

Teaching Tools to Improve the Development of Empathy in Service-Learning Students

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Abstract

Students participating in service-learning classes experience many benefits, including cognitive development, personal growth, and civic engagement. Student development of empathy is an understudied area, especially with respect to how students develop empathy through interactions in their service-learning placements. This article describes a project designed to pilot teaching tools (e.g., self-assessment, reflective writing) related to empathy development in 12 undergraduate students. This study examined changes in level of student empathy across the semester, critical incidents linked to such changes, factors that enhanced or challenged empathy development, and student metacognition related to empathy. Findings suggest that certain experiences, such as observing the emotional experiences of others or being given more responsibility at a community site, might prompt changes in level of empathy for service-learning students. Strategies for integrating findings from this pilot project into other service-learning courses and future directions for empathy research are also described.

Introduction

Service-learning classes as formal course offerings are becoming available in increasing numbers at universities across the country. The benefits of service-learning classes on student outcomes are well-documented, especially when compared to outcomes for students who have not taken a service-learning course. For instance, service-learning has been found to have a positive effect on personal insight and cognitive development (Yorio & Ye, 2012). Further, two studies found that service-learning students had a greater understanding of complex social issues than non-service-learning students (Batchelder & Root, 1994; Hirschinger-Blank & Markowitz, 2006). Results of a meta-analysis indicated that students in service-learning courses experienced greater application of knowledge and skills across settings than students not enrolled in a service-learning course (Novak, Markey, & Allen, 2007). Together, these studies demonstrate the strong impact of this unique pedagogical approach on enhancing student outcomes through service-learning experiences.

One area within service-learning research that has not gained much attention is the impact of service-learning on the development of empathy within students and, specifically, the process by which students develop empathy through service-learning. Empathy is defined as “the ability to walk in another’s shoes, to escape one’s own responses and reactions so as to grasp another’s” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 98). A recent meta-analysis from 72 samples of American college students found that empathy is declining in students, especially since 2000 (Konrath, O’Brien, & Hsing, 2011). Fundamental to the process of developing empathy is being able to cognitively grasp how another person may be affected by a situation and understand that there may be other perspectives to any situation (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Wilson, 2011). An emotional connection typically occurs in which an individual feels compassion for another and becomes motivated to understand that person and situation in a new way, often with the desire to help (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000).

Service-learning courses provide an ideal platform for students to develop empathy as they allow students to participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs (Bingle & Hatcher, 1996). Students experience social issues firsthand and often recognize another person’s need or level of despair for the first time (Goleman, 1995). The reflection component of service-learning then provides students with an opportunity to process those interactions and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences with individuals and organizations in the community. Students often begin working in a service-learning setting believing that they understand what it is like to work with someone from a different upbringing or socioeconomic background. When students develop relationships with the individuals they are working with, their preconceived beliefs are often challenged, and cognitive dissonance occurs; students may resolve this conflict in beliefs by rethinking their attitudes and views about the individuals they are serving (Wilson, 2011). Through this process, students develop empathy; they move toward viewing others as more similar to themselves and improve their ability to place themselves in the position of others.

To date, research on empathy development in service-learning classes is sparse. Collectively, studies have considered empathy development within the context of development in other learning and personal outcomes (Mofidi, Strauss, Pitner, & Sandler, 2003; Rosenkranz, 2012). Teaching tools related to developing empathy in service-learning courses, including the use of reflections spe-

cifically focused on student changes in empathy, may prove useful in promoting growth in student empathy. This article provides an overview of a pilot project designed to increase undergraduate student empathy in service-learning. Further, analysis of student journals provided a means of beginning to unpack how students may develop empathy through critical incidents (i.e., experiences that triggered empathy development) and whether student metacognition related to empathy occurred. This research provided insight into how students develop empathy and how service-learning instructors can best ensure their students experience the greatest potential in their development of empathy across the semester.

Setting the Context

Virginia Commonwealth University

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) is located on an urban campus in Richmond, Virginia, and has an annual enrollment of almost 24,000 undergraduate and 5,500 graduate students. VCU employs more than 3,000 faculty members and consists of 13 schools and one college. VCU's campus is located on approximately 144 acres in downtown Richmond, which is an ideal setting for community-based service in the Richmond area. The Richmond area is diverse in terms of both race/ethnic background and socioeconomic status. For instance, 51% of individuals living in Richmond are African American/Black (39% White, 6% Latino), and 25% of families live below poverty threshold (*U.S. Census Bureau, 2012*).

