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Empathy for the Instructor: A Reflection of Using Empathy-Based Pedagogy as a Graduate Teaching Assistant

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Introduction

Reflecting on the swift transition between graduate student and instructor, my initial sense of self was primarily rooted in my role as a learner; however, my transition to a Graduate Student Assistant (GTA) brought a new set of challenges and expectations.

The seminar rooms were small and discussion-driven, but instead of intimacy and a rewarding dialogue, I often felt isolated. This isolation was disorienting. Still, I realized it was a necessary invitation to deepen my understanding of the importance of inclusivity and empathy in teaching. It became even more apparent that empathy extended past understanding students' emotions; it's about creating a space where all students, even those who may feel like outsiders, can be heard and acknowledged.

This was an emotionally complex role that often required me to navigate rugged emotional terrain. What had once been a concept I experienced as a student now became a tool I had to wield for both my students and myself. How much of myself could I give without compromising my academic identity? How could I offer empathy without blurring the line between teacher and peer?

These questions, both personal and pedagogical, eventually transformed into a formal inquiry of my own classroom practices. In Fall 2023, I conducted an IRB-approved study in my English 103 (called "Rhetoric of the Mind") composition courses, each with 18 students. The study aimed to explore whether implementing an empathy-based pedagogy—one that explicitly asked students to draw from personal experience and identity—could increase engagement and foster deeper learning, regardless of whether students initially identified with the assigned texts. Through a discourse and thematic analysis of student-generated writing (including free-writes, reading responses, and reflective assignments), I also examined which pedagogical practices including cohort discussions or ungraded reflective writing were the most effective in creating meaningful academic engagement. While this study centered on student outcomes, it also clarified the emotional and professional challenges I faced as both instructor and instructor including balancing empathy with authority, maintaining professional boundaries, and managing the emotional labor of being a teacher while still navigating my academic and personal growth. Now, I'm turning the lens inward as I examine the other side of empathy-based pedagogy through the perspective of the instructor.

What Exactly is Empathy-Based Pedagogy?

Before immersing myself in the discourse of empathy-based pedagogy, I had previously understood empathy through the familiar aphorism of "placing myself in someone else's shoes." Although I superficially navigated that, in practice, it was revealed how little I could manifest those skills. A brief historical review reveals that empathy held its first glimmers in Germany through the term *Einfühlung,* which directly translates to "feeling-into" (Ganczarek 141). However, scholars have understood that empathy is not a unidimensional concept. According to researchers Stewart Mercer and William J. Reynolds, empathy branches out into "ethical, cognitive, emotional, and interactional constituents" (qtd. in Zhang 2).

Building on this disciplinary framework, Anne Dohrenwend's work in empathy-based pedagogy further asserts that empathy involves both affective and cognitive processes, requiring conscious, deliberate effort and skilled listening (1755). Unfortunately, these rhetorical and interpersonal skills are often overlooked in traditional academic curricula and professional settings. This underscores the need for writing pedagogies that actively cultivate empathy and emotional intelligence as integral to rhetorical competence and professional adaptability.

How Did I Teach it?

As a GTA, I quickly learned that applying these strategies was not always straightforward. I needed to adapt them to meet the unique dynamics of my students and the challenges of my dual role. In turn, I was inspired by Natalya Hanley's clear framework for implementing empathy in the classroom, with a formulaic breakdown of three steps: empathetic listening, participation, and behavior (82–3). I was drawn to these steps because they mirrored the four branches of emotional intelligence: (1) perceiving emotions; (2) using emotions to facilitate thought and other cognitive activities; (3) understanding emotion; (4) managing emotion in self and others (Salovey and Grewal 192). Of these, teaching empathetic listening was one of my classroom's most complex yet important tasks. Empathetic listening is understood as "a process of gathering, proceeding, and learning information to understand another person's perspective, which is different from the story from one's perspective" (Hanley 82). Empathetic listening already assumes that students maintain an open predisposition to different perspectives. Without this openness, effective empathetic listening is nearly impossible.

