportunities for written and spoken communication connected not only to the self but also to disciplinary research. It made sense to pair these attributes together. Fortunately, I found autoethnography, a technique which, when delivered through writing, offered substantial opportunity for qualitative measurement of student empathy as well.

Ellis et al. (2011, p. 273) have defined autoethnography as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience." The technique is focused on the interaction between individual and environment through self-reflection, rendered with the categorization and description typically expected of an ethnography of a societal other (see Adams et al., 2014; Holman Jones et al., 2013). Further, Viramontes (2012) has argued that autoethnography is a powerful technique, even a "signature pedagogy," in the university classroom because it helps students to see "multiple possibilities, multiple truths" through a rigorous self-examination at the intersection of their personal experience and surrounding socioeconomic and cultural factors (p. 3). Building on those

strengths, the modified approach known as *evocative autoethnography* (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) encourages participants to consider not only their ethnographic surroundings and influences but also their emotions and feelings in a more complete rendering of their reaction. Such an approach does not preclude but in fact must also incorporate a critical perspective on events, people, and the reactions one has to them. Empathetic leaders must be able not only to understand the emotional and cognitive reactions of others, but also their own to devise a more tailored response to circumstances in an intellectually rigorous fashion.

Writing offers a powerful method to discover, track, and measure these tailored empathic reflections, as it is iterative and available for further comparison or analysis in the future. Leake (2016) has proposed teaching empathy through rhetoric to connect more completely with a variety of audiences and as a means to stoke the fires of invention and creativity. Similarly, Adler-Kassner and O'Neill (2010) have written that creative “stories” offer a road to comprehension in terms familiar to all people, regardless of intellectual background. Linking that to professional futures and aspirations provides additional layers of meaning and importance that encourage students to think meaningfully about their own experiences and what they might mean to them later. Adler-Kassner and O'Neill thus recommended that instructors incorporate narrative forms whenever possible. Along the same lines, Vogelsang and Bergen (2018) found that reflective writing assignments helped nurses to develop a deeper understanding of their own roles while also forming empathy for others. Further, Shaffer et al. (2019) found that empathy increased in those evaluating self-harming behavior in others after engaging in narrative, reflective writing. Written autoethnographic reflection thus offers a medium for measuring changes in student empathy.

Left to their own devices, however, students might not generate sufficient metacognitive awareness of the importance of their activities. As Chick et al. (2009) have found, students benefit from stepping back to think about the metacognitive impacts of their own thoughts and feelings as they engage with others. Consequently, they develop a greater empathic appreciation for foreign ideas and a stronger understanding of the sources and consequences of their own emotional reactions to new information or accounts of others. Participating in individual and group discussions on their intellectual journeys allows students to begin the process of merging their “inner” and “outer worlds,” as Dirkx has described the process (Dirkx et al., 2006, p. 126). While the world that surrounds students seems chaotic, judgmental, and multi-vocal, so too is their inner world, which is composed of a variety of influences and a cacophony of impulses they must learn to engage and control. The productive conflict between these worlds generates what Dirkx and Mezirow have termed *transformative learning*, whereby students emerge on the other side as different people more ready to engage the world that surrounds them.

With a strong understanding of the nature of empathic development, a group of tools potentially useful in measuring any possible changes, and a handful of techniques with strong potential to increase student empathy, I had to deliver a course that would help a select group of students to learn in this manner. The course needed to fit into the institutional schema, meet graduation requirements, connect to the historical discipline, and include an open discussion of pedagogical research objectives. Fortunately, just such a course became available as I formulated my research plan.

Course Structure and Intent

The course, numbered as History 402 and carrying the title “Identity and History,” served as the culminating academic experience, or capstone, for fourth-year students enrolled in the Foreign Area Studies-History (FAS-History) major at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) in the spring of 2022. FAS requires students to select a world region from among Africa, East Asia, Latin America, or Europe; choose a disciplinary focus from among history, political science, and military-strategic studies; complete a regionally focused language program; and follow an intensive interdisciplinary sequence of courses, weighted toward their disciplinary focus, in history, geography, economics, political science, and military-strategic studies. The capstone course thus had to serve as a crowning research experience, remain anchored in the historical discipline while honoring the interdisciplinary student background, and offer opportunities for reflection on the experience across and in the major itself. Including 11 total students, my course worked around three primary focus areas: a scaffolded research project, substantial and frequent written reflection, and interaction in groups and pairs.

