

Writing Pedagogies of Empathy: As Rhetoric and Disposition



Eric Leake

Abstract: Empathy is attracting increased attention within and beyond the academy. In this essay I review relevant theories of empathy and their place within rhetoric and composition. I propose two approaches to teaching empathy: as rhetoric and as disposition. A rhetorical approach incorporates a necessary critical awareness of empathy's enticements and limitations, while a dispositional approach cultivates empathy as a habit of mind. I argue that writing pedagogies of empathy as rhetoric and disposition are ideally suited to combine the cognitive and affective, critical awareness and practice, to inform not only our engagements with texts but also with one another.

At Northwestern University's 2006 commencement, Barack Obama, then a U.S. senator, took to the lectern. He told the graduates that among the most important qualities he learned in college, one they also should cultivate, is empathy. "There's a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit—the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes; to see the world through those who are different from us," he said. Obama's phrasing of an "empathy deficit" is unfortunate, as it suggests more empathy is needed rather than better empathy, but the empathy that he describes holds promise. In calling for the cultivation of empathy and connecting that to the civic goals of higher education, Obama added his voice to a growing emphasis on the teaching of empathy. A decade later, advocates for teaching empathy champion its potential to address everything from bullying to social inequities, from bridging differences and to promoting prosocial practices. In this essay, I take up the question of teaching empathy for rhetoric and composition. What is the significance and value of empathy in the teaching of writing? And if we are to teach empathy in composition, how might we do so in full awareness of empathy's enticements and limitations?

I begin with an overview of the calls to teach empathy within higher education and then propose two complementary approaches to teaching empathy: as rhetoric and as disposition. To teach empathy as rhetoric is to make apparent the ways empathy works to create meaning and how it moves us. A necessary component of teaching empathy as rhetoric is the practice of a critical empathy that is aware of empathy's limits. To teach empathy as a disposition is to teach prosocial habits of mind that are rooted in our work with texts but with the potential to extend beyond the writing classroom. It is to teach writing in ways that develop more empathic practices and tendencies in how we understand and respond to one another. These approaches—empathy as rhetoric and as disposition—reinforce one another, as a rhetorical awareness of empathy and the practice of critical empathy help keep empathic dispositions accountable. I ground these approaches in classroom applications and argue throughout that writing is uniquely suited as a technology for teaching and cultivating empathy.

Defining Empathy

First, however, it is useful to review definitions of empathy. A full accounting of the definitions and history of empathy, going back to the German *Einfühlung* ("feeling into") and sympathy before that, is beyond the scope of this essay. Empathy is a complicated subject with definitions that vary by field. Part of the appeal of teaching empathy may be the ambiguous nature of the concept: Empathy works as a generally unopposed positive term that connotes caring for others and understanding diverse views. Yet this is one of the liabilities of empathy, because teaching empathy can connote these values without explicitly defining them or how they might be enacted.

Empathy has yet to be fully theorized within rhetoric and composition, although its affective and cognitive

components correspond to current concerns in the field. Some of the more useful concepts of empathy for a pedagogical application come from psychology, for how it establishes processes of empathy; and philosophy, for how it considers the value of empathy. Across disciplines, empathy typically involves cognitive and affective ways of understanding. It often includes a move to perspective-taking so that one might be more aware of how the world looks and feels to somebody else with a different personal history and in a particular situation. Developmental psychologist Martin Hoffman, a leading theorist of empathy, defines empathy as “an affective response more appropriate to another’s situation than one’s own” (4). One of Hoffman’s modes of empathic arousal is perspective-taking (“[i]n which one imagines how the victim feels or how one would feel in the victim’s situation”), so that his definition of empathy includes a cognitive component in the form of perspective-taking (5).

Philosopher Amy Coplan similarly defines empathy as “a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person’s situated psychological states while maintaining a clear self-other differentiation” (5). She elaborates upon that definition by explaining,

To say that empathy is “complex” is to say that it is simultaneously a cognitive and affective process. To say that empathy is “imaginative” is to say that it involves the representation of a target’s states that are activated by, but not directly accessible through, the observer’s perception. And to say that empathy is a “simulation” is to say that the observer replicates or reconstructs the target’s experiences, while maintaining a clear sense of self-other differentiation. (5-6)

Coplan’s definition is notable for its precision and for the inclusion of self-other differentiation as a necessary feature of empathy. I highlight this feature of Coplan’s definition because it is missing from so many shorthand definitions of empathy as simply seeing an issue from another’s perspective or putting oneself in another’s shoes. The problem with those understandings of empathy is that they do not recognize the limits of empathy and the easy collapse of self-other differentiation when another is recast in the likeness of the self. At the same time, empathy relies upon some recognition of a self-other overlap for the possibility of understanding another. This tension between differentiation and overlap makes all the more necessary a critical practice of empathy, one informed through rhetorical awareness of empathy as a persuasive force that is situational, purposeful, and built upon identification.