The reality of today's classroom underscores a broader issue: some students lack the practical skills needed for empathetic engagement, or even basic listening skills. Classrooms, once a space for dialogue and connection, may now feel marked with quiet disengagement. Slowly, I have observed that small talk and casual conversations were diminishing. Given this shift, I found myself asking: how could I, as a graduate student assistant, teach my students the importance of empathy, humanity, and meaningful connection…when genuine listening did not seem like the norm?

Fortunately, my pleas were answered when I came across a didactic article by Jennifer Borek, recounting their experience teaching and evaluating practical listening skills. In her piece, she claims that “[g]enuine reflective listening is not an accident. It takes effort, self-control, and patience. It means controlling the desire to be in control and to force one's perspective on the other party. Listening is half of all communication. It is a part of communication from which we learn and during which we demonstrate respect and build trust” (Borek 5). Many instructors assume that behaviors like note-taking or eye contact signal engagement, but these alone don’t foster the deeper listening essential for empathy.

There were moments when the classroom felt resistant to empathy-based practices. Despite my best efforts, many students seemed unwilling to engage often due to a lack of confidence or reluctance to display vulnerability. As a GTA, I struggled with how to handle these moments. However, rather than viewing these emotional responses as a concrete barrier, I recognized that emotional intelligence lessons, particularly the second and third branches, would help my students deepen their empathetic listening skills. The second branch suggests using emotions to “facilitate thought and other cognitive activities,” while the third refers to “understanding emotion” (Salovey and Grewal 281). In the classroom, this meant encouraging students to use their emotional responses as tools for deeper reflection and understanding of others’ perspectives. For example, I would prompt students to consider how certain issues made them feel and how those emotions could be used to better understand their peers' viewpoints.

Similarly, rather than maintaining a lecture-style classroom that enforced an authoritarian dynamic, I shifted into the role of a facilitator, guiding classroom discussions and encouraging active student participation. I found that smaller and more intimate spaces for discussion, such as cohort groups and community blog posts, broke the ice. While these practices are common in composition pedagogy, I found that my own inflection lay in accentuating vulnerability from both roles in the classroom: student and instructor. I made a point of modeling uncertainty and reflection in our discussions and blog posts, which seemed to give students permission to do the same. Over time, I saw a shift: students began to engage more openly, not just with me but with each other. The shift was not immediate, but when students started to listen actively and participate authentically, it felt like a small victory in creating an empathetic classroom.

Empathy-Based Pedagogy in the Writing Classroom: Reflection, and Responsive Instruction

My study demonstrates that empathy-based pedagogy could increase student engagement and foster deeper connections with course material. Student discussions revealed a shift from their knee-jerk defenses or disengagement to approaching the material with a different perspective of enthusiasm and openness. In the most precious of cases, the data held responses in discussion posts or survey data had revealed their inner kindness through demonstrating empathy for the authors or characters of a novel

or story as a direct result of what their peers had been disclosing or relating. These exchanges didn't just improve participation; they transformed the way students approached composition, helping them see writing not just as a task, but as a tool for understanding the self and others. In the writing classroom, this is especially powerful. Writing is inherently personal, even when academic. When students feel safe, seen, and heard, they take more creative and intellectual risks. This environment, cultivated through empathy-based pedagogy, allows for vulnerability, which is at the heart of genuine writing. The result is deeper engagement not only with the material, but with the act of composition itself.

Connecting Empathy to Composition Theory

Empathy-based pedagogy aligns with several principles of composition theory, particularly in post-process and social constructivist frameworks. Most research points to the importance of maintaining a welcoming environment for students and often claims that when the opposite occurs, "when learners feel that they are not connected to their instructors, their insights toward the efficiency of education are reduced (Moore and Kearsley 2004)" (Zhang 1). Whereas research from Carl Rogers showcases that when an instructor has the ability to understand a student's reactions from the inside…the likelihood of learning is significantly increased (Zhang 2). Sharon Tettegah and Carloyn Anderson defined this form of *teacher empathy* as an "aptitude to communicate with learners' concerns, understand their concerns, and perceive the situations from learners' points of view" (Zhang 2).

