

## Demonstrating Empathy for Students

Whenever I teach a new course, I share my higher education journey with my students. I tell them how I didn't become serious about earning an art degree until I turned 40, when I had an epiphany: I'd fallen in love with photography and suddenly realized that I could leave the soul-crushing career I'd created for myself and become an art professor ... if only I had an MFA. I continued as a full-time entrepreneur while earning my BFA, which was exceptionally difficult. Then I moved to New Orleans to pursue my MFA. Of course, that meant I had to close my business. Graduate student stipends don't go very far, so in the summer I drove a street sweeper, sanitizing the streets of the French Quarter and Central Business District in the heavy heat and humidity of pre-dawn Louisiana. After this I moved to Texas to pursue my PhD, where I also needed supplementary income. During the first summer, I worked as a heavy equipment operator for a demolition company. The next summer, I took a job power-washing gas stations overnight. Imagine the scene: it's midnight, it's 105 degrees outside and even hotter in my truck, and I'm spraying a mixture of boiling water and disinfectant on hot concrete. As grueling as these experiences were, I stuck to my path, going straight through from BFA to PhD in just eight years. I tell students how difficult it was and that I often wanted to give up. Then I invite them to share their stories with me. "What's been hard for you?" I ask. "How are you overcoming the challenges you face?" Sharing my story opens the door to a much deeper conversation than if I'd led with my questions. Students know how difficult their own journeys have been, so realizing that I've also faced challenges to being there in that room with them makes me seem more human, more approachable, and more empathetic.

Empathy is what paves the way to develop interpersonal connections, which are the primary source of purpose and meaning in our lives. Indeed, we have a powerful neurobiological need to feel connected to our fellow humans. This isn't easy. For connections to happen, we have to be willing for others to see us, to know us for who we really are. Connections happen in those moments of honesty, when we share a part of our hearts and the other person responds, "Hey, me too! I thought I was the only one."<sup>1</sup>

Our students have taken a significant risk just to enroll in college, laying their entire future on the line. Their hope of graduating into a well-paying career might be their entire family's last best chance at a brighter future. So, they enter our classrooms burdened with this knowledge, then they look at us, standing at the pinnacle of our careers, and they feel inadequate and unworthy by comparison. "How can I ever accomplish that much?" they wonder. That's why I share my story. If I can do it, so can they, I tell them. I express my belief that each and every one of them is worthy, valuable, and capable of success. And I pledge I'll stand by them and support them in whatever ways might be needed.

Furthermore, our job as faculty necessarily involves a power differential. We judge students' performance on assignments and assessments, so they naturally fear they won't measure up to our expectations. It takes a great deal of courage for a student simply to raise their hand in class, since they risk being ignored or told they're wrong. Our feedback on assignments carries an impact, for better or worse. We can convey our belief in their ability to succeed while we also inform them of areas for growth and improvement, or we can focus only on the mistakes and discourage them. Perhaps the most dramatic example is found in the group critiques that art students experience, which are among the most emotionally demanding events in higher education. At a critique, student artists don't only share their artwork – they put their entire self-concept on display because they routinely pour their hearts and souls into their works. (Who among us wouldn't find this intimidating?) When we express negativity towards their work, students may well perceive our words as a denunciation of who they are, not just dissatisfaction with some aspect of the artwork. Any of our students, regardless of the discipline they're pursuing, might perceive a bad grade as a personal condemnation. We think we're evaluating

their performance, but it feels to them as though we have rejected them as human beings. This is particularly true of our most vulnerable students: those who have suffered the trauma of being on the receiving end of racism, poverty, classism, homophobia, and other negativity associated with their identity. They think, “I’m not good enough. It’s not okay to be who I am. I don’t belong here.”<sup>2</sup>

Let’s conduct a little thought experiment. Think about your days as a student, as far back as you can remember. Was there a teacher or other adult in the school who said or did something that was so humiliating, so embarrassing, that it forever changed how you thought about yourself? Conversely, was there a teacher or other adult who believed in you and made you believe in your self-worth when no one else did? I’d wager you can conjure up a name and a face for both questions.

That leads us to the crucial question: which of those teachers do you want to be?