VCU is categorized as a Carnegie Doctoral/Research University—Extensive by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, which puts it in the ranks of the top research universities in the nation. In 2011, the Carnegie Foundation elevated VCU to “Very High Research Activity” status. VCU was just reclassified as a “Community Engagement” institution in 2015, making it one of only 40 universities in the country to hold both the “Community Engagement” and “Very High Research Activity” Carnegie distinctions and one of only 28 public universities in the country with academic medical centers to achieve both distinctions. As a major university in an urban environment, VCU is especially committed to research and service activities that connect the university with the Richmond community, as evidenced by VCU's strategic plan, *Quest for Distinction* (http://www.quest.vcu.edu/media/quest/pdf/the-plan_full.pdf). *Quest for Distinction* outlined a set of goals aimed

at improving partnerships between VCU and community-based organizations and focused on becoming a national model for community engagement and regional impact.

Service-Learning at VCU

Service-learning courses at VCU are housed within the Division of Community Engagement. Service-learning at VCU is a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets community-identified needs. This collaborative teaching and learning strategy is designed to promote and encourage course content, personal growth, and civic engagement (see <http://www.servicelearning.vcu.edu>). VCU service-learning courses are audited prior to receiving the *SRV LRN* designation, a designation that appears next to the course title in the university's course schedule and on students' transcripts. During 2013-2014, VCU offered 117 distinct service-learning courses across 233 different class sections. Annually, more than 3,600 VCU students complete at least one service-learning course.

Human Services Fieldwork

The Department of Psychology at VCU offers a service-learning course titled Human Services Fieldwork, which is available to junior and senior students majoring in psychology. The objective of this service-learning course is to promote student understanding of a multisystemic ecological model of individual and community development. Students participate in weekly didactics and complete 8 hours of service per week in a community agency or organization serving populations at risk for negative psychological or health-related outcomes. Prior to enrolling in the course, students meet with the instructor to ensure a match between student interest and placement site. There are typically up to eight placement opportunities available to students each semester, including sites serving children (e.g., after-school programs, child care centers, tutoring programs, centers for children with developmental disabilities) and adults (e.g., adult day care centers, community health clinics, agencies providing substance abuse services, organizations for victims of sexual or domestic violence). Students complete reflective writings and written assignments, participate in group-based discussions, keep a log of service hours, and complete required readings across the semester. Topics in the course include understanding behavior using a risk and resilience framework, conceptual models that pro-

mote individual and community development, professional ethics, and processes related to personal growth and civic engagement. The project described in this article stemmed from the author's observations during 2 years of teaching this service-learning class. The author found that the course did not support student awareness and understanding specifically related to their development of empathy through their service-learning experiences.

Review of the Literature

As noted, a handful of studies have evaluated empathy as a student outcome in service-learning courses. In one study, dental students reported increased empathy for the needs and situations of patients after providing dental services in community-based settings (e.g., community health center, nursing home; *Mofidi et al., 2003*). In a marriage and family class, students participated in either a service-learning project or a book discussion project; students completing the service-learning assignment were more likely to express empathy in their reflective writing than those students that participated in the book discussion project (*Wilson, 2011*). In another study that incorporated service-learning into an undergraduate nursing course, students described developing empathy for the daily struggles facing families by working with individuals who were different from themselves (*Hunt, 2007*). In a lifespan development course (*Lundy, 2007*), students who chose to complete a service-learning project demonstrated a significant increase in emotional empathy, as measured by the Emotional Empathetic Tendency Scale (*Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972*), compared to students who chose other project options (e.g., interview project, research paper). Finally, feelings of empathy were reported in a group of baccalaureate nursing students who worked at a camp for children with diabetes (*Vogt, Chavez, & Schaffner, 2011*). In their reflective writings, these students described a feeling of empathy with the temporary adoption of the lifestyle of children with diabetes. Thus, these studies suggest that students who complete a service-learning course or project are likely to experience enhanced empathy for others.