In addition, Nancy Sommers' work on student revision practices emphasizes the importance of feedback and reflection in developing writing, claiming, "[T]hese revision strategies are a process of more than communication; they are a process of discovering meaning altogether" (385). Empathy-based pedagogy encourages students to see feedback not as criticism but as a form of care. Similarly, instructors who model empathy in their responses demonstrate that revision is a process of growth, not judgment. For example, when students express anxiety about peer review, I incorporate low-stakes empathy-building exercises before any formal critique begins. We might start by writing affirmations for one another's work or reflecting on what makes receiving feedback difficult. These adjustments, directly inspired by student input, foster trust and make the revision process more meaningful. Similarly, when students shared that they felt disconnected from writing prompts, I revised them to allow for more personal reflection and voice, which invited them to explore moments of moral conflict, transformation, or belonging. These prompts, grounded in empathy, elicited some of the most thoughtful and well-developed essays I've seen in my teaching career. The feedback loop between students and teacher, when guided by empathy, becomes generative. It leads to ongoing course adjustments, more inclusive practices, and ultimately, more powerful writing.

Reflection as a Pedagogical Tool

The greatest lessons often supersede what is written in textbooks. I entered academia to teach and offer what I lacked during my formative years. Many of my students are navigating their first real experiences of autonomy and authorship, both personally and in writing. Some thrive with this freedom; others seem to lack their voice or purpose. Empathy-based pedagogy becomes crucial here. It allows me to support students not just as writers, but as individuals developing a sense of self through language. Encountering a range of students from various disciplines has broadened my horizons and allowed me to become familiar with many different assignments and teaching styles, which, in turn, strengthens my teaching skills as I attempt to diversify my fields.

This practice of listening with empathy aligns with a concept I have come to appreciate deeply—*rippling.* Introduced by Irvin D. Yalom in *Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death,* the novel details profound insights into his confrontation with mortality and our intrinsic purpose for existing. I increasingly understood the ephemerality of my existence, and the concern for human legacy is ingrained in me because, without it, humans lack meaning. To overcome this, Yalom provides even his most stubborn patients with secular counsel through the concept of *rippling*, which refers to the fact "that each of us creates, often without our conscious intent or knowledge—concentric circles of influence that may affect others for years, even generations. That is, the effect we have on other people is, in turn, passed on to others, much as the ripples in a pond go on and on until they are no longer visible but continuing on a nano level" (Yalom 83). In essence, this effect is not talking about a physical dowry or gift, but rather "...leaving behind something from your life experience; some trait; some piece of wisdom, guidance, virtue, comfort that passes on to others, known or unknown" (Yalom 84). As educators, our role extends into human development and psychology, where we aim to impart knowledge and offer guidance, compassion, and counsel to those seeking it. By embracing empathy in our teaching, we acknowledge that our influence can ripple through students' lives, often in ways we may never fully understand.

A Slight Digression in Progress…

Navigating these challenges of employing empathy-based pedagogy as a GTA has been a significant life lesson in its own right. While I feel fulfilled by the positive changes I have made in the classroom, I have also realized that the emotional investment did not stop when I left the classroom; the emotional demands of teaching became overwhelming, and I needed to set clear parameters for my emotional energy. Juggling the different rosters of students, I find myself increasingly serving as a conduit for others' needs, leaving me little time or energy for my own personal desires or engaging with family and friends. Although I still consider this career advancement a blessing, I felt underprepared to pay the cost of mental and emotional strain in managing a class alongside my pedagogical goals. Empathy-based pedagogy demands a deep investment of emotional energy, which can quickly become exhausting, especially when you are still navigating your role as a teacher. In my case, I often found myself caught

between the desire to connect with students on a personal level and the need to maintain professional boundaries and authority. Scholars Leandra Smollin and Arnold Arluke have shed light regarding similar sentiments of isolation, describing how graduate students hired as part-time instructors or assigned few courses undergo this "rite of passage…[and] occupy a liminal space where they are both students…as well as instructors" (28). Moreover, perhaps the only thing we desire after a long day expanding our social battery is to be alone.