We can use our considerable influence to build our students’ confidence and self-efficacy by demonstrating empathy during our interactions with them. Theresa Wiseman identified four elements of empathy.<sup>3</sup>

1. **Take the other’s perspective** and try to see the situation through their eyes. Set aside your own feelings and reactions.
2. **Put aside judgment** and ask what *you* need to learn or understand about the situation. Appreciate the other person as a unique and valuable human being.
3. **Stay neutral** and try to **understand the other person’s feelings**. Tap into your own experiences to find a way to connect, remembering when you experienced something similar.
4. **Communicate that you understand** using reflective phrases like “It sounds like you…” or “I hear that you…”

It’s very easy to undermine empathy, despite our best efforts. Some common pitfalls<sup>4</sup> are listed below, along with an example. Suppose a student tells you that they just lost their job and are worried about how they’ll survive without any income.

Pitfall	Example	Reason
Telling someone that other problems are even worse than theirs might be.	“My friend was out of work for five years a while back. He’s still trying to pay off all the credit card bills he racked up just for groceries and gas.”	This says their problem is unworthy or unimportant. The student’s unemployment might not be as severe as your friend’s but to the student, it’s just as real and just as worrisome
Telling them to look on the bright side or find the silver lining.	“Well, at least you can sleep late in the mornings now.”	This trivializes their pain. It might even seem like you’re ridiculing them for being worried.
Telling them how to solve their problem or trying to fix things for them.	“You should call my brother-in-law. He’s got a landscaping company and is always looking for summer help. I’ll give him a call and see if we can set up a phone interview for you.”	This avoids recognizing emotion by diverting attention to action. When we act, it precludes or masks what we feel.
Telling them, “I know how you feel.”	“I know how you feel. I was unemployed for a while and it was a really hard time for me. I even had to get food for my family from the community food pantry before I found work again.”	This can come across as patronizing and disingenuous, even if it’s sincere. It turns the conversation to you instead of dealing with the other person’s problem.

If our goal as educators is to facilitate *all* of our students’ academic achievement and career success, demonstrating empathy is among the most powerful tools at our disposal. On that same first day of class, near

the end of the period, I tell my new students, "I'm here because of you. You are my most daring dream. If you're experiencing any kind of problem, just let me know. Catch up with me after class. Send me an email. Text me. I promise, I'll stand by you through whatever it is. I care about you and want more than anything to help you reach for your dreams." Students know I mean this sincerely. I've had many, many occasions to make good on these promises and have never regretted the help I've given to students. Nothing makes me happier than attending graduation and having students introduce me to their parents as the professor who made them believe in themselves. It's a joy beyond measure. It's also something that's within every faculty member's reach, if we make empathy for our students our highest value.

*"This is by far the best professor I have ever had, and likely will ever have. I couldn't ask for a better professor than him. [He] was extremely nice and truly cared about each and every one of his students. He knew that we had other classes and understood the costs of our textbooks. He truly understood how hard college can be. He trusted us and wanted us to refer to him on a first name basis. Additionally, I have never felt comfortable speaking out and taking part of any conversation in a classroom. I'm always too nervous to answer anything professors ask out loud. However, I cannot say the same about this class. Professor Mackh provided the class with an environment that I actually felt comfortable participating in. Taking part in discussions helped me learn so much more than I would have otherwise. After taking this class, I'm sure that I would definitely take another class with this professor if given the opportunity. Bruce, if you're reading this, thank you for a truly amazing semester. You really are the best professor ever. At the beginning of the semester you told us how it was your dream to teach. I'm glad I got to be a part of your dream."*

*~End of Term Survey Comments, Art-1100, Fall 2019*

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Brené. (2015). *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. Avery.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, *ibid*.

<sup>3</sup> Wiseman, T. (1996), A concept analysis of empathy. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 23: 1162-1167. doi:10.1046/j.1365-2648.1996.12213.x

<sup>4</sup> Sahota, A. (2013). *How to Express Empathy – Avoid the Traps!* Agilitrix: High Performance Redefined. <https://agilitrix.com/2013/01/how-to-express-empathy-avoid-the-traps/>