Lacking from these studies, however, is an understanding of how coming face-to-face with another person's situation in a service-learning setting can evoke changes in empathy. Few service-learning courses focus specifically on student level of empathy and how it changes throughout the semester, as well as experiences that may challenge or promote changes in empathy. The project described here was aimed at piloting teaching tools related to

empathy development in a service-learning course for undergraduates and ultimately determining the key components related to empathy development that can be integrated into other service-learning courses across the nation.

Project Details

This pilot project was conducted within a service-learning course offered through the Department of Psychology at VCU and taught by the author, a licensed clinical psychologist with expertise in conducting community-based research with families from diverse backgrounds. The project described here was piloted with 12 students. Nine of the 12 students were senior psychology majors; the remaining three students were junior psychology majors. Two students were African American, 10 were Caucasian, and three students were male. Students were placed in one of eight community settings: elementary schools in the City of Richmond (five students across three elementary schools), school for students with autism and developmental disabilities (one student), substance abuse treatment center (one student), free community clinic providing medical services (one student), child care center (one student), community center providing after-school care for children (one student), agency providing psychological services to community members (one student), and an organization for victims of domestic or sexual violence (one student). At each site, students completed activities that fulfilled the identified needs of each organization. Each student volunteered 8 hours a week for approximately 100 hours of service across the semester.

Three students had limited direct contact with individuals at their placement sites. At the organization for victims of sexual and/or domestic violence, the student completed a training program and was on call for area hospitals if a victim needed services; she was never paged to provide support for a victim. The student at the free medical clinic assisted with medical chart reviews, administrative tasks, and some shadowing of nurse practitioners with patients. The student at the psychological services agency watched taped therapy sessions, observed therapist phone calls with patients, and entered patient data from assessments. The remaining nine students interacted directly with the children at their schools or centers, or with patients at the substance abuse clinic.

Empathy Components of the Course

During this pilot study, two requirements that focused on enhancing student empathy were integrated into the existing Human Services Fieldwork course. These components are described in detail below.

Empathy self-assessment. During the second week of class, students were asked to complete an initial self-assessment of their level of empathy. For this assignment, students were first asked to read an article by Wilson (2011) that outlined three levels of engagement related to the expression of empathy (shock, normalization, and engagement). This “stage theory of engagement” was developed by Rockquemore and Shaffer (2000) to describe cognitive changes that occur in college students throughout a semester. Wilson (2011) posited that although empathy is a less well-known aspect of learning that relates to personal and social development, it should be considered a crucial aspect of learning in service-learning classes. More well-known types of learning include explanation, interpretation, and application (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Empathy is important for the achievement of understanding because it involves personal meaning-making and being able to make sense of different pieces of knowledge; this understanding can then be applied to new situations (Wilson, 2011).

After reading the article by Wilson (2011), students were asked to determine their current level of empathy (shock, normalization, engagement). In the stage theory of engagement, which Wilson (2011) applied to empathy development, *shock* is described as being dismayed by the social and economic circumstances of the individuals they were serving. The next stage, *normalization*, is described as beginning to see an individual’s circumstances as normal, identifying commonalities with others, and beginning to break down an “us” versus “them” viewpoint. The third stage, *engagement*, is when students begin to recognize why things are the way they are for individuals at their placement, and they begin to attribute problems to systemic issues instead of blaming the individual.

In addition to identifying their current level of empathy, students were asked to describe (a) why they identified with that level of empathy; (b) how their placement could contribute to their development of empathy, including which interactions would be useful; (c) what changes they expected to see in their level of empathy throughout the semester and why; and (d) how they would determine whether their level of empathy had developed during the semester. Students were asked to answer these ques-

tions in their self-assessment of empathy in a four-page, double-spaced paper. This paper was then discussed in class and used as a reference point for future discussions of empathy throughout the semester. At the end of the semester, students were asked again to indicate their current level of empathy with space provided for optional comments.

Empathy focus in reflective writing. In each semester of Human Services Fieldwork, students are asked to complete nine reflective writings that are typically one page (single-spaced) in length and follow the well-known “What? So what? Now what?” heuristic of service-learning reflective writing (*Driscoll, 2007*). For this pilot project, students were asked to add an “Empathy what?” section to reflections assigned after they had completed their self-assessment. Thus, this component was added to eight reflections for each student. Instructions for this component of each reflection were as follows: “This section should include one to two solid paragraphs that describe how your empathy is evolving and/or being challenged in your placement. You may wish to build off your empathy self-assessment.” Students were encouraged to share aspects of their reflective writing during class discussions.

