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Narrative

In Someone Else's Shoes: A Collaborative Effort to Increase Empathy Through Instagram & Atticus Finch

SARA HOEVE

Throughout his political career, President Obama has urged Americans to cultivate a sense of empathy. In an interview with *O Magazine*, he argued that Americans were currently suffering from a new type of deficit, a deficit of empathy: "I often say we've got a budget deficit that's important, we've got a trade deficit that's critical, but what I worry about most is **our empathy deficit**. When I speak to students, I tell them that one of the most important things we can do is to look through somebody else's eyes."

In his commencement address to Morehouse College, he again emphasized the need for empathy: "Your experiences... should **endow you with empathy** -- the understanding of what it's like **to walk in somebody else's shoes**, to see through their eyes, to know what it's like when you're not born on 3rd base, thinking you hit a triple. It should give you the ability to connect. It should give you a sense of compassion and what it means to overcome barriers."

In another public statement, Obama suggested that reading might be a powerful tool for impacting empathy development of children across the country: "And so it's books more than anything else that are going to give our young people the ability to see other people. And that then gives them the capacity to act responsibly with respect to other people."

Later, in his farewell address to the nation, President Obama made the following conclusion: "If our democracy is to work in this increasingly diverse nation, each one of us must try to heed the advice of one of the great characters in American fiction, Atticus Finch, who said, '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.'"

In the following narration, I will recount one teaching partnership, and our effort to address student empathy, through a unit that began with the text *To Kill a Mockingbird* and culminated in a digital writing assignment based upon Brandon Stanton's "Humans of New York" photogra-

phy project (blog, website, and Instagram account: see *HumansofNewYork.com*). This unit was created, developed and implemented collaboratively by my colleague Lauren, the classroom teacher, and myself, her instructional coach.

Our Partnership

As an instructional coach, I work as an onsite professional developer, supporting teachers as they incorporate research-based instructional practices, establish yearly professional goals and seek out additional feedback. My relationships with my colleagues are collaborative, rather than evaluative, as we work together to identify interventions, plan curriculum, observe one another and brainstorm instructional strategies.

While there are many types of Instructional Coaches, our district uses the Cognitive Coaching model, in which our coaches are trained in "non-judgmental mediation of thinking" (Cosa and Garmston 12). By asking questions that encourage teachers to think critically about their practice, I facilitated teachers' reflections as they considered context, identified goals and values, and make informed choices for student success. Ideally, Cognitive Coaching aims to produce self-directed persons with the cognitive capacity for high performance, both independently and as members of a community (16).

I was assigned to coach Lauren throughout her first two years in the high school building, which were also her first two years of teaching. After teaching high school English for ten years, I was working as an instructional coach and adjunct professor while completing my doctoral work. Although Lauren and I were at different stages of our career, our backgrounds in English education, similar pedagogical beliefs and Lauren's sense of humor made for an easy, exciting and empowering partnership.

Throughout the course of the school year, Lauren and I met on a monthly basis to clarify her goals, the vision for success, plan for measureable data collection, as well as the teaching strategies necessary for achieving that success.

Following professional development training, we used the SMART framework for her goal planning. The acronym for SMART goals indicates areas of focus in goal-setting: **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**esults-oriented, and **T**ime-bound.

Month #1: Goal Brainstorming

Our initial coaching meeting focused on brainstorming ideas for Lauren's yearly SMART goal. We began by reviewing the current reality in Lauren's classroom in order to identify areas of strengths and needs. By looking specifically at her current classroom context, we were establishing a student-centered focus. Her ultimate goal would not focus on her behaviors, but would aim to see measurable growth in student achievement.

Early in the discussion, Lauren focused on her 9th grade English class, a one-year "English 9" class, taken by all high school freshmen. Lauren chose this class for a number of reasons. First, her teaching assignment included four sections of English 9, so any positive changes to this class would impact the majority of her students. Additionally, since our high school does not track students of varying ability levels, English 9 contains a wide range of learners and Lauren needed ways to differentiate instruction and engage a variety of student interests. Furthermore, Lauren also believed that 9th grade is an important time of transition and change. The skills she could effectively scaffold for her 9th grade learners would support their adjustment to high school and prepare them for the next three years of education.