Calls for Teaching Empathy

Empathy has found its way into the curriculum for social workers to understand clients, doctors to demonstrate a more effective bedside manner, and elementary students to be more considerate classroom citizens. Many of the broader calls for teaching empathy are based upon its social and civic functions. No less an authority than Hoffman writes, “To me, empathy is the spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible,” echoing Adam Smith’s idea of sympathy as a force of social cohesion (3).

The growing imperative to teach empathy within higher education makes it an important consideration for composition. Empathy is prominently identified as a key value in the “Framework for Twenty-First-Century Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement,” part of the report by the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. According to the task force, “The kind of graduates we need at this moment in history need to possess a strong propensity for wading into an intensely interdependent, pluralist world. They need to be agile, creative problem solvers who draw their knowledge from multiple perspectives both domestic and global, who approach the world with empathy, and who are ready to act with others to improve the quality of life for all” (23). They add, “Another name for these graduates is democratic citizens.” The task force connects empathy to respect for human dignity, the engagement of multiple perspectives, and moral discernment. Similarly, in *Engaging Diverse Viewpoints: What is the Campus Climate for Perspective-Taking?* empathy along with perspective-taking is presented as “a crucial catalyst for intellectual and moral growth” (Dey et. al., ix). The report is part of the Core Commitments initiative by the Association of American College and Universities. The report’s authors write, “Enhancing one’s knowledge by attending seriously to differing perspectives and developing respect and empathy for others’ views even in the face of disagreement must, therefore, remain a bedrock element of any college education” (ix). These reports focus upon the ways that college education might make for a more pluralistic, tolerant, and cohesive society. They seize upon empathy as a key quality in producing any such society. Unfortunately, the reports do not provide much instruction in how to develop empathy, and they offer a fairly general conception of empathy as recognition of human dignity and the consideration of the viewpoints of others, similar to Obama’s description of empathy. Nonetheless, I include the reports here mainly because they illustrate the value placed upon empathy as a pedagogical and democratic goal. Since composition courses are at the core of the contemporary college curriculum, instructors of those courses would do well to be aware of how empathy is being evoked as a pedagogical goal.

A more developed call for teaching empathy toward democratic ends can be found in the work of Martha Nussbaum,

which informs the AACU report and is relevant to composition because Nussbaum focuses on the humanities in general and work with texts in particular. She argues for the need to educate world citizens who can understand cross-cultural differences. “A graduate of a U.S. university or college ought to be the sort of citizen who can become an intelligent participant in debates involving these differences, whether professionally or simply as a voter, a juror, a friend,” she writes (8). Nussbaum links such an education to the cultivation of humanity and in particular three capacities: the ability to think critically, the ability to see oneself as bound to others as a citizen of the world, and the ability to think beyond factual knowledge and engage the narrative imagination. Nussbaum describes that last ability, which is the practice of empathy, as “the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have” (10-11). This imagination is not uncritical, Nussbaum argues, because it is accountable and informs judgments about ourselves, others, and our worlds. Nussbaum locates these abilities within the tradition and mission of liberal arts education, particularly the teaching of literature.

Not surprisingly, Nussbaum’s argument has found some sympathy within the humanities, where advocates emphasize the civic promise of empathy, particularly narrative empathy, as a reason to study art and literature. Through this emphasis, reading and studying literature becomes a way to develop empathy and teach toward a more inclusive and civic-minded democracy. The idea that the humanities help develop empathy and civic participation can be alluring, especially at a time when the humanities are viewed as under siege. This allure makes Suzanne Keen cautious, however. “It would be comforting to believe that links between novel reading, empathy, and altruism or committed action in favor of human rights really exist,” Keen writes (xxi). “The fact that cultural authorities insist upon these connections just as reading becomes a minority pastime activates my skepticism as much as my concern...” (xxi). Keen is not ready to credit novel reading alone as cultivating empathy and, by extension, altruistic and prosocial actions. She does, however, allow that pedagogy may make a difference. “Conscious cultivation of narrative empathy by teachers and discussion leaders could at least point toward the potential for novel reading to help citizens respond to real others with greater openness and consciousness of their shared humanity,” she writes (147). Keen’s focus is on the narrative imagination in reading and responding to fiction. A composition approach to teaching empathy as rhetoric and disposition may hold even greater potential and has yet to be adequately developed.

Teaching Empathy as Rhetoric

Dennis Lynch notes that “Empathy used to be at the center, at the heart, of rhetorical studies” (5). It should still be. Empathy fell out of favor due to its liabilities, such as the conflation of self with other and the tendency for empathy to serve the interests of the more powerful. Empathy can elide differences and take the place of more meaningful action, such as when “I feel your pain” works as a responsibility dodge. Hoffman outlines many of the biases to which empathy is prone, including proximity and familiarity biases, which lead us to empathize with those closest to and most like us.