Group and partner discussion occupied 19 of the total 40 class meetings with another four taken up by project presentations, an opportunity for the students to interact with one another on their interests and research achievements. The first five lessons of the semester focused on the practice of autoethnography, featuring articles by Muflichah and Mackinlay (2020) on building understanding across national lines; an article from Forrest et al. (2012) on the need to deal with learning uncertainty; and examples of autoethnographic practice from Achebe (2002) and me. Following some time spent in the library working on research topics and sources, we returned to engage the deeply personal research experiences of van Klinken (2019). The middle third of the semester focused largely on partner and group discussions on the challenges and experience of research in student historical projects. Following the completion of those projects and the resultant presentations in the final third of the course, the class reassembled to discuss the institutional autoethnographic findings of Estes et al. (2018) and conclude with more generalized reflections on the course and individual student experiences. Each of these meetings enabled the students to compare their findings, whether analytical or personal, and to realize their journeys were not unique but instead similar to those of their peers. As a result, they gained increased sensitivity for the values and interests of others while gaining confidence in their own approaches in the historical discipline.

Indeed, historical research formed the core of the course in a manner that embraced individual student interests. First, students could select the topic and format of their ultimate project without feeling tied specifically to a research paper, the more traditional coin of the realm in history. In this semester, the students chose to create three documentary films on the importance of radio in Antarctic exploration, Saudi Arabian military strategy, and music in the American Civil Rights movement; three written papers on Arctic icebreaker competition, West African political systems, and the Soviet gulag; one podcast on fear in the Brazilian military dictatorship; one collage-style painting on media in the Bangladeshi War of Independence; one painting on the souring of American-Chinese relationships in the late 20th century; one representative garment on class differences in Imperial Russia and France; and one digital comic on colonial misunderstandings in Nigeria. In accordance with the approach examined autoethnographically by Leonard and Ayers (2021), research occurred through scaffolded assignments organized around dedicated library sessions and intended to build on each other over time. Students thus began by formulating a

research question and its value in a research design, which they followed with a research prospectus, a project outline, and a rough draft before completing a final version and delivering the presentation. Students also had three opportunities to work with partners in sharpening arguments and sharing techniques. They thus could better understand their own skills while appreciating that everyone in the historical community, from me as an experienced instructor to them as seasoned but still relatively inexperienced undergraduates, went through a similar struggle to understand what Kelly (2020) has termed the “hidden curriculum” of the discipline. In other words, they had to learn how to communicate as budding historians. Learned indirectly, these social cues aided the students in adapting their identities to the demands of the professional world in a supportive and open classroom environment.

In an effort to enhance this learning, the students connected to the historical discipline through near-continuous reflection. Students were responsible for generating 14 weekly journal entries as the semester progressed, following a standard prompt that encouraged them to reflect on their experiences with their topics, each other, and the discipline (see below). As a first effort at long-form autoethnographic work, the students generated an early-semester intellectual reflection, where they reexamined their own academic work in the context of their social, intellectual, and economic environment as well as their affective state. On lesson 38 (of 40), following two days of partner and group discussion, the students generated an intellectual trajectory. In that assignment, they considered their early-semester reflections, connected them to their experiences in the course and with their research project, and imagined what those findings might mean to their future professional careers and interactions with others. When examined carefully and methodically, all of these activities yielded important insights into the connection between autoethnographic reflection and student empathy.

Methodology

The study operated from two primary hypotheses. First, I proposed that the students would demonstrate significant change in measurable emotional empathy over the course of the semester as found in a standardized and quantitative tool, in this case the TEQ. Second, the study hypothesized that students would increase their ability to express emotional empathy in written form over the course of the semester as measured through a qualitative empathy scale that I developed.

As indicated above, the TEQ provided a standardized and quantitative measure of emotional empathy. Nine of the 11 students completed the two administrations of the survey executed on the first and last days of the semester, both during scheduled class time. The results of those surveys, linked to specific student respondents, were collected by a third party not connected with the study, with the results withheld until after the completion of the semester and associated grading. Students were aware of the purpose of the administration and provided their assent for collection and analysis. I then anonymized all results through the assignment of pseudonyms to the student participants.