In this first meeting, Lauren identified numerous areas she hoped to improve. The previous school year, the study of *To Kill a Mockingbird* had fallen flat, as her ninth graders seemed disconnected from the time period and struggled to comprehend much of the text. Next, she shared a desire to cultivate a more empathetic classroom, one in which students would practice more empathy through better listening, thoughtful discussion and collaboration. Finally, she referred to some of the English department goals, which include more student choice in text selection, digital writing opportunities, community-based learning and authentic audience integration into the English curriculum.

At the end of our brainstorming session, a number of goal areas had been identified. Lauren planned to give the list some thought over the next few weeks as she observed and reflected on her learners and the classroom dynamics.

Month #2: Goal Planning

Our second coaching session focused on moving beyond brainstorming and onto creating a framework for the goal. Between our meetings, Lauren spent three weeks observing her students closely. In an effort to better evaluate and gather data, she video-taped each class period and reviewed the footage at home. As we began the meeting, I took notes as Lauren shared her conclusions about the learners in her 9th grade classroom:

"My learners often exhibit self-aggrandizing tendencies, including inhospitable or even hostile behavior toward opinions or perspectives that differ from their own. They often view the world as "black and white," and consider themselves the center. When examining different perspectives, they practice the skills of critique and evaluation without first practicing the skills of listening and understanding."

Because SMART goals are student-centered, I asked Lauren to clarify the changes she wished to see in her learners. Through our discussion, her goal became defined: "My goal is to teach listening and understanding of unfamiliar or dissimilar perspectives as both a skill and a practice of empathy. Rather than immediately moving into evaluation and critique, I would like to teach students to listen and understand first."

Before we could begin planning how to achieve her goal, Lauren described what a successful goal outcome would look like in her classroom. Identifying these indicators of success would be necessary for crafting our approach, but would also be useful when we planned ways to collect data. If our goal work was successful, Lauren imagined the following outcomes:

1. My classroom will be absent of comments that dismiss external opinions simply because of difference (sarcasm, ad hominem attacks, eye rolls, etc.)
2. Students will be able to listen to classmates without interruption
3. Students will be able to employ interpersonal skills that demonstrate respect
4. Students will be able to thoughtfully consider how someone else is feeling
5. Students will be able to remove their own interests and opinions in order to interview, paraphrase, and empathize with someone else's experience

6. Students will demonstrate reflection on multiple perspectives in journal writing, rather than ethnocentric, self-focused writing

Month #3: Assessing Empathy?

Once Lauren had outlined the current reality, identified the focus for change, and created learning outcomes, we began brainstorming authentic assessment models. We quickly realized that assessment and data collection would be our biggest challenges, as we asked: *How could students demonstrate mastery of empathy? How would Lauren assess empathy?* Although educators recognize the value of “soft skills” such as persistence, grit, effort and risk-taking, these elements are difficult, if not impossible to measure quantitatively.

In preparing learners to meet 21st century demands, our assessments began with real world relevance, as we wondered: *Which discipline specific skills require empathy? When do professionals use empathy in the real world? How are they evaluated?* Through our discussions, we searched for situations in which a writer's ability to listen and empathize is evaluated by their audience. Professionally, these contexts often require the writer to represent someone else's story, argument or perspective to an outside audience, such as journalism or research writing. When we framed our outcome in terms of a student writer accurately recounting someone else's story, we discovered a method to assess empathy and deep listening skills. Although our students have plenty of experience writing their own narrative experiences, they had never been asked to tell someone else's story. In order to compose an effective piece, they would have to listen closely, connect emotionally, and consider someone else's perspective.

By the time the meeting concluded, Lauren and I decided that we would assess students' empathy gains by evaluating their ability to listen respectfully, paraphrase another perspective, and accurately tell the story of someone else's experience.