Impact of the Project

Methodology

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained for this study. Data to evaluate the potential promise of these teaching tools related to empathy development were obtained from student self-assessments of empathy and reflective writings that included the “Empathy what?” section. From the self-assessments, level of empathy at the beginning and end of the semester were extracted. Representative statements for students at each level were also identified.

Reflections were read and coded independently by two doctoral students with no affiliation to the service-learning course or service-learning in general at VCU. Coders were also blind to any information about students (e.g., sex, race/ethnicity, undergraduate year) or placement sites. Identifying information, including dates, was deleted from reflections. Coding occurred after the end of spring semester. Coders determined how many times across the reflective writings students experienced an increase in their level of empathy. Increases were noted when the student either explicitly stated that his or her empathy increased or the coders noted such a

change implicitly through the student's comments in the reflection. Coders also documented critical incidents or events that occurred in reflections when a change in empathy occurred. Critical incidents were grouped by categories, and number of students experiencing such incidents was calculated. Coders also noted themes across reflections related to factors that promoted or challenged students' development of empathy. Finally, coders noted whether students became more aware of their own empathy development either by explicitly saying that they were more self-aware of their own empathy or by stating that they had experienced a change in empathy.

Initial Findings

Self-assessment. Initial and final assessment of empathy level for each of the 12 participating students can be found in Table 1, as well as the type of placement for each student and whether students interacted directly with individuals in their placement.

At the beginning of the semester, one student described being in the shock stage of empathy.

I thought I had a pretty good idea of what I was getting into, but I was wrong. I expected a bit of chaos and some differences in social interactions when working with the students, but it's far more intense than I could've ever imagined. Right now I find myself very anxious when I approach the children; I'm not comfortable around them. I believe once I spend more time around them and have a better understanding of them, I'll be able to interact with them more easily.

Another student described being in between shock and normalization. This student stated:

Starting my placement has been kind of a slow process and it's now picking up with more consistent hours so I'm starting to develop deeper relationships with those at the school. With my relationships developing more, I feel like I am transitioning into normalization, however I still have not had too much exposure to the kids yet. I still fall back into the shock stage when hearing some of the stories about the kids who attend the school. The first day or two I definitely was in shock because the

environment of the school was so different from that I grew up in.

Table 1. Assessment of Student Empathy Across Semester

Student	Setting	Direct contact with individuals at site	Beginning/end of semester stage	Percent (#)* of reflections describing an increase in empathy	Self-awareness of own empathy
Student 1	Elementary School	Yes	Shock/ Normalization	62.5% (5/8)	Yes
Student 2	Elementary School	Yes	Normalization/ Engagement	50% (4/8)	Yes
Student 3	Elementary School	Yes	Engagement/ Engagement	75% (6/8)	Yes
Student 4	Elementary School	Yes	Normalization/ Engagement	57% (3/7)	Yes
Student 5	Elementary School	Yes	In between shock & normalization/ Engagement	100% (6/6)	Yes
Student 6	School for autism & developmental disabilities	Yes	Engagement/ Engagement	100% (8/8)	Yes
Student 7	Substance abuse treatment center	Yes	Engagement/ Engagement	88% (7/8)	Yes
Student 8	Free community medical clinic	Limited	Engagement/ Engagement	25% (2/8)	Yes
Student 9	Community center for after-school care	Yes	Normalization/ Engagement	25% (4/7)	Yes
Student 10	Psychological services agency	Limited	Normalization/ Engagement	88% (7/8)	Yes
Student 11	Organization for victims of sexual & domestic violence	Limited	Normalization/ Engagement	37.5% (3/8)	Yes
Student 12	Child care center	Yes	Normalization/ Normalization	75% (6/8)	Yes

Note. *Three students did not turn in required reflections and therefore have a total number of reflections less than 8.

Six students described initially being in the normalization stage. One student shared:

I would define myself as someone who falls on the normalization end of the scale. I find that I tend to attempt to make others feel as though they are not that different because of their situation and that we are all equal, regardless of our past.

