On Teaching Empathy

Frank Shushok, Jr.
EDITOR’S NOTE

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MY GOOD FRIEND SCOTT MOORE ONCE told me that he doesn’t like the common saying, “Let’s agree to disagree.” Instead, he prefers, “Let’s keep disagreeing.” The first statement indicates a discussion is over and that the parties agree to move along, often in different directions. But “let’s keep disagreeing” emphasizes a continued commitment to conversation. Executive Director Cindi Love (interviewed in this issue) says it another way. She believes there’s value in simply “staying in the room” with people with whom she deeply disagrees.

Humanity’s most promising moments are when people listen, empathize, and seek to understand perspective, realities, or experiences that are diverse, unique, and different. It’s not easy; it takes will. When this occurs, however, it’s not unusual for both sides to change. In a time where race, gender, sexuality, and religion, among hundreds of variables, seem to divide us in profound ways, empathy and perspective seeking are necessities for interrelatedness. Without empathy, justice-making and peace-keeping are impossible. So cultivating empathetic practices among ourselves and our students must be among our highest priorities.

A recent study in Personality and Social Review made my heart sink. For decades, social psychologists at the University of Michigan have been administering a standardized test to college students that measures empathy. Based on those results, Sara H. Konrath, Edward H. O’Brien, and Courtney Hsing report that the ability to metaphorically stand in another’s shoes (perspective taking) has plummeted 34 points since 1980. When it comes to the ability to feel and respond to others’ emotions (empathetic concern), student responses have fallen an astonishing 49 points.

It’s a tempting rabbit trail to question the factors contributing to our students’ eroding capacities for empathy, and these hypotheses are worth further exploration. But another trail is equally fruitful. There’s good evidence that our capacity for “perspective taking” or experiencing “empathetic concern” is malleable. In fact, with a little practice, effort, and heightened awareness, we can strengthen our students’ empathetic competence, just like we can support them in becoming better writers, public speakers, or soccer players. No matter the origins of empathic erosion, this good news claims the condition may be reversed.

In this edition of About Campus, you’ll find lots of opportunity for perspective taking. Perhaps we can use this moment to bolster the empathetic capacities of our students and ourselves. As we do, I’m hopeful that more justice and more peace will follow.

With hope,
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