Month #4: Designing the Instagram Project

Although our third meeting helped us visualize forms of assessment, Lauren and I still needed to conceptualize the final writing assignment. Since 21st century writing often occurs in shared digital spaces, Lauren's English department has been working to incorporate more digital writing opportunities in their classroom practices and assignment. Lauren was also interested in using multimodal composition, where her students would be considering their written text, along

with visual images and elements of graphic design. We were attempting to create then a multimodal writing project, following the study of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in which students would tell the stories of others.

Like most of our students, Lauren and I spent a portion of our free time on social media, especially Facebook and Instagram. We both followed the “Humans of New York” (HONY) account, in which Brandon Stanton depicts the realities of New York life through artsy photographs and poignant quotations. Rather than presenting his own life or opinions, Stanton uses his platform to give voice to the nameless strangers he encounters, inviting his twenty million social media followers to deeply listen and empathize with the diverse experiences and unique perspectives of their fellow citizens. Whether the subject's voice is fearful, elated, hopeless, contemplative, or mentally ill, each one is distinct, a testament to the author's ability to listen deeply and accurately represent each story.

Since the HONY Instagram account reflected many aspects of Lauren's SMART Goal aspirations, we conceived a project that would, in many ways, mirror Stanton's work. Lauren formed clear project goals:

Instagram Project Goals

1. Practicing and fostering the skills of empathy and listening
2. Telling stories of unheard voices in our community
3. Learning to use language powerfully and effectively
4. Learning to listen for a purpose
5. Using digital tools to widen our audience

Next, she prepared the project description for her students:

For this writing project, each member of the class will be conducting an interview, transcribing an interview, and choosing parts of their interview to be posted to a class Instagram account. This account will gather the stories, voices, and words of people in the Grandville community and beyond. This project is modeled after the “Humans of New York” project.

Once the project began to take shape, Lauren insisted on the students interviewing someone unfamiliar, rather than their friends or family members. Since we work in a

mostly hegemonic school district, where the students are mostly white and middle class, she encouraged them to seek out different perspectives, finding someone of a different age group, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, religion, or any other identity-defining factor. Interviewing someone they didn't know well also required the students to listen carefully, as they had little context or background knowledge for the interviewee's answers. Finally, we hoped, even in small ways, that our students could do an act of service by giving voice to members of their community, especially those whose voices have been historically underrepresented or silenced.

Month #5: Scaffolding the Learning

In Lauren's SMART goal process, we often approached the process by working backwards. We first decided the outcome we wanted to see in our learners. When we could visualize the end, we were able to design an authentic assessment to measure our outcome and collect data. In our next step backwards, we addressed the scaffolding students would need to complete our assessment. Since Lauren had gathered data from her own observations and video footage, we could make gains between pre-assessment and final product.

Since Lauren decided to implement her goal work during the study of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, she used the character's experiences, quotations and perspectives to introduce students to models of empathy. Next, the students were invited to discuss these questions in Socratic Seminars and Fish Bowls. Both teaching strategies required students to practice the skills as they followed guidelines for respectful listening, paraphrasing a classmate's opinion, and understanding different points of view without judgement.

In addition to the literature study, Lauren worked with the ELA Common Core State Standards for Speaking and Listening (https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/MDE_ELA_Standards.pdf) by practicing responsive listening, scaffolding both preparation and practice for their interviews. Beginning with low stakes topics like curfews or school uniforms, students paired with partners and the "speaking" partner presented their opinions on the debate. Then, the "listening" partner followed Lauren's explicit instructions:

- *Listen first and acknowledge what you hear, even if you don't agree with it, before expressing your experience or point of view.* In order to get more of your conversation partner's attention in tense situations, pay attention first: listen and give a brief restatement of what you have heard (especially feelings)

before you express your own needs or position. The kind of listening recommended here separates **acknowledging** from **approving** or **agreeing**. Acknowledging another person's thoughts and feelings **does not have to mean** that you **approve of** or **agree with** that person's actions or way of experiencing, or that you will do whatever someone asks.

