

TEACHING TO CONNECT

Tying Reflection to Empathy Development in Civic and
Community Engagement Education

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"We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness" –Thich Naht Han

Background

I have a colleague who once told me that he believed the greatest threat to humanity was our willingness to "turn away." "Everyone has that racist, classist family member who says hurtful, bigoted things at dinner over the holidays- I mean, you know what I mean, right? We hate that guy! We don't like what he says or respect him for saying it, but we have that tie- he's family. We can't fully turn away from him because he's family. But that's the thing," he said "if someone isn't family, we feel entitled to turn away, and in turning away, something significant is lost." To me, that willingness to turn away is toxic. When we don't turn away- when we instead see ourselves as intrinsically and inextricably connected, and find ways to navigate difficult relationships and conversations through holding on to our common humanity- that is what it is to develop and possess radical empathy.

Having worked in the field of civic engagement in higher education for nine years, and as an active participant in the work as an undergraduate student, I developed a tremendous affinity for and commitment to community engagement work. As I began work on my undergraduate thesis in Communication Arts, a mentor and friend pushed me to consider a topic that had significance to me personally. She said, "If you are going to take on this type of work, you should consider researching something you truly care about." Naturally, this advice came to mind when considering a research topic for this class. Measuring empathy outcomes for students intentionally engaged in communities is not a gauge that is highly regarded in my field, and not one that will likely move provosts and university administration to allocate funds to the offices facilitating this work. Despite that, it is a measure that I believe is important- as a practitioner, as a formerly engaged participant, and as a human being seeking connectedness in my own life.

As a student I got many things out of my 1800 hour service commitment through the Bonner Scholars Program. Among these benefits were the opportunities to confront issues around social justice, civic identity, diversity, spiritual exploration, community building, and much more. Considering my most transformative take-away's, one stands out as having the largest impact on my life: empathy. My sense of connectedness to the larger community and work was fostered, deepened, and expanded tremendously through the experiences I had and the stories I was privileged to have had others share. My ability to connect with others was tied organically and inextricably to a sense that their situation and my own could not be viewed as impossible to exchange- a sense that I could feel with them in new and extraordinarily deep ways. As a practitioner facilitating this experience for other students, I now see them developing a similar sense of connectedness that goes beyond friends, or even acquaintances, to strangers and populations they have never met. In my experience, students who engage in communities in a program that pairs community and civic engagement with active reflection are more capable of demonstrating radical empathy in the face of difference; a skill that feels critical to creating more just, equitable, healthy communities. It is this significant sense of impact that draws me again and again to this topic, as I continue to strengthen my articulation of empathy development in my own experience, and in the ways I teach.

Given my experiences and interests around empathy development through community engagement work, I am naturally left with many questions around these topics. Through this report I hope to explore several of these questions as I walk you through the research I have done around empathy, community engagement, and the reflective practice that I believe may connect the two. While the work of this project has left me with more questions than answers, I will focus this report on the

following guiding question: What role might reflection play in the development of empathy through civic and/or community engagement in higher education?

Understanding Empathy

Empathy is an extremely complex concept- one that has been defined and debated across multiple disciplines for as long as it has been utilized. In their work on examining the development of the term and its use, Eisenberg and Strayer summarize well the difficulty of defining the term effectively saying, "Empathy has been defined as 'the capacity for participating in, or a vicarious experiencing of another's feelings, volitions, or ideas and sometimes another's movements to the point of executing bodily movements resembling his' (Websters Third New International Dictionary, 1971). ... a further implication [of this definition] is that empathy is a complex state, the existence of which is judged on the basis of indirect evidence" (Eisenberg and Strayer, 38). What they begin to explore through their work is that empathy is perhaps best defined by our ability to point to moments of its employment, rather than our ability to use language in a way that can recognize its significance in so many fields and lived experiences.

In my own work, I have often thought of empathy as the notion that ones own sense of peace, justice, and equality is tied up with that of others. In other words, empathy calls us to put our own emotions and securities in line with those of all people- a deeply vulnerable sense of connectedness. Eisenberg and Stayer share their own definition. "In our view, empathy involves sharing the perceived emotion of another- "feeling with" another. This vicarious affective reaction may occur as a response to overt perceptible cues indicative of another's affective state (e.g., a person's facial expression). Or as the consequence of inferring another's state on the basis of indirect cues (e.g., the nature of the other's situation)." (Eisenberg and Strayer, 5) These indirect cues are what I am most interested in within the context of this research. In other words, I am less interested in a students' ability to feel sad when they see someone else crying, and more interest in their ability to feel emotionally moved and transformed by knowledge of the incredibly diversity of human experiences.