However, as rhetoric and composition has foregrounded questions of identities, affects, bodies, and the possibilities and barriers to understanding amid differences, empathy has regained relevance. Empathy corresponds with Kenneth Burke’s theories of identification and consubstantiation, central to persuasion. As Burke describes identification, “You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (55). Lisa Blankenship proposes the idea of “rhetorical empathy,” which she defines as “a way of extending Burke’s identification by entering into the experience of the Other using appeals based on emotion and personal connection. Rhetorical empathy functions as an inventional topos and a rhetorical strategy, a conscious choice to connect with an Other, and also as an unconscious, often emotional, response to the experience of others” (2). Her “rhetorical empathy” can function as “strategic essentialism” that flattens differences in order to invite identification in the service of larger persuasive purposes (4). Lynch argues that empathy is useful not in spite of the questions that it raises but because of them. Laura Micciche makes a similar observation in singling out empathy as especially suitable for interrogating the interactions of emotion and reason. (Another article in this issue addresses empathy, including the blocks to it and the problems it creates, in writing classrooms engaged in writing with off-campus communities.)

Teaching empathy as rhetoric has broad application as a suitable means of more closely examining the personal, social, and rhetorical functions of reason, emotions, and judgments. Empathy can be a means of invention, a heuristic, a way of considering audience and situation, an instrument of revision, and a tool for critical analysis. Teaching empathy as rhetoric attunes us to its all of its possible uses and liabilities as a means of persuasion.

One of the ways that empathy is most commonly evoked in rhetorical studies and textbooks is as a mode of belief, reception, listening, and understanding. It is presented as an attempt to enter an argument from the perspective of another. What a pedagogy of empathy as rhetoric does is help make apparent—and therefore open to analysis,

critique, and more purposeful use—the ways in which empathy is employed rhetorically with a particular audience and purpose and in a particular situation. A pedagogy of empathy as rhetoric builds upon other rhetorical pedagogies in which arguments are constructed and analyzed. The most important of these is a revised notion of listening, as explored by Rogerian rhetoric and Krista Ratcliffe's concept of rhetorical listening.

Rogerian rhetoric may be the most widely taught form of empathy as rhetoric because of how easily its restatement principle can be employed and how distinct it is from formal argumentation. Rogers identified empathic listening, or listening with understanding, as a potentially transformative means of communication. To listen with understanding, or empathically, Rogers writes, “means to see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about” (qtd. in Teich 29). The potential that Rogers sees in empathic listening demonstrates the power that such a rhetorical positioning can have in facilitating communication and as a means of connecting to another, showing goodwill, attempting to enter another's perspective, or, perhaps more problematically, feigning any of the above as a means of gaining rhetorical advantage. Rogers' approach is especially useful in writing pedagogies because Rogers focuses so much on techniques, such as the suspension of judgment and the restatement of another's position to the other's satisfaction. I should add, however, that Rogers developed his approach in a therapeutic context for personal change in interpersonal relationships and did not intend for it to become a rhetorical strategy used for persuasive purposes. When asked in an interview with Nathaniel Teich what he thought about using Rogerian principles to win an argument, Rogers said, “I regard that as quite the opposite of my thinking. And I also regard it as a perversion of my thinking” (55). Still, that original intention of use has not kept Rogerian rhetoric from being taken up in composition pedagogies.

The Rogerian approach to rhetoric is comparable to Krista Ratcliffe's concept of rhetorical listening and Peter Elbow's believing game. Ratcliffe proposes a rhetorical mode of invention and understanding—what she calls “standing under”—that, like the Rogerian model, resists the urge to make counterarguments and quick judgments. Ratcliffe argues for a wider type of listening, almost as immersion, in which the listener attempts to go beyond claims to approach context and values and perhaps common ground. She writes, “If we recognize not just the claims but the historically-grounded cultural logics enveloping other people's claims, we may still disagree with the claims, but we may better understand the personal and cultural assumptions (dare I say, values and beliefs) that guide other people's logics” (209). In attempting first to understand another's context, values, and background, Ratcliffe is advocating a type of empathic awareness.

To really understand somebody else, we have to attempt to understand where that person is coming from. This is a broader view of empathy that requires us to attend to differences not only in positions but in personal histories, cultural contexts, and individual preferences. Elbow's believing game also can be seen as a method of analysis, as a different kind of critical thinking. Elbow compares his believing game to what he calls the doubting game, which is more prevalent in the academy and wider culture. Explaining the difference, Elbow writes, “Often we cannot see what's good in someone else's idea (or in our own!) till we work at believing it” (2). Elbow's believing game—which he calls methodological belief—relies upon experiences and emotions and inhabitation as well as propositions and formal logic to test an idea. In the ways that it relies upon these qualities it utilizes empathy, in a manner that can be taught for the purposes of understanding and responding to arguments. To be fair, Elbow distinguishes his approach from a Rogerian one when he writes that the believing game is not just withholding judgment and restating another's position but is instead actually trying to believe what the other person is saying, which is moving from a position of understanding to one of shared belief. Neither Ratcliffe nor Elbow argues for simple and noncritical acceptance. Empathy in this use is not a suspension of critical engagement but of suspending rejection prior to understanding. It requires humility, receptivity, and openness.