Ironically, being a GTA has allowed a greater chasm of disconnection to emerge within the academic community. I understand that the position of a GTA is ephemeral to the campus culture due to short-term contracts; however, navigating a different campus and culture makes one susceptible to the same culture shock as entering a new working environment. In addition, within the classroom, some students bypassed my humanity and saw me as a vehicle for grades, an obstacle to navigate to pass the course, a means to an end. Reducing my teaching to a purely transactional retainment alongside the other contributing factors led me to experience "physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in emotionally demanding situations" (Harrison 1999 qtd. in Lackritz 713), or *burnout* as we colloquially say. This feeling is well known as a slow but steady erosion of energy and enthusiasm, compounded by constant pressure, demands, and lack of emotional rewards (Lackritz 714).

This lack of work-life balance naturally leads me to note an institutional impediment to empathy-based pedagogy. Despite the widespread praise for empathy as an essential teaching trait and its central role in university mission statements that are committed to student retention and inclusivity, there is a glaring lack of institutional support for those expected to implement this pedagogy, and even less readily available for GTAs and adjunct faculty. In addition, Jessean Banks has noted, "[d]espite an abundance of available literature on best educational practices and professional development initiatives that are typically offered by university teaching and learning centers, there is little opportunity for GTAs and adjuncts alike to share experiences, investigate, and embrace contemporary approaches to curriculum and pedagogy with other colleagues in the immediacy of their own discipline and program settings in which they teach" (16).

The refusal or lack of compensation to encourage and integrate incoming faculty attempting to integrate in academia does not supersede the diminishing returns of assuaging teaching anxiety and ensuring every student receives quality education from the resources embedded. The instability of retention rates and job security correlates to student performance, where students performed better when taught by full-time faculty, mainly due to the professional development opportunities and support available to them compared to their adjunct counterparts (qtd. in Banks 12). If universities genuinely valued student success, they naturally would demonstrate that same respect for those responsible for teaching them. Until graduate and adjunct faculty receive equivalent professional development to full-time faculty, student retention and success will continue to be undermined (Banks 12). Enthusiasm alone is not enough to sustain effective teaching in the long term, and, with the necessary resources, both students and instructors can be set up for a long trajectory of success. What is written off as a

rite of passage for budding instructors to be indoctrinated into the college experience goes much deeper and is a vein of injustice. But just because a foundation exists does not mean it should not change.

Nuances to Navigate: Saving Face, Professionalism, and Self-Disclosure

Being near the age of the students I was assigned to teach, my relationship with students was often complicated by my dual role as a peer and "authority figure," whatever that means. One of my ongoing concerns is understanding what it truly means to be a "professional" in this context. Without the formal title of professor and navigating the uncertainties inherent to graduate school, I frequently encountered imposter syndrome. Anxiety related to first-time teaching among graduate instructors often revolves around five key themes: "feelings of unpreparedness, overwhelming time demands, lack of confidence, challenges with students, and insufficient support" (Smollin and Arluke 31). Many graduate instructors report spending months preparing for their first course, sometimes entire summers, to write out lectures. Like them, I had spent all this extra effort to conceal the ironic truth: I did not have it all together, but I was expected to perform as someone who did. Researcher Jennifer Borek illuminates the demands of an instructor. She lists a very tangible concern, "[Our] ego needs are critical to most of us. We want to feel competent, and by and large, teachers are very competent" (Borek 3). Understanding these expectations, a cycle of self-doubt manifested: how do I balance authority with empathy?