Empathy's Many Faces

Given what we know of empathy and its complex development and definition as a term and as a concept, it becomes difficult to image the possibility of measuring clearly the development of empathy in ourselves, let alone in another person. As Eisenberg and Stayer, as well as others, have thoughtfully pointed out, we can often get glimpses of empathy in individuals through gleaning other aspects of the term. Terms like "connectedness," "circularity," "interrelatedness," "feeling with others," and the like, have all been used to describe empathy.

Seeking to understand the development of empathy, I found myself limited by the published literature in terms of what I could find from those who assembled their knowledge of empathy from the context of engaging in community work. In light of this, a move to personal interviews of colleagues and mutual friends who I thought might have something to share on the subject became necessary. A brief survey was developed and I conducted both sit-down interviews and the collection of written responses (see appendix 1). Respondents were from colleges and universities of varying size and institutional commitment, and individuals ranged from professional facilitators to relatively new participants. What they universally communicated was a significant and pervasive understanding of the ways reflective practice in civic and community engagement contributes to ones development of a sense of connectedness and empathy. Responses were remarkable. "Knowing another person's story can help you connect to him/her." (Menkhaus Interview). "Critical sharing of viewpoints and perceptions upon which a greater sense of community and understanding is build" (Kibler Interview). "I feel more

connected to them, and it reminds me of the importance of human connection.” (Mistry Interview). “Reflection, when prompted with openness and relationship, affirms connectivity, interrelatedness, reliance on one another. It also allows for us to connect experiences to what has gone before, and what may potentially come after. Reflection allows for perception of continuity, circularity, process oriented interpretation of experience.” (Clerkin Interview).

The responses to the questions related to connectedness and empathy stopped me in my tracks. After years of ruminating on the perennial question “... or is it just me?” about my own development of empathy through this work, I suddenly had emails and conversations flooding my inbox and my mind from others who shared this significant development in their sense of self and community. As I began to allow empathy to show itself through its many faces- connectedness, interrelatedness, and the like, suddenly offered me the freedom to explore the development of empathy in a way that was more authentic to my own work, as Eisenberg and Strayer suggested.

Community Engagement and Reflection

Community engagement is yet another term that has many definitions and iterations on a national and international scale. That said, it is thoughtfully defined by the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) below:

"Community engagement describes collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. The purpose of community engagement is ... to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good." (NERCHE)

This widely accepted definition is useful in demonstrating the type of work that students complete through community engagement, particularly in that it highlights the reciprocal partnership and facilitated learning through classroom reflection and academic connections in disciplines like sociology, psychology, interdisciplinary studies, and beyond.

A leader in our understanding of the significance of reflection in community engagement work is Janet Eyler, who says, “While there is not much research in the service-learning literature that specifically addresses techniques of reflection, evidence from studies of problem-based learning, situated cognition, and cognitive development suggests approaches to reflection that will enhance the power of service-learning in attaining these important goals which facilitate full community participation.” (Eyler, 517). This perspective is considered paramount in the field, where I have heard the (dry) joke offered “What’s the dash in service-learning? ... the reflection!” Reflection is understood as the element that ties service or community engagement and learning of all kinds, including the learning related to course goals, and the learning related to community participation, sense of self, and other psychosocial outcomes. Particularly interesting to me in Eyler’s view is what she identifies as “facilitation of full community participation,” as it seems to suggest outcomes related to connectedness and community in its artful word choice.

Reflective Practice Done Well

Our general understanding of reflective practice in education, particularly as it relates to academic community engagement, has been largely informed by the work of John Dewey. Janet Eyler gives nod to Dewey in her own work noting “Dewey’s (1933, p. 9) notion of reflection as ‘persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it

and the further conclusions to which it tends' is a standard rarely met." (Eyler, 523). For the sake of simplicity and wide applicability, many in the field of service-learning and academic community engagement have come to think of well executed reflective practice in terms of the "Four C's," which point to the significance of reflection as continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized (Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede, 1996). In recent years, we have also come to see the significance of reflection as being a practice done in community, rather than in isolation, noting that not only can exclusively individual reflection contribute to falling short on achieving student learning outcomes, but that, in fact, it can be counter-productive to these goals (Park and Millora).