The Necessity of Critical Empathy

Missing from many conceptions of empathy as a mode of listening, understanding, or believing is a larger critical awareness of empathy; this critical awareness is a vital part of any pedagogy of empathy. As mentioned, empathy is prone to biases. It has been criticized for serving the interests of the more powerful. As Amy Shuman writes, “Empathy offers the possibility of understanding across space and time, but it rarely changes the circumstances of those who suffer. If it provides inspiration, it is more often for those in the privileged position of empathizer rather than empathized” (5). This form of empathy resembles pity and can serve the interests of the empathizer by confirming his or her desire to be considered a compassionate individual without changing the circumstances of the person empathized with. For example, to empathize with the less fortunate without acting to change the systems that position them as less fortunate only acts to preserve inequalities and future occasions for empathy. Empathy also can serve a colonizing agenda when the empathizer starts to remake the empathized in his or her own image or begins to assume too much about what is known, because we can never have full access to another's point of view.

In that sense, empathy is always at best an approximation of understanding. It is this risk of colonization through empathy that concerns Theresa Kulbaga as she explores Western conceptions of the Middle East, which can serve as justifications for conquest in the name of human rights. The question critical empathic readers should be asking themselves, Kulbaga argues, is “empathy to what end?” (518). This question forces a critical empathy that recognizes empathy is rhetorical in producing effects and that also prompts questions about who gets to empathize with whom, how so, and why.

Todd DeStigter advocates for the practice of critical empathy, which he defines as “a process of establishing informed and affective connections with other human beings, of thinking and feeling with them at some emotionally, intellectually, and socially significant level, while always remembering that such connections are complicated by sociohistorical forces that hinder the equitable, just relationships that we presumably seek” (240). Likewise, Min-Zhan Lu proposes working in solidarity toward social justice through a process of “critical affirmation,” which she describes as acknowledging the “yearning for individual agency shared by individuals across social divisions without losing sight of the different material circumstances which shape this shared yearning and the different circumstances against which each of us must struggle when enacting such a yearning” (173). Lu’s critical affirmation, a term she borrows from Cornel West, works as a form of critical empathy because it looks for common cause in human yearning while also maintaining awareness of significant differences in circumstances. For the practice of critical affirmation, Lu identifies “writing, especially personal narratives, as a site for reflecting on and revising one’s sense of self, one’s relations with others, and the conditions of one’s life” (173).

The practice of critical empathy is important because it addresses the liabilities of empathy and allows for the critique of empathy. Empathy is prone to exploiting differences in circumstances and social positioning. It tends to give the empathizer the benefit of the doubt when ignoring differences and presenting interests, those of the empathizer and the empathized, as converged. Its emphasis on a shared humanity, which is a core feature of the possibility of empathy, can function as what Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes describe as a “flattening effect” in “emphasizing commonalities that prevent us from perceiving and analyzing critical differences” (431). “In the process,” they write, “the ‘other’ is tamed as a knowable entity.” Critical empathy, on the other hand, starts with a recognition of unknowability. Like Lynch’s “rhetorics of proximity,” which invite identification while at the same time frustrating that identification by estranging and noting differences, critical empathy asks us to attend to questions of dissimilarity and to the interests served by empathy and the conditions under which empathy is evoked. In those occasions when empathy is used to speak in the place of another, a critique of empathy can reestablish the value of the original voice.

Teaching Empathy as Disposition

Writing pedagogies often aim to develop habits and dispositions, as is evident in the “habits of mind” forwarded in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project. In order to understand what teaching empathy as a habit of mind or a disposition in writing might look like, I turn to the cognitive schema criticism of Mark Bracher and psychological theories of empathy, most notably those of Hoffman and C. Daniel Batson. They develop empathy as a psychological process that writing teachers with social justice orientations might adopt to affect habits of mind not only in relationship to texts but also to others.

Empathy is appealing in part because of its potential to change people and how they relate. Rogers speaks to this potential in describing his approach to communication, specifically in a therapeutic setting:

It (listening with understanding) is the most effective agent we know for altering the basic personality structure of an individual, and improving his relationships and his communications with others....We know from our research that such empathic understanding—understanding *with* a person, not *about* him—is such an effective approach that it can bring about major changes in personality. (qtd. in Teich 29)

Rogers’ attention to changes in personality support the possibility of developing empathy as a disposition through pedagogy. A pedagogy of empathy as disposition aims to cultivate empathic habits in students through the ways they read and write and interact with texts and one another. Bracher focuses on literary studies but with a social justice application that also cultivates dispositions and is relevant to writing pedagogies. Bracher combines a psychoanalytical background with work in cognitive studies to focus upon cognitive script formations—basically, the ways in which people learn habits of perception, interpretation, and response to certain stimuli, such as their environment and others—as a way of teaching literature for social justice. The idea is essentially that by instructing how people read others and the world in literature, and by distinguishing “faulty appraisals” from those that are less

so, teachers of literature might also instruct students in how to better appraise and read their world. Bracher's pedagogy emphasizes empathy as a disposition by focusing on cognitive habits rather than strictly on content. As he explains,