Another student added,

I feel that I am already past the stage of shock. Early on in life, I have already encountered various situations where I have been forced to encounter the harsher realities of life and I have been privileged to meet so many people from so many different backgrounds with different stories and personalities. Because I am in the normalization stage, I feel as though I have begun to adapt to the service context because I am starting to see adverse situations in life as normal and frequent. I am no longer shocked or amazed at some of the people and scenarios they have been through because I understand that the community has a vast amount of needs and troubles.

Four students also described being in the engagement stage. One student commented, “I identify with the engagement level of empathy, and I credit that mostly to my diverse background. My experiences have taught me about my own privilege and the privilege of others.” Another student described,

My current level of empathy is engagement because I’ve come to terms with how things are in the clinic setting. While I am saddened by some of the living conditions the patients are subjected to it no longer shocks me and I have no problem interacting with them in a personable way. I think that this comes from going to such a diverse school and parents encouraging me to look beyond what someone looks like on the outside to get to know them.

In their rating at the end of the semester, 10 students indicated that their level of empathy was in the engagement stage, and two students indicated that their level of empathy was in the normalization stage. Most notably, seven of the 12 students described a change in level of empathy such that they moved to a higher stage

of engagement by the end of the semester. One student who moved from normalization to engagement stated,

At the end of the semester, I would say my level of empathy was definitely engagement. I became so close with the students I had worked with and leaving them was very hard. Interning at my site was an eye opening experience like no other.

Four students described starting the semester in the highest level of empathy, engagement, and consequently ending the semester at that level. Interestingly, two of these students noted that they might have overestimated their level of empathy at the beginning of the semester. One student stated, "At the beginning of the semester I said I would have been in the engagement stage but I think that was a broad overstatement on my part."

Reflections: Increases in empathy. The percentage of reflections in which students experienced an increase in level of empathy can be found in Table 1. All students described some movement in empathy in their reflective writings across the semester. Documented changes in empathy ranged from 25% of reflections to 100% of reflections, indicating a wide range in number of reflections describing an increase in empathy. The average percentage of reflections describing an increase in empathy across all students was 65.3%. Interestingly, even if students did not experience a change in level of empathy from the beginning to the end of the semester (five students), they still described increases in empathy in their reflections. This suggests that even among those students who believed they started the semester with well-developed empathy, experiences at their service-learning site continued to impact their development of empathy. It is also important to note that students who had limited contact with individuals at their placement sites also described increases in their level of empathy throughout their reflections. For two of these students, the percentage of reflections describing such increases was on the lower end (25% and 37.5%). It should be noted, however, that another student with limited contact indicated a change in level of empathy in 88% of reflections, and a student with direct contact indicated a change in only 25% of reflections.

Reflections: Critical incidents tied to empathy changes. In evaluating whether a student's reflection described an increase in empathy, coders also highlighted critical incidents that may have prompted such increases. These incidents were then grouped by

themes to highlight areas for class discussions or course content in future service-learning courses integrating a focus on empathy development. Critical incidents were grouped around five themes: (1) observing emotional experiences of others, (2) being given more responsibility at site, (3) learning more about the people being served, (4) having a personal connection with others, and (5) experiencing challenges to previous thoughts about a situation. Each is described briefly in turn, with the number of students describing each incident also noted.

1. Observing emotional experiences of others. Six students described observing some sort of emotional expression in others at their placement site and indicated that this experience was linked to a change in their level of empathy. Emotional experiences included observing teachers' frustration as they managed behavioral issues in children and watching a teacher's reaction after a student overturned a desk in the classroom. Students described developing empathy for the teachers in these situations, which was unexpected for many students as they expected to feel more empathy for the children with whom they directly worked. Other experiences were child focused, including seeing a child crying at school because of a disagreement with peers and watching an embarrassed student run away from the school after an issue between the student's parent and staff at the school. Another student described observing a client's frustration with the group facilitator at the substance abuse treatment center and developing empathy for the facilitator after watching how the situation was handled.