Building on the studies outlined above related to autoethnography and empathy measurement, the course required students to complete 14 total weekly journal reflections, with the first and last journals employing a different prompt. Both the first and last journal entries occurred coincident

with administration of the TEQ and thus focused on student reflection associated with that activity. Journal entries contributed to course grading only through points associated with completion with no subjective assessment of quality. The intellectual reflection and intellectual trajectory also had specific prompts to encourage student reflection. These activities contributed to the grade through a subjective instructor assessment of writing quality and depth of reflection. The prompts for each component appear in Table 1.

Table 1

Prompts for Self-Reflective Activities

TYPE OF REFLECTION	ACCOMPANYING PROMPT
Weekly Journals 1 & 14	In learning to interact with other people as a fellow human being and as a leader, it is important that you reflect on your own feelings. Focusing on your responses to the questionnaire repeated below for your reference, reflect on and write about what you have learned about yourself using the following prompts as a guide. a) Are you empathetic to the plight of others? How do you know? b) What, if anything, would you change about how you think about and respond to others and why? c) Did this survey tool help you to think about your own approach to others? Why or why not?
Weekly Journals 2-13	Reflect on the activities and events in History 402 in the last week. How did they affect your understanding of yourself, the world, and the discipline of history, broadly construed? More specifically, you may respond to one or more of the following leading questions to get you started. a) What have you realized about the effect of your background and your surroundings on you, as a person, a student, and a future leader, from your experiences this week in this course? b) How did the experiences and expressions of others in this course impact the way you thought about yourself, others around you, and the world? c) What will make you successful as a future leader given your background as a FAS-History major and a student in this course? d) How has the discipline of history and your experience as a FAS-History major shaped your student experience? e) How will the discipline of history impact you in the future? f) How has the discipline of history and your experience as a FAS-History major impacted how you see other people? g) Are you empathetic? Why or why not?

Intellectual Reflection	This is your first opportunity to reflect on your development as an undergraduate historian. In short, this is a critical reading of your own work and experiences as a FAS-history major. You should, in 1300-1500 words, consider the research and writing you have done in the history, geography, political science, and military strategic studies courses in your major. What have you achieved? Where have you succeeded? Where have you failed? What important lessons have you gained? How have the views and experiences of others, whether fellow students or historical figures, impacted your experience? Has your choice of major changed or revealed the way you think about the world and other people? Strive for deep reflection and honesty. If you do not have any residual archives from previous courses, do the best you can to recreate your experiences by memory and/or the use of other externals, such as communications with fellow cadets, friends, parents, teachers, or other significant people on what happened to you in your educational journey to this point.
Intellectual Trajectory	Having engaged in discussions with your instructor and your classmates over the course of the semester following your initial intellectual reflection, you should now be ready to describe where you see yourself going intellectually in the future. Compare what you wrote in the early-semester intellectual reflection with what you are thinking and feeling now about your path as a FAS-History major in 1300-1500 words. How have your interests changed or evolved? Have the experiences, thoughts, and conclusions of others influenced your thinking? How will your experiences, both in and outside of this class, shape your future as a thinker and leader?

In an effort to measure empathy in student writing, as outlined more generally above, the study required a specific rubric for application to each writing sample. Recent studies related to empathy were critical in constructing this scoring matrix. Celimli and Higdon (2019) demonstrated that regular, intensive, and imaginative writing practice aided adolescent students in the growth of empathy, a practice that fit well with my journal-generating course design. Their rubric built on three primary elements: emotional response, perspective taking, and proposal for action. Those three categories, and a scoring system based at three levels, formed the foundation for my work. Seeking even greater fidelity, I incorporated the findings of Fetterman et al. (2021), who connected higher instances of perspective taking with higher instances of metaphor employment in daily

student use. I was not able to follow students sufficiently to measure their daily spoken metaphor use, but the routine employment of journals focused on reflection acted as a stand-in for this process. Finally, my rubric built on what Vogelsang and Bergen (2018) described as the interprofessional competency and role establishment built from regular reflective writing. The team-based, leadership development environment of the US Air Force Academy made this component a natural fit and thus factored into the prompts students used in creating their entries. Building on these studies, my rubric thus sorted each individual student expression of introspection and empathy into one of three categories: superficial, proficient, and advanced. I applied that categorization to each instance (individually expressed thought) of self-reflection, yielding a quantitative count of instances of each level of empathic expression. Any effort at self-reflection, even one so basic as “I am weird,” served as one instance of self-reflection. Thus, a single journal entry or reflective paper might have multiple entries falling at different scoring levels. In generating the scoring, I maintained verbatim copies of student comments in the textual fields as well.

