

Empathetic Communication: A Creative Writing Pedagogy for Inspiring Compassion

I want to inspire my students to become writers who change the world. This may be overly-ambitious for a 9th grade English teacher at a small Christian school with only 11 students, but I will fight for my little corner of the world to become as compassionate and gracious as possible in the socially isolated age we live in, (“compassion” being interchangeable with “empathy” in my view). This can only come from instilling my students with a restored sense of empathy. I use the word “restored” because the loss of empathy is a much discussed phenomenon in America and many other technologically-dependent countries. Many point to an erosion of empathy through replacement of face-to-face interaction with digital communication. As this relates to my students, Mangione reports that only 25% of high school students have regular non-school-based interactions with their friends other than through text messaging and other digital formats (para. 3). If they do not see faces and hear voices, their capacity to comprehend or even regard the feelings of others diminishes.

What can one English teacher do to reverse that trend? I can use whatever tools and whatever time I have with my students to encourage them to think critically about their own ideas and emotions and how they differ and align with those of other people. One such tool that is undervalued in our current swing of the cultural pendulum is creative writing. I have observed that as our dependence on technology increases, so does our distance from other people. Conversely, as we increasingly consume media as a form of visual and neurological stimulus instead of as a path to understanding ourselves and each other, our respect for the literary expression of others as a resource for understanding degenerates. I want to teach my students to

care and to write things that make others care. Therefore, teaching creative writing is not just a box to check on the state standards; it is an avenue to illuminating written expression as a way to connect with the lives of people who are different. In short, I believe a pedagogy that instills the value of the product, process, and preservation of creative writing can help foster empathy in young students.

Enjoying the Product

It is an accepted principle of pedagogy that a literature curriculum benefits students beyond just improving literacy. Poetry, plays, and works of fiction expand the imagination and widen the world that the students live in and comprehend. Creative nonfiction can make historical events and differing points of view more accessible and personal. All of these genres share the common trait of building a deeper connection to one's own emotions and the thoughts and experiences of the subjects of the works. Freeman & Phillips found that the act of reading literature develops empathy by strengthening the skill of processing others' experiences (76). Conversely, teachers can guide students to consider disparate points of view in the readings, thus encouraging critical examination of their own pre-conceived ideas against the backdrop of those presented in what they read.

I have found an additional benefit as literary study relates to teaching creative writing. By experiencing the writing of others as a step in teaching them to write, I have found that my students see the emotional and cognitive value of the written word, and their writing becomes more focused on creating pieces that resonate. For example, I recently led my 9th graders through a unit on the poetry of the Psalms. Since I work at a Christian school, there is always a built-in objective of biblical literacy. However, my intent was also to show them the poetic style

of the genre, and how Hebrew poetic devices affect both theology and spiritual connectedness.

After the reading portion, I assigned them the task of writing their own short psalm using

“Hebrew rhyme,” which is essentially repetition and expansion of declarations and imagery.

Rather than just reading Bible verses from 2500 years ago and hearing me lecture about style, the

students were inserting themselves into the role of psalmists. The result was a deeper

appreciation of poetry in spiritual expression and a sense that the students’ own words could help

others understand their faith. In other words, they became part of the millennia-long tradition of

Hebrew poetry.

As much as this exercise was specific to ostensibly Christian students at a faith-based school, the same method could be applied to teaching them to craft pieces in a style from a culture or belief-system that is totally foreign to them. I could bring in works for them to read and imitate that are perhaps distant in their period of origin and are also from another part of the world or another religious tradition. We would examine the pieces not only formalistically, but as expressions of humanity – the stories of people who have hopes, struggles, and beliefs as real and valid as theirs. Hammond & Kim suggest that human minds tend to empathize more with individuals than with large groups, the group being harder to conceptualize concretely (189). In light of this, constructing cross-cultural empathy would begin with building respect for the literary canon of other cultures through reading and discussion of the presented works and the individuals the works represent. Group reading and peer-discussion would be vital, as Hammond & Kim also found that building empathy through literature generally falls short without these steps (191). This is unsurprising since looking at the point of view of an individual portrayed in a work is easier to accomplish through a communion of reaction and interpretation.

After the discussion phase, I could complete the task by asking students to imagine the lives of characters or speakers from the culture we just discussed, and give those subjects a voice through a creative writing assignment. Repeated often enough throughout the course of the year, empathetic reading of literature from any culture or group would likely become second-nature. It follows then that their estimation of literature's power to connect people would grow, and their own writing would be increasingly motivated by that goal. In this pedagogical plan, reading and reasoning about the creative writing of others becomes the foundational footing of a structure of empathetic communication. Good readers become better writers; compassionate readers infuse their writing with the understanding of others they have gleaned from what they have read.