For many GTAs, the fear of losing authority in the classroom can cause them to adopt a *face* or persona, perhaps even playing the role of a more distant or rigid figure. Machiavelli considered what makes an effective leader, "At this point, a question arises: is it better to be loved than feared, or to be feared than loved? The answer is that a prince would like to be both. But since it is difficult to reconcile these two, it is much safer to be feared than loved—if the one must cede to the other" (Machiavelli and Atkinson 271). The idea of saving "face" is not new and is mentioned on many occasions by sociologist Erving Goffman's "On Face Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction," which details how individuals manage their social identities, striving to project a consistent image that earns respect and social validation (Goffman 5–7). For GTAs, maintaining face is especially challenging due to the lack of clear protocols or models for balancing authority and approachability. This tension made me reflect on my own role: How would students perceive my instruction? How will the students receive my instruction and authority? How do I navigate leniency in comparison to empathy? These issues then begin to reflect the most personal and reflective portion of my experience and encounter with empathy-based pedagogy: Empathy-based pedagogy can be misunderstood by students, often perceived as granting them unlimited leeway.

For instructors, this can sometimes lead to fears of being "trampled" by students at the beginning of the semester. After all, restoring respect once lost takes a long time to reclaim. This tension between maintaining authority and embodying an empathetic

approach constantly challenges me. I was, after all, the least menacing person in the classroom, and at times, I had undergone my struggles of having to be an emotional sponge to others. I wanted the same for myself, someone to lend an ear. Why do instructors need to consider altering themselves to gain the same respect? This tension is echoed in a poignant example shared by Tobin (2010), who conducted case studies of instructors. The case involved a first-year instructor, Linda, who struggled with whether to share a personal, painful experience with a student. After learning that her mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer, Linda encountered a personal narrative written by a first-year student regarding the same fear and pain, and there she felt the same deep connection. Torn between professional boundaries and a desire to empathize, she confided in her colleagues: “I need to maintain some professional boundaries with my students, especially since I am a new teacher and I am not much older than them. However, all I can think about when reading her essay is how much I am dying to tell her that I know exactly how she feels. Do you guys all really think it would be a terrible mistake for me to tell her?” (196). This narrative is a small reminder of the deep emotional labor involved in teaching.

Furthermore, I have understood that teaching is a performance, an act to maintain face, “professionalism,” and composure. Undoubtedly, there are many solitary and emotionally burdening experiences that GTAs and instructors alike face, but this is why empathy in the role of the classroom and beyond is crucial. Teaching should never be a solitary, unrecognized endeavor, and the patterns of discrimination and disrespect that persist in academia must be challenged and stopped. The work of GTAs and adjunct faculty needs to be continuously supported and reinforced, not only for the benefit of students but for the well-being of those entrusted with their education.

Grand Takeaways

After confronting the challenges, recounting the benefits, and relaying the nuances of being a graduate student assistant navigating empathy-based pedagogy, it is safe to say that it has fundamentally shaped the way that I interact with the world…for the better, of course. As educators, we can influence not only our students’ academic success but also their well-being, self-esteem, and sense of belonging. That is truly the heart of teaching, and I am blessed to meet a fantastic set of students every semester. I look forward to connecting with them as I understand that teaching is not purely about sharing knowledge but also about fostering growth within myself. The role I strive for is to teach beyond the curriculum and become an individual who maintains themselves as curious, open-minded, approachable, compassionate, and willing to create a dynamic and inclusive learning environment. As for the next step? That’s a difficult question. But as Jordan Peterson reminds us, “What shall I do with the most difficult of questions? Consider them the gateway to the path of life” (434).

My journey as an educator is far from over, and I look forward to the continued opportunities to grow, learn, and inspire those who walk into my classroom.

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