“Superficial” efforts at self-examination dealt largely in fact, as in this notional example (instance 1): “I am a white heterosexual cisgender male.” Note that the writer did not dig deeply into motivation, meaning, or wider cause and effect. “Proficient” students moved a step further in their analytical process, extending their findings beyond simple self-criticism or fact relation to an understanding of how individual traits or events fit into a larger whole or impacted others. For example, the same student might expand on the previous superficial example (instance 2): “I am a white heterosexual cisgender male, but that is not all that I am. I can’t change my fundamental makeup, but my heterosexuality allows me access to aspects of society which, when coupled with an acceptance of others, makes me an ally of those not like me. I want to understand what they are going through.” This statement is quite potent and reveals a student accepting their own vulnerability while remaining open to the experiences of others. Finally, “Advanced” students push their analysis and technique still further, connecting their experiences to the larger surrounding society in an explicit engagement with environment and specific perspective-taking. Such an advanced student might reformulate the preceding statements (instance 3): “Debates in the news media make it seem that all white, cisgender, male heterosexuals are trying to destroy the ways of life of those not like them, but I find instead that the social rituals of the young Americans who I know are more sensitive to the needs of the other people they know, building a societal web together rather than resorting to a Simon and Garfunkel-style island. Some people say that truth is a fiction, but the truth that interests me is in the other person or people.” Note in this case not only the willingness to feel through others, but also the employment of several metaphors to illustrate the wider point, a key indication of empathic ability. Table 2 places the statements laid out in this paragraph in the rubric as an example of this technique.

Table 2*Written Empathy Scoring Rubric*

INSTANCE	Superficial (w/ comment)	Proficient (w/ comment)	Advanced (w/ comment)
1	Willingness to offer racial and sexual identity as white cisgender male, no deeper analysis		
2	Continued identification as white, cisgender male	Clear evidence of vulnerability, willingness to consider lives of others with reference to self as “ally”	
3		Evidence of vulnerability and connection to larger groups	Heavy use of metaphor with comparison to Simon-Garfunkel and web, openness to other experiences, wider grasp of context of experience (news media reports) for self and others
Total (by category)	2	2	1
Grand Total of all Columns: 5			

When measured with these tools, whether quantitative or qualitative, student performance in the course in terms of project quality and empathic expression greatly exceeded my expectations.

Results

As discussed above, the first experimental hypothesis held that students would demonstrate a significant increase in empathy as measured in the TEQ. Only 9 of the 11 students in the course completed both the pre- and post-course administrations of the survey, but among those 9 the average score on the TEQ increased from 48.44 to 51.11 out of a maximum 64 points. A dependent t-test on this small sample size indicated a statistically significant increase, with $t(8) = -1.81$ and $p = .05$. It is difficult to ascertain specific causation for this change, though the qualitative results (see below) support the idea that student empathy increased over the time spent in the course. Seven of the 11 students completed the optional end-of-course feedback survey, which included the question “How, if at all, did this course affect your empathy for others?” Four students felt their empathy increased due to the course, two felt the course made them more aware of their empathic ability but did not increase their empathy necessarily, and one felt the course had no specific impact.

Students who found the course had a positive impact generally anchored those thoughts in the shared journey through historical research. Jean framed that connection through historical subjects themselves: “The structure of this course forced me to empathize with others—both present and