I hold that the contribution of narrative empathy to social justice lies not in its production of sympathy for the suffering of fictional characters but rather in the fact that each experience of narrative empathy contributes incrementally to the development of more accurate and comprehensive information-processing scripts, which then subsequently generate not only feelings of sympathy but also ameliorative actions in response to real subalterns outside the text. (375-376)

Bracher's push for social justice aligns with other efforts to broaden the people and populations for whom we feel empathy. He asks that we examine the factors that lead to or limit compassion. He advocates a pedagogy that attempts to reform the cognitive schemas that contribute to faulty appraisals of responsibility to the sufferers for their own suffering alongside a failure to account for other influences, such as social and environmental factors. Bracher argues that the appropriate corrections can be made by educating students about schemas, as practiced in their reading; helping them identify faulty and harmful ones; and then pushing them to construct and practice more adequate schemas as replacements. Bracher acknowledges that his pedagogy is value-laden, but no pedagogy is value-neutral. Besides, he contends, an individual or atomistic understanding does not jibe with the reality of social conditions. The ways of reading Bracher emphasizes include greater attention to the importance of context in an individual's plight, attention to human suffering, to the common humanity characters and readers share, and recognition of the responsibilities characters have to one another and that readers have by extension to those in real-life situations similar to the situations of the characters. The key is not only attending to the content but in the ways that we think about the content so that we might apply that thinking beyond the text. While Bracher's pedagogy is focused on literary interpretation, the attention to cognitive schemas and work with texts suggests writing pedagogies would be similarly effective.

C. Daniel Batson et. al. find that "inducing empathy for a member of a stigmatized group can improve attitudes toward the group as a whole"; that "these feelings can be stimulated by taking the perspective of a person in need, imagining how that person is affected by his or her plight"; and, most significantly, that "inducing empathy may be a potent and valuable technique for creating more positive responses to the stigmatized of society" (1656). Their research supports the hypothesis that feeling empathy for a member of a stigmatized group can lead one to help that group and that such empathy may be best engaged through perspective-taking, such as that practiced in discursive writing. Their study is essentially a rhetorical one in which students read about another's perspective through other-focused role-taking and then determine how to allocate relief funds. Extended to the writing classroom, the study suggests that empathic ways of reading and writing might translate to more empathic ways of understanding the situations of others and more altruistic actions in response. The study is related to Batson's larger work in establishing the empathy-altruism hypothesis, which suggests that greater empathy leads to a greater likelihood of altruistic and prosocial actions. Cultivating empathy as a disposition through writing pedagogy might then foster a greater inclination towards prosocial action and altruism in students, or at least that is the hope.

While outlining psychological processes of empathy, Hoffman also warns against empathy's biases. In basic terms, we most readily empathize with those with whom we have the most in common. Hoffman describes as "egoistic drift" the tendency for the affective dimension of empathy to become increasingly concerned with the self, resulting in a loss of empathic connection (56). One way to address this bias is to expand one's experiences and to become more familiar with a wider variety of people and perspectives. Such increased familiarity has been credited with promoting social progress. An additional response to the familiarity bias is what Hoffman terms "multiple empathizing," which is a sort of empathy jujitsu in which bias is turned against itself (297). Hoffman suggests that instead of asking a person to empathize with a stranger, we might instead ask that person to empathize with a family member or close friend in the stranger's position. For example, instead of trying to imagine what it is like to be unemployed, a student might instead imagine how his or her father would feel were he suddenly unemployed. Such an exercise in multiple empathizing also could help the student avoid making what Bracher would identify as a faulty appraisal in blaming the father's unemployment upon his own laziness or other character deficiencies. Instead the student could focus more on social and economic conditions and personal history. As Hoffman writes, "Empathy's familiarity bias makes one less likely to empathize with a stranger; what better way to counter that tendency than to transform the stranger into a person one is close to" (297). Employing a multiple empathizing approach in teaching writing requires changes in phrasings, prompts, and rhetorical positioning, but doing so could contribute to significant differences in how people respond to others and other situations in writing.

Much of empathy is determined by how we read and write the world, is mediated by language and rhetoric, and is concerned with our relationships to one another. All of this informs how a pedagogy of empathy as disposition might be put to use in the writing classroom. As Bracher, Batson, and Hoffman demonstrate, even subtle changes in the

wording of an assignment can have larger consequences in developing habits of empathy by changing the perspectives that students take and how they position themselves in their writing. These habits become ways of reading and writing and understanding others, with greater potential for prosocial orientations. More so than the pedagogical strategies proposed in teaching empathy as a rhetoric, strategies for teaching empathy as disposition make use of the cognitive and affective potentials of attempting to inhabit other perspectives through reading and writing. They ask us to attend to situations and circumstances and recognize shared vulnerabilities. They also include a social justice agenda based upon the hypothesis that teaching toward greater empathy, not just as a cultural value but as a disposition informed by writing and rhetorical practices, might contribute to a more just world.