- By listening and then repeating back in your own words the essence and feeling of what you have just heard, from the speaker's point of view, you allow the speaker to feel the satisfaction of being understood (a major human need). Listening responsively is always worthwhile as a way of letting people know that you care about them. Our conversation partners do not automatically know how well we have understood them, and they may not be very good at asking for confirmation. When a conversation is tense or difficult it is even more important to listen first and *acknowledge what you hear*. Otherwise, your chances of being heard by the other person may be very poor.

As students gained more experience, they began demonstrating stronger listening skills and Lauren was able to offer more complex and controversial topics for the discussions. Finally, students used resources such as Brene Brown's TED Talk on "Empathy."

Month #6: The Results

By the end of Lauren's SMART Goal project, an Instagram account "In Someone Else's Shoes" presented the stories of Humans of Grandville, Michigan. Demonstrating mastery of the paraphrasing, respectful listening, and digital writing skills, each of the student posts includes a reflection from someone else's perspective and a photograph of that person's shoes. Together, the account offers both variety and depth in the stories, including the voices of a grandfather struggling with Alzheimer's, a homeless high school student and a "recovering Catholic."

After we spent time reviewing the data we had gathered from student reflections, final projects, and video footage, Lauren identified areas of success in her SMART goal work:

Overall, students have grown in their ability to dialogue respectfully with one another. Throughout the student reflections, I can also see evidence of some thoughtful consideration of the theme of listening and its applica-

tions. Many students commented that they learned more about their interview subject than they expected, or that they came to view their interview subject in a different way. The *Socratic Seminars* were shockingly effective in holding students to a high standard of interpersonal communication and thoughtful discussion. When I compare student discussion before *Socratic Seminars* to discussion during *Socratic Seminars*, I can see a lot of growth in the way students refer to one another, reference the text, and respond to differing perspectives.

While we celebrated the gains made by many of the students, we also discussed areas of the goal work that left her feeling frustrated, the changes she hoped to make for the following year, and what she had learned about herself as a teacher. She explained:

I continue to wonder about how to hold students accountable to the same standard of communication in every aspect of their lives. While students had demonstrated high-level interpersonal skills in the seminars, they did not commonly employ those skills in daily classroom activities. Perhaps I need to be stricter in my classroom management from the beginning, which I hope to change next year. Next year, I would also give students better suggestions and offer more resources for finding an interview subject, especially for students who are shy or don't have wide social circles. Being explicit with expectations would help students gain more from the interview experience and lead to stronger writing. In terms of applying this to my own teaching, I have learned that I can be a little too understanding and flexible when students wanted to interview a youth group leader or someone else they knew quite well. The purpose of this goal was to push students outside their comfort zones, and I need to be more willing to challenge student culture firmly, make my expectations clear, and stick to those expectations.

Final Thoughts: Teaching the Text

While Harper Lee's metaphor for empathy is timeless, literary scholars from Claudia Johnson (1994) to Alice Petry (2007) have criticized the novel's problematic messages concerning race, class and gender. Both in the town of Macomb and in the narration, privilege clearly rests with the white townspeople, including the paternalistic figure of Atticus Finch. Since we were planning to study the novel with a white, middle class student population, Lauren and I were

concerned about perpetuating the subtle racist ideologies, as well as our students' tendency to recognize racism as only overt slurs and a segregated South.

Since we had decided to keep *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a classroom text, it was our responsibility to use a critical pedagogy (Freire, 1968) to help students discuss, challenge and confront the stereotypes and contradictions within the story. We also utilized Michael Macaluso's (2017) framework, which suggests a comparative lens for studying old and new racism. To further contrast racism then and now, a study of *TKAM* could be followed by more recent texts concerning race, such as: Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, Jacqueline Woodson's *Hush*, Walter Dean Myers's *Monster*, or Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely's *All American Boys*.

Yet, if students are to critically approach issues of race, class, gender, or sexuality, they must first be trained in empathetic listening and responding. Only when empathy is present can we truly begin to set aside our own agendas and engage in the experiences of others. Perhaps the first steps towards building that empathy is asking our students to consider a walk in "someone else's shoes."

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