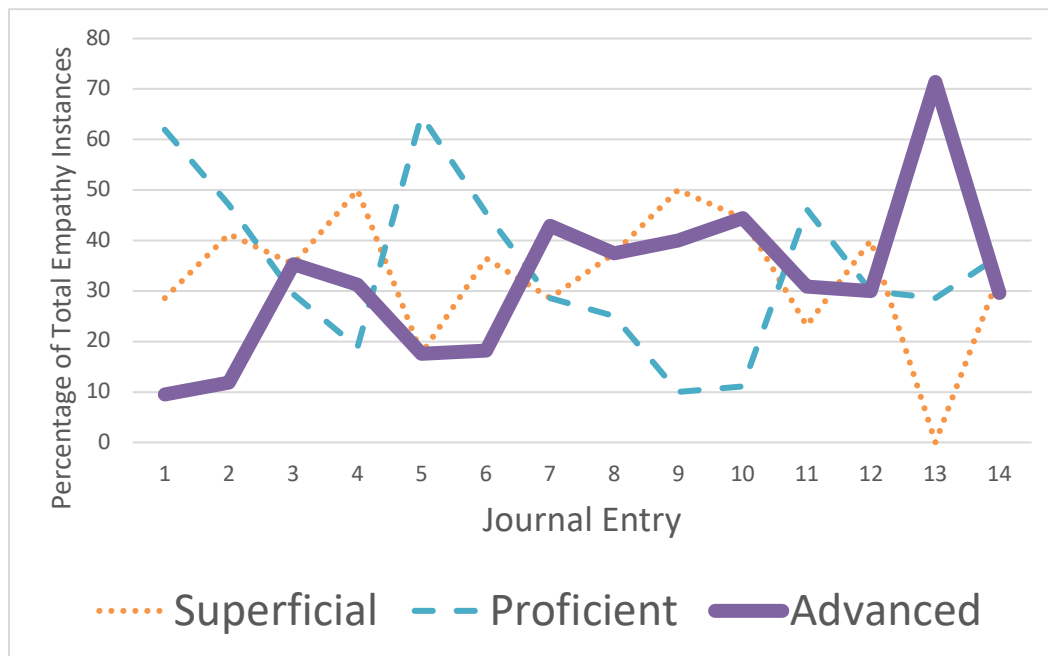
past. I felt the same fears as my classmates, and that similar feeling brought comfort in a time of need.” Charlotte realized how common these problems were for everyone: “This course made me realize that everyone’s experiences are so much more similar than I thought. There were many times throughout the semester where I felt like I was the only person with a particular problem, only to find out that other people are struggling with the same issue. This encouraged me to understand that I can relate to others and empathized with others a lot more than I thought I could.”

The three students who were more neutral on the impact on empathy generally focused on their skills when entering the course. Adeline, who was otherwise quite positive about the value of the course, found empathy less central: “I don’t think it affected it, just made me more self aware of my own empathy.” The only anonymous student respondent found that the course “Did not change it [empathy] but made me think about it a lot more.” Angelique remained solidly noncommittal on the course’s impact: “I personally think it takes longer than a semester to have any affect [sic] on empathy for others. So, I feel my empathy for others has remained the same since the beginning of the semester.” The students in the course clearly engaged with the idea of empathy in one fashion or another, even if they did not necessarily believe there was an immediate impact to their own sense of empathy. Despite those misgivings, student journals generally demonstrated an increase in the quality of student empathic expression as the semester continued.

Over the course of the semester, student journal expressions of empathy improved both qualitatively and quantitatively. Figure 1 reflects this aggregated change, as “advanced” expressions expanded to more than 70 percent of the total expressions by week 13 as opposed to a low of 10 percent in week 1.

Figure 1

Percentage of Total Empathy Instances by Category per Journal Entry



As the semester progressed, the students became more accustomed to honest reflection, particularly as their research projects came together and they felt an individual sense of accomplishment. At the same time, all the students were within weeks of graduation, which may have placed them in a more reflective mood and inclined to wider connections, often employing the metaphorical style that is such a strong indicator of empathetic connection. At the same time, they had already generated relatively superficial statements of their views and habits in the first phase of the course, so the likelihood of “superficial” reflection by that stage was smaller. The ratio of “advanced” to “superficial” reflections in the concluding long-form intellectual trajectory assignment as compared to the initial intellectual reflection assignment did not show any noticeable change, likely because students had more time to reflect and more time to revise their work to demonstrate deeper evidence of introspection. In any case, the qualitative growth of student empathetic expression in journals from the early part of the semester to the end was striking and easily apparent from a rapid review.

The paired journey through research, coupled with targeted readings and the group discussions, encouraged this qualitative growth. The excerpt from van Klinken (2019) provided a crucial impulse for several of the students as they realized the importance of such reflection while also growing in their connection to each other. Five of the 11 students commented on that reading or the corresponding reactions of their peers in journal entries 3 and 4, all of which were quite revealing about the growth in their empathy. The following examples show differences in empathic capability among the students, but in all cases also indicate serious reflection.