In considering the practices that are most useful, and perhaps most likely to foster the sense of connectedness or development of empathy which I am trying to understand through this project, I once again turned to individual interviews. Strategies that both practitioners and participants shared as feeling productive and useful in achieving thoughtful engagement included setting aside an explicit time and place (Clerkin), demonstrating and fostering mutual openness to sharing (Mistry), having a facilitator skilled in "unpacking" situations and experiences (Mistry), beginning with individual reflection and moving to group sharing (Menkhous, Mistry), employing varying approaches for varying learning styles (Ferber), and engaging in well-research practices such as critical Incident Journaling (Elrod). These practices, which emphasize both self-inquiry and development and the significant inclusion of group processing, align well with what literature points to as best-practices for serving as the metaphorical bridge between service and learning.

While many outcomes are known to be developed by reflective practice in community engagement including those tied to academic success (Eyler), student retention (Eyler and Giles), and even some preliminary work suggesting psychosocial outcomes (BTtP), much of the work on student outcomes remains unexplored. In order to get a preliminary sense of the experiences of practitioners and participants, I included a question on perceived outcomes of reflective practice in my interviews. The feedback was, once again, extraordinary. "Reflection, when prompted with openness and relationship, affirms connectivity, interrelatedness, reliance on one another. It also allows for us to connect experiences to what has gone before, and what may potentially come after. Reflection allows for perception of continuity, circularity, process oriented interpretation of experience." (Clerkin). "The best reflections I have ever participated in included individuals admitting their ignorance, being genuine, and being able to say that they may disagree with someone, but are able to respect and love them. Ultimately, that unpacking would hopefully lead another student to another conclusion or a want to share their experience, thus continuing the discussion and reflection." (Mistry)

Future Work

Given what I have been able to research and articulate on community engagement, reflective practice, and the development of the many faces of empathy in its participants, it is useful to summarize what exactly it is that we now know. Increasingly, the connection between community engagement and empathy development is gaining clarity. With strong known outcomes of reflection related to empathy, and with reflection so clearly tied to community engagement work and its outcomes, I can say with growing confidence that the link seems to exist. What has largely informed this claim is not just the framework from existing literature and frameworks, but also by the impactful interviews with individuals with whom I have worked, and also those conducted with those with whom my own friends and colleagues work. What they universally communicated was a significant and pervasive understanding of the ways reflective practice in civic and community engagement contributes to ones development of a sense of connectedness and empathy.

As we explored earlier in the paper, the term empathy comes with an extremely complex and fluid definition and history. It is understood differently in many disciplines, and comes to develop its own definition and use even in the limited scope of my own work. This raises important questions

around finding a definition that suits my work, or perhaps choosing a term that seems to more specifically align with the type of connectedness or collective spirit that I am trying to capture. Exploration of this work, including which of these two paths would be most appropriate, will require significant more research both on empathy's many definitions and their usage, and on what it is exactly I am trying to capture in my research around connectedness.

I would like to see, or perhaps facilitate, future research in both of these areas the form of surveys or focus groups. Once a clear definition or more suitable term is selected, I would like to explore research around the element of causation in the link between empathy or connectedness and community engagement. Additionally, while we have a strong sense of best practices for reflective practice in general, it remains unclear which of those practices are most closely tied to empathy development. In a recent article, based on Roman Krznaric's "Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It", which considers the question of our ability to teach empathy, a hopeful claim is made; "The good news is that almost everyone can learn to be more empathic, just like we can learn to ride a bike or drive a car." (Krznaric). He goes on to assert from his research that practices like making a habit of "radical listening," looking for the "human" behind everything, and becoming curious about strangers (Krznaric), can all be tools we use to teach empathy. The more I come to understand about each of these practices, the more clearly I can imagine their integration in existing reflective practice, as well as in the possible new strategies that can be developed.

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Appendix 1

Interview/Written Response Questionnaire

Introduction: As a community-engaged learning practitioner, I have become increasingly interested in effective reflective practice, and the outcomes it can facilitate. In particular, I am interested in the ways reflective practice helps participants to develop a sense of connectedness and empathy. While there is a growing body of research around the possible psychosocial outcomes of community engagement, there has been little published on the development of empathy and connectedness, two products which I myself have both experienced in my personal work and seen others experience in my professional work. In light of this, I am interested in your experiences as a participant and/or practitioner in this work so that I may begin to look for casual trends or connections, and perhaps significant differences in our experiences.

- 1) *Tell me about a time when you participated in reflective practice has been particularly useful?*
- 2) What does it feel like for you as a participant when reflection is well facilitated? What makes it well facilitated?
- 3) In your experience as a facilitator, how do you ensure that you get the space for reflection that you value?
- 4) What do you feel that you, personally, gain from reflection?
- 5) What helps you to feel connected to others?
- 6) As a practitioner, what do you think reflection facilitates in community engagement work?
- 7) Where have you seen these outcomes in your own experience?
- 8) What psychosocial outcomes have you seen tied to community engagement work?