Empathy in the Writing Classroom

One way to incorporate pedagogies of empathy in the classroom is through the selection of texts that students encounter and how they work with them. The best texts are those that both invite and frustrate identification in the manner Lynch describes as employing a “rhetoric of proximity.” Lynch analyzes texts by Temple Grandin and Cornel West, both of which demonstrate how the experiences of a woman with autism and a black man in America invite but also resist identification given their experiences, histories, and situations. Another strong candidate is Leslie Jamison’s *The Empathy Exams*, in which she reflects upon the challenges of empathic identification and the ways in which it can fall short. These texts offer a critical empathy reading because they force readers to acknowledge the appeal and limitations of empathy. At those moments when readers might feel most comfortable identifying with the authors, these texts foreground differences in how people experience the world. Their reading easily leads to the types of questions that foster practice of critical empathy. The key is not only in the selection of texts but in how those texts are read and interpreted.

Empathy may be used as a means of rhetorical analysis. Many advertisements, particularly political ads, rely upon empathic identification. An empathic analysis assignment might ask students to examine the ways empathy is used to garner the viewer’s support, for example, or persuade the viewer to donate to a cause, such as a charitable campaign. Analyses could focus on the many modes of empathy to include what is said as well as what is seen and felt through images and music and the representations of bodies and relationships. Many students are already intuitively aware of the moves advertisements make towards identification. Working in the rhetorical analysis of empathic appeals can help them employ and resist such moves while also recognizing the ways empathy can be used to erase differences and to serve particular interests.

Empathy is a powerful means of invention. Any writing assignment that asks a student to imagine the position of another, and to do so critically, is employing empathy. Hoffman identifies two types of perspective-taking: self-focused and other-focused. In self-focused perspective-taking the observer imagines how he or she would feel were he or she in the place of the other. In other-focused perspective-taking, the observer pays attention to any available personal information about the other—including facial expressions and body positions, past experiences, personal preferences and history—and imagines more directly how the other feels. These slight differences in perspective-taking positions have significant effects. Self-focused is more affectively powerful for the observer than is other-focused, although both produce more intense feelings than does objective positioning. Writing teachers could lead students through self- and other-focused invention exercises in order to appreciate diverse perspectives on an issue. To do so critically they would also need to acknowledge the limits of perspective-taking, since it is an exercise in invention rather than a means of accessing what another person thinks and feels. Teachers could ask students to compare self-focused and other-focused perspectives to see how they imagine the positions of others, and they could employ Hoffman’s concept of “multiple empathizing” as an additional mode of invention.

In a pilot study I had students write essays in response to objective prompts and to prompts that first asked them to engage in multiple empathizing perspective-taking. I then coded the essays for the types of empathic moves students made in their writing. The results of the pilot indicate that while both objective and perspective-taking prompts produced moves of *content* empathy, in which students referenced the social dimensions of issues and the humanity of others, the perspective-taking prompt produced greater moves of *relational* empathy, in which students expressed recognition of self-other overlaps or an inclination toward altruism. For example, in expressing content empathy a student might write that we should not blame the homeless for being homeless. In expressing relational empathy, a student might observe shared vulnerabilities and write that were circumstances different, a member of his or her family could be homeless. One is a statement about the conditions of empathy, and the other is a demonstration of empathy. This suggests that perspective-taking activities, and multiple empathizing in particular, affect the ways students position themselves and relate to others in their writing. With instruction, repetition, and reflection, these ways of relating have the potential to become dispositional.

Empathy can have great utility in classes concerned with the interpretation of literature and the work of creative

writing. Bracher and others outline full pedagogies for teaching literature in a manner that uses concepts of empathy in the service of social justice. I wish to add just a couple of ideas that pair creative and critical assignments with reflective writing toward the same ends. I have asked students to write character extensions in response to a work of literature, such as a collection of short stories. Students then had to pick a character from the work and write a short story that extended that character by providing background or continuing the character past the limits of the work, just as fan fiction often does. Students had to write an accompanying essay that demonstrated how their extension was grounded in the details of the text. I found that students most commonly chose to extend the character that most resembled themselves, and so a variant of this assignment might ask students to reflect upon why they chose that character they did, how they identified with that character, or it might ask the students to write about a character that did not so much resemble themselves, again asking them to reflect upon the limits of their identification. Because empathy is useful in writing fiction as a craft (Keen, for example, addresses many of the ways that empathy is employed in literature), I have asked creative writing students to write a story that employs concepts of empathy to inform the reader's experience, perhaps by inviting, limiting, or frustrating reader identification. Students then had to write an accompanying essay in which they reflected upon how they used those concepts of empathy and for what purpose. These assignments are just two illustrations of how empathy may be employed in writing while also asking that the writers reflect upon the use, limits, and purpose of such employment.