Pierre: I found the reading about the guy studying Christianity in Africa really interesting. The intersection of research and self. I really do want to be involved in the research I do. Being here, it’s tough. I can’t really get to the British National Archives or travel Antarctica. I’ve always dreamed of going to Antarctica, actually. My brothers and I plan to sail there when we’re older. I guess this week just got me more excited about how studying history affects us.

Charlotte: Honestly, the first thing I wrote down when I began reading the excerpt was that I was worried about how people in our class would react to it. It is a rather jarring title and topic, especially if you are not familiar with the LGBTQ community. I wasn’t worried that anyone would be insensitive on purpose (I think that we are all much too smart for that), but just that the title would cause them to shut down and not fully read the paper. I know that this is definitely biased on my part and that I don’t know everyone’s background in class, but it was my initial concern. However, what Andre said really stood out to me, that he feels like he has a lot to learn. I thought that this was amazing self-reflection on his part and I believe that it holds true for all of us. Even if we think we know a lot about something, we never know all of it, and there is always more to learn.

Angelique: Initially I didn’t know what to think about it, but as I read on, I realized how expressing one’s connection and vulnerability to his or her research, and also addressing that bias, can make the author’s work more trustworthy. I am not sure if I can do that, honestly, but I think I would be more willing to read such material knowing about it beforehand.

Pascal: Despite the unique title, I found the reading particularly enlightening in the author's ability to be vulnerable. This is a rare characteristic in research writing. Most authors don't easily shine a light on their insecurities, weaknesses, or personal information. Adriaan Van Klinken does the exact opposite.... Reading Klinken's [sic] work made me question my own vulnerability. I have realized that it is a trait I rarely practice. It takes courage and dedication to be vulnerable sine it allows others to see your weakness and it can be hard to deal with their judgment. From now on I am going to dedicate myself to continuously developing a mindset open to vulnerability. I want to do this because vulnerability elevates honesty above all else. It allows you to fess up when you have made a mistake, rather than relying on deceit.

Clarice: I also felt the impact of the author discussing his HIV status near the end of the article (page 7/8). He proposes the irony of having studied the endemic, African moral taboos, and a queer lifestyle as an African to in turn become HIV positive most likely from a queer, African man. I would say I was surprised (unexpected, but I had no harsh reaction to his disclosure) but I appreciated his honesty, especially since he expects honest [sic] and vulnerability from those he interviews on equally personal matters. It makes me wonder about other connections I have to my field of study outside of simply sharing a deep rooted heritage or physical similarities. What is my connection to religion or violence since those are categories and sub-categories of the things I have studied? I am unsure how to answer that question right now, but it is food for thought.

Pierre's entry is exemplary of early movement toward empathy, as he began to connect the experiences of others to his own interests, as varied, seemingly random, and superficial as they appeared. Charlotte came to the reading already thinking about others, discovering in the process a greater personal ability to respect that growth and apply the lessons from that book to classroom experiences. Angelique took that a step further, as did Pascal, in applying those skills directly to the research the students were conducting and demonstrating a more advanced form of empathic connection. Clarice, finally, pushed even further and connected not only to her research but then also through that back to larger societal ills regarding racial, religious, and ethnic difference. Even at this early stage in the semester, student growth was apparent in their writing.

Working longitudinally along the semester axis indeed reveals growth among the students in even greater relief than the anecdotes above. Andre, Jean, and Marc were exemplary in this respect, though all of the students demonstrated some growth over time.

Andre, Journal 1: The source of my empathetic deficiencies most likely stem from past experiences that led me to become more closed off when it comes to dealing with emotions.

Andre, Journal 14: I have come to realize that I am indeed empathetic to the plight of others and am protective of those who are being targeted. The caveat is that I have very little empathy to self-inflicted misfortune.... I believe it is everyone's personal responsibility to recognize and remedy their faults without the expectation that others will be there to lift them up and fix the problems.

Jean, Journal 2: Through the intellectual reflection, I traced my interest in history back to elementary school.... Two of my character traits pushed toward history as an academic major: curiosity and creativity.

Jean, Journal 14: I would take a more personal approach to empathy, however. In the [future occupation], we train in cookie-cutter responses to solve interpersonal conflicts. I feel constrained to a specific question. Like a simple work flow chart, I will ask another question depending on that answer until I can deflect responsibility of the individual. A more personal approach would increase both efficiency and effectiveness but that requires months of relationship building at the start.