A Process of Understanding

The stones atop that foundation are laid with the process of creative writing. While creative writing is known in ELA circles as the pinnacle of Bloom's taxonomy, its utility for building empathy makes it even more worthwhile, provided that the work is guided toward writing about points of view beyond one's own. Personal writing has become very popular in secondary ELA classrooms, but creative writing ought not stop there. If a writer never goes beyond his or her own outlook, empathy never blossoms. Gordon acknowledges the potential pitfalls of an over-emphasis on personal writing, but asserts that personal writing can be a starting point for a young writer because it hones an understanding of one's interests in subject matter (89). Therefore, a writing teacher should take hold of those interests and ask the student to push beyond the self and into the lives of others.

Gordon cites one of her students as a case study, wherein she asked the student to imagine a character the student would never want to associate with and try to build a story from

that character's point of view (87). This exercise not only makes for more fleshed-out characters, it urges students to consider the human beings behind ideas and behaviors. The emotions of the characters become relatable, even if the characters are detestable. I think that I could take this a step further and create assignments where students have to create characters whose views are repugnant or incomprehensible to them. I would ask them to give the characters motivations that they could relate to emotionally, thus humanizing the views the characters represent. In Harper Lee's classic work, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch offers the author's thesis: "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (39). The act of character development is like sitting down and listening to what one imagines that character has to say. There is no shorter road to empathy than learning to listen.

I embarked on a mission last year to teach my students the art of listening for better communication in a unit I called "Civil Discourse." I shared the Yaqui people's tradition of requiring each person in a disagreement to repeat what the opponent had just said before taking a turn to speak, thus ensuring a habit of listening and clearing up any misunderstandings. I asked the students to choose a topic on which they disagreed and employ this listening technique. The majority reported after the unit that they felt a radical improvement in their ability to empathize with the other person. Extending the importance of listening into their character creation would provide the same service to the students as they sought to understand where their characters were coming from. Therefore, creative writing exercises designed around empathy would likely help students broaden their understanding of others through the process of attaching recognizable motivations to otherwise unrelatable people.

Freeman & Phillips found evidence to support this in their work with medical students whose efforts in creative writing were meant to strengthen empathy toward patients in their future medical practices. The students were asked to write a reflective essay and then discuss their pieces. The results were noteworthy: “the self-reflective processes and actively engaging with the perspectives of others ensured students were able to enhance their critical thinking skills” (Freeman & Phillips 80). The researchers further discovered that the writing was only half the process. The full benefit in building empathy came in hearing the reflections of other students (81). I conclude from this that an empathetic communication pedagogy would best take the form of a peer-to-peer workshop environment.

I think my approach would consist of a structure for each creative writing assignment beginning with interrogation and reflection, then moving to creating characters and speakers from differing points of view or ways of life, writing the piece including those perspectives, and then concluding with sharing with a partner or small group for a discussion. The digesting of what the other students have written would multiply the number of perspectives being considered. Flick asserts that many writers seek out experiences such as police ride-alongs and spending time out in a city to absorb and then disseminate the lives of people they encounter (9). The empathetic communication workshop would be a personal, face-to-face classroom version of that same effort.

Preserving the Connection

In addition to the components of imparting the value of literature and the necessity of considering others' viewpoints in their writing, the final piece of the puzzle would be to guide

the students toward seeing written works as a heritage in need of preservation. As they read the literature of others and craft their own, I would reinforce for them how creative writing serves to connect them to each other, to outside cultures, languages, and ideas, and to the past and future. I think empathy is a perishable commodity. Time makes us forget – languages and traditions disappear; past suffering which informs present outlooks gets recontextualized or diminished by shifts in popular thought. Reading and writing about varied experiences and viewpoints renews the bonds of compassion for other people who may have known the world differently. Forna insists “lost narratives must be retrieved, those that have been omitted, replaced. We must continually repeat ourselves” (37). The stories of our collective experience must be protected, passed on, and reiterated when necessary to maintain the ties that keep the human family talking to one another.

Putting It into Perspective

It is impossible to deny there has been a degradation of genuine discourse in our present age. Some blame politics, others point the finger at technology, and in recent years, COVID has been the go-to villain. Whatever the confluence of driving factors may be, people have stopped listening, ceased reading and considering, forgotten how to think critically and compassionately. Poetry, prose, and other forms of creative written expression have long been the aid to understanding. To my mind, a creative writing pedagogy that works to revive due respect for literature, imbues the process of writing with “walking around in another’s skin,” and seeks to engender a desire to ensure writing continues is the best course a teacher can take to foster empathetic communication in the next generation of young writers. Is it idealistic? Yes. Am I a Pollyanna? Probably. But even if I reach one student who goes on to write something that

inspires someone to look at others with compassion, then I have helped that student to change the world.

Work Cited

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