Finally, empathy is a powerful concept for invention, analysis, and reflection in personal writing. Students might write personal essays that explore challenging moments of empathy as empathizer or the person empathized with. They might consider empathic biases by identifying in a particular text or situation the person they are most and least likely to empathize with and why. Often attention to omissions of empathic consideration, to the people not automatically or easily extended empathy, can be the most instructive. To give them some experience in writing about other people and experiences, I had students interview and write profiles of classmates. They then reflected upon how they chose to write the profile and, more significantly, their experience reading another's representation of themselves in their partner's profile. These experiences draw their attention to details and representations in how readers are invited to understand and empathize with others. Such writing is always practiced with a critical awareness of empathy through reflection. When repeated, that attention to critical empathy can begin to inform a class ethos so that students might be more attendant to the perspectives of their classmates and others and more aware of how empathic biases can begin to obscure differences. I offer these assignments not as models—because I am always trying to improve upon them—but as ideas for how empathy might inform work in the writing classroom. Writing is uniquely positioned to engage empathy through invention, analysis, and critical reflection.

Why Empathy and Why Us?

A 2010 study by Sara Konrath caused some media alarm. She found empathy to be on the decline among college students since 1970 and especially since 2000. For her part, Konrath did not seem too concerned. "The good news is that empathy is not 'destroyed' or 'under siege,'" she wrote. "Instead, empathy may be sick." Diagnoses of a "sick" empathy are not uncommon. Many educators have echoed Obama's call for teaching empathy as a way of addressing the social challenges of the new century. These calls themselves are important. As Daniel Gross notes, part of the value of rhetoric is that it asks why we study certain issues and ask certain questions at certain moments. "Such work is not just descriptive but prescriptive by way of its mere presence and reiteration," Gross writes (59). "One message of the moment is 'empathy matters.'" Why does empathy matter now, and how does it matter to rhetoric and composition?

I expect one reason so many people are turning to empathy now is because we are concerned about the fragility of social relations and understanding, in our local communities and across the world, while we witness international conflicts, refugee crises, and the fracturing of our communities among multiple lines of division and violence. Empathy, as Hoffman suggests, is supposed to be the glue that helps societies cohere. The wish of many calling for pedagogies of empathy is that if we can teach empathy we might find better ways to understand one another across our substantial differences. Here, a critical empathy is especially important, however, as performances of empathy can be as readily employed to attempt to erase differences as to acknowledge and understand them. Without critical practice, the burdens of empathy can be shifted to the less powerful, so that their experiences are silenced as they are made the target of another's well-meaning but unreflective empathy and are asked in turn to empathize with the more powerful. Rhetoric and composition has an important role to play here in supporting the critique of empathy and the practice of critical empathy. These practices can start in the writing classroom, where positions, relations, and habits are most open to examination and revision through reflective writing with others.

Some of the current advocacy of empathy also suggests a fear that we do not fully understand one another and a desire for an easy fix. Simply teaching empathy should not be promoted as that easy fix. The practice and teaching of empathy, as rhetoric and as disposition, requires balance, and a critical awareness of empathy requires that we be

okay with not fully understanding one another so long as we are engaged in the work of understanding and of valuing one another with a respect for our differences and the unknowable. Empathy should be recognized as both worthwhile and always incomplete. The practice and questioning of empathy seem to be exactly what DeStigter has in mind with “critical empathy” and Lu with “critical affirmations,” engagements that knowingly take risks.

Another reason that pedagogies of empathy may be of interest now is because they speak to concerns of morality. Empathy and emotions in general are part of moral considerations. They alert us to issues of moral significance, and they help inspire moral actions. Or at least that is the hope, stated in the full title and throughout Hoffman’s major work on empathy, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*. Hoffman proposes a mechanism through which empathy activates guilt, guilt that inspires prosocial actions such as altruism, caring, and a concern for justice. He argues that empathy can be taught. Rhetoric and composition also has given attention to morality. I am thinking here of John Duffy’s recent argument that rhetoric and composition would do well to move beyond a postmodern ethics of critique and instead look to the rhetorical tradition for a greater concern with virtue. “We need, I submit, a language that will maintain our critical commitments but emphasize equally an ethics of affinity, solidarity, and empathy,” he writes (218). Duffy argues that the navigation of human relationships is already a part of the teaching of writing. “To teach writing is by definition to teach ethics; more specifically it is to teach what I call ‘ethical dispositions’” (213). Duffy opens his essay with an accounting of the deplorable state of public discourse, and for a current example we need only look to the 2016 presidential election and calls to blame victims, delegitimize the experiences of others, and incite violence. Ethical dispositions, such as empathy, are proposed as a way of helping establish the discipline’s purpose and possibly interceding in troublesome discourses like these.

At the center of all of these discourses are individuals and individual bodies. Some of our current disciplinary interest in empathy is related to renewed consideration of these individuals and of emotions and bodies. Empathy in general seems to bring together many of the so-called “turns” in the field—the turns “affective,” “social,” and “material”—as ways of more fully understanding persuasion beyond the well-established limitations of appeals to pity and formal logic. Meaning and persuasion are created and transmitted in part through the emotions, as Micciche and Lynn Worsham have long recognized. Worsham’s call that “our most urgent political and pedagogical task remains the fundamental reeducation of the emotions,” is as pressing today as ever (216). Pedagogies of empathy as rhetoric and disposition offer an opportunity to educate the emotions at the juncture of the cognitive and the affective, the personal and the social, where emotions can be investigated, held accountable, and put toward action. Such pedagogies at their best hold the promise of contributing to social justice.