Marc, Journal 2: My interests are split between both mechanical devices and a love of history, and to find a topic that is not overused but still interesting is my goal.

Marc, Journal 10: With the days counting down faster and faster it seems like the limited time I have to either make an impact or leave a legacy of something of myself here begins to weigh on me. While legacy and leaving an impact is not everything there is in life, it has certainly been a goal of mine to leave those behind me better than I was or at least pass on what I have learned. History is a great way to do this, as historians will always be studying the past.... However, it seems hollow to wrap all of one's dreams up in a tangible vessel that moth and time can destroy; memories are a far more impressionable but long-lasting way to leave your mark on someone.

Each of these students began with relatively simplistic descriptions of their own abilities and interests, becoming more sophisticated in their expression of empathy by the end. Andre, the same student who drew Charlotte's gaze earlier as a potentially close-minded person, grew a more nuanced understanding of connection as he extended his views to the plight of others and even began to build an approach that he might apply to others over time. Jean took his growing capacity for empathy as a form of knowledge and compared it to bureaucratic processes that might be useful in helping others to grow as well. Finally, Marc demonstrated enormous change, from a simple statement of academic interest to complex metaphorical expressions of legacy that moved across time, space, and memory as a more lasting form of societal change. Empathy, expressed differently in all cases but also occurring at scale across the students in the course, grew demonstrably in all available measures.

Concluding Thoughts

The capstone history course was successful for the students. Marc reflected simply: "It helped me set myself up for the future and understand where I want to go." Pierre pushed that thought even further: "I learned that my personal life and academic life were actually a lot more connected than I thought. Now I feel a little bit freer, a little bit more aware of myself." In general, they found the opportunity for reflection necessary, enlightening in a variety of ways, and worthy of expansion in the future. Adeline was the most explicit in recommending an expansion of autoethnographic reflection beyond the capstone and beyond the major. Considering experiences in courses as

diverse as astronautical engineering and French, she wrote in her 12th journal, “I know that if I had really thought and reflected in a meaningful way about my academic journey when I was a freshman, what I would have written then would have been so different from what I’ve written this semester ... my favorite classes at USAFA have been taught by professors who challenged me to connect personally to the subject.” While I am skeptical of the depth of reflection that a university professor could honestly expect from a first-year student as Adeline proposes, she nonetheless does raise a few important points. First, this approach has strong potential in virtually any discipline, as all undergraduate majors build from a foundation toward a standard disciplinary or in some cases pre-professional expectation at the end of the sequence. Second, the historical discipline is particularly well-suited to empathetic development because it requires analysis and consideration of the lives of others, even if separated by decades or centuries. In Adeline’s mind, the self was the key connecting element enabling learning and the growth of caring for others.

At the same time, Adeline hints at a secondary problem that potential teachers of this technique should consider. When confronted by a discipline foreign from their passion, as in her astronautical engineering example, students tend to lose interest quickly and focus their energies elsewhere when possible. Consequently, professors must carefully cultivate an environment of student-centered discussion and experience, whereby students take personal responsibility early and feel accountable to themselves and to each other. The change in student attitudes will occur gradually and will often appear first in writing and only later in discussion. The intimacy of the written word permits these deeper and more honest reflections before the student is ready to share that stance with a wider group.

Indeed, those intimate writings and discussions are crucial to the success of the technique, as students must connect with a disciplinary exemplar (the professor), the research subject matter, and their fellows in the course. Scalability is thus a potential challenge to the technique, as applying this effort to a large lecture hall of hundreds of students would be impossible for the professor to manage. At larger universities, those massive meetings would have to break into smaller discussion sections, permitting the students to recognize and act on the shared sense of disciplinary journey that is so important for a successful intellectual and emotional exchange. Further research into the precise techniques to make this movement across scales of student groups is necessary, as the stakes are high. Building a more responsible and empathetic leadership core in the United States and beyond depends at least in part on the willingness of universities to put students in a situation to learn the value of others by understanding themselves.

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The views expressed in this work are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the US Air Force Academy, the United States Air Force, or the Department of Defense. Any errors that remain are mine. This research was authorized by the US Air Force Academy IRB as project #FAC20220101E.