Rhetorics of empathy are already at work in the world. Teaching to and about them is a way of recognizing that work and of being better able to engage it. Pedagogies of empathy as disposition ask that students not only be more aware of how they read and write others and themselves but also that they try to cultivate those habits for prosocial ends. We in rhetoric and composition, given our critical practices and pedagogical strengths, should seize upon the valuable opportunity presented amid task force reports and growing concerns that “empathy matters.”

Works Cited

- Alexander, Jonathan, and Jacqueline Rhodes. “Flattening Effects: Composition’s Multicultural Imperative and the Problem of Narrative Coherence.” *College Composition and Communication* 65.3 (2014): 430-454. Print.
- Batson, C. Daniel, Johee Change, Ryan Orr, and Jennifer Rowland. “Empathy, Attitudes, and Action: Can Feelings for a Member of a Stigmatized Group Motivate One to Help the Group?” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28.12 (2002): 1656-1666. Print.
- Blankenship, Lisa. “Rhetorical Empathy in Dustin Lance Black’s 8: A Play on (Marriage) Words.” *Present Tense* 3.1 (2013): 1-8. Web. 1 Sept. 2015.
- Bracher, Mark. “How to Teach for Social Justice: Lessons from Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Cognitive Science.” *College English* 71.4 (2009): 363-88. Print.
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1950. Print.
- Coplan, Amy. “Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects.” *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*. Eds. Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie. New York: Oxford UP, 2011. 3-18. Print.
- Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, and National Writing Project. *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2011. Web. 5 Jan. 2016.

- DeStigter, Todd. "Public Displays of Affection: Political Community through Critical Empathy." *Research in the Teaching of English* 33 (1999): 235-244. Print.
- Dey, Eric L., Molly C. Ott, Mary Antonaros, Cassie L. Barnhardt, and Matthew A Holsapple. *Engaging Diverse Viewpoints: What is the Campus Climate for Perspective-Taking?* Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2010. Web. 5 Jan. 2016.
- Duffy, John. "Ethical Dispositions: A Discourse for Rhetoric and Composition." *JAC* 34.1-2 (2014): 209-237. Print.
- Elbow, Peter. "The Believing Game—Methodological Believing." *The Selected Works of Peter Elbow*. 2008. Web. 20 March 2009.
- Gross, Daniel M. "Toward a Rhetoric of Cognition." *Neurorhetorics*. Ed. Jordynn Jack. New York: Routledge, 2013. 53-61. Print.
- Hoffman, Martin L. *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.
- Jamison, Leslie. *The Empathy Exams*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014. Print.
- Keen, Suzanne. *Empathy and the Novel*. New York: Oxford UP, 2007. Print.
- Konrath, Sara, and Edward H. O'Brien and Courtney Hsing. "Changes in Dispositional Empathy over Time in American College Students: A Meta-Analysis." Presented at the Association for Psychological Science Annual Convention, Boston, May 27-30, 2010. Web. 28 Aug 2010.
- Konrath, Sara. "The End of Empathy?" *Psychology Today*, 20 June 2010. Web. 26 Aug 2010.
- Kulbaga, Theresa A. "Pleasurable Pedagogies: Reading Lolita in Tehran and the Rhetoric of Empathy." *College English* 70.5 (2008): 506-21. Print.
- Lu, Min-Zhan. "Redefining the Literate Self: The Politics of Critical Affirmation." *College Composition and Communication* 51.2 (1999): 172-194. Print.
- Lynch, Dennis A. "Rhetorics of Proximity: Empathy in Temple Grandin and Cornel West." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 28.1 (1998): 5-23. Print.
- Micchiche, Laura R. *Doing Emotion: Rhetoric, Writing, Teaching*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2007. Print.
- The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012. Print.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997. Print.
- Obama, Barack. "Obama to Graduates: Cultivate Empathy." Northwestern University, 19 June 2006. Web. 11 Jan. 2016.
- Ratcliffe, Krista. "Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretive Invention and a 'Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct.'" *College Composition and Communication* 51.2 (1999): 195-224. Print.
- Shuman, Amy. *Other People's Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005. Print.
- Teich, Nathaniel, ed. *Rogsonian Perspectives: Collaborative Rhetoric for Oral and Written Communication*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1992. Print.
- Worsham, Lynn. "Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion." *JAC* 18.2 (1998): 213-45. Print.

"Writing Pedagogies of Empathy" from *Composition Forum* 34 (Summer 2016)

© Copyright 2016 Eric Leake.

Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

 SHARE    ...

Return to [Composition Forum 34 table of contents.](#)

Composition Forum is published by the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition with the support and generous financial assistance of Penn State University. *Composition Forum* ISSN: 1522-7502.