2. Being given more responsibility at site. Six students also described critical incidents related to more responsibilities at their placement. For instance, students noted being asked by supervisors to take the lead in activities with children (e.g., reading, leading a craft), check on children in other classes, make supply kits for families in shelters, and lead a group session. Students described that when they were given these increased responsibilities, they developed more confidence in themselves and in their interactions with individuals at their placements.

3. Learning more about individuals. Six students also described critical incidents being linked to times when they were able to learn more personal information about someone they were working with at their placement site. For instance, students working with children in the elementary schools learned more about children living in shelters, arguments they had with their parents, and other occurrences in their home lives. Students also noted learning more about teachers' backgrounds and personal lives. The student working in

the free medical clinic described developing empathy for patients after learning more about their personal lives.

4. *Having a personal connection with others.* Four students described having a personal connection with another person at their site, either by having had that experience themselves or by sharing in an experience with other people at their site. For instance, one student described how, after a client the student was actively interacting with at the site passed away, the student developed greater empathy for the other clients and facilitators as they all grieved for the shared loss of the client. Another student described hearing about the passing of a teacher's father and having a greater sense of empathy for the teacher as the student had experienced a similar loss. The student noted that she could imagine what it was like for the teacher to come to work each day and set aside her grief to give her all for the children at the center. At a different placement, another student described noting a change in empathy after watching a young student being scolded by a teacher and the young student not understanding why he was in trouble. The service-learning student described remembering that feeling as a young child when he would not understand why he was in trouble with his parents. Finally, a student with limited direct contact at her site described developing empathy for a client at the psychological center who was the same age she was. Although the student never met the client, she could imagine the social and personal issues the client may have been struggling with in addition to having an anxiety disorder.

5. *Experiencing challenges to previous thoughts about a situation.* Three students described experiencing a change in empathy that could be linked to a previous belief or notion being challenged. For instance, one student described challenges to her beliefs regarding what constituted an anxiety disorder in that she had underestimated what it was like to have an anxiety disorder. Another student described not being fully aware of the range of challenges that public school teachers experience on a day-to-day basis with young children. A student helping with food distribution at his agency described listening to the discussions between community members and noticing their clothing. He described how he had not been prepared for the idea that community members would not care what they looked like, since their primary focus was receiving a meal that day.

Reflections: Factors that promoted or challenged development of empathy. In addition to coding student reflections for critical incidents tied to empathy development, coders also identified

themes across reflections that highlighted factors that may promote or challenge empathy development. These themes can be found in Table 2. Briefly, students noted that getting to know an individual over time, becoming more aware of who that individual was as a person, taking time to think about what a person's life might be like, and gaining more confidence in their ability to do good work at their site contributed to improved empathy. For those students with limited direct contact, an additional consistent theme was their being surprised at their ability to develop empathy for individuals at their site in light of limited contact with them. However, students did note that this limited contact might also be a challenge to developing empathy, and several wondered how much more their empathy might have developed had they had more direct contact.

Table 2. Factors in Student Reflections That Promoted or Challenged Development of Empathy

Factors tied to promoting empathy development	Factors that challenged empathy development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Getting to know individuals over time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feeling like one should be building empathy in a certain scenario even when they may not be
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gaining more confidence in ability to do the work well 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focusing more on sympathy versus empathy in initial interactions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More hands-on experiences and direct interactions with people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Harder to develop empathy when no direct contact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stop and think about what the implications of that person's life would be for the student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficult to understand the perspective of others or the situations that people may be in
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Surprised to experience increases even when not directly involved with individuals at site 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Situations in which students did not believe teachers were working hard
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowing more about a person makes it easier to increase level of empathy, even when this is indirect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Situations in which students questioned why an individual was at a particular site (e.g., food distribution, anxiety clinic)

Other factors that made it more challenging for students to develop empathy included struggling to understand the perspective of others or relate to those from different backgrounds (e.g., lower socioeconomic status). Students also had difficulty developing empathy if they believed the individual, such as a teacher, was not truly invested in their work that day or if the student was

unsure why a community member was seeking services at their site. These sorts of interactions often caused students to “disconnect” from the person to some degree. Several students also struggled with moving from sympathy to empathy and with feeling they should be developing empathy when they could not on a particular day. These students noted that they tried to put themselves in the other person’s shoes but often found themselves “feeling badly” for the person instead. Once the student was able to better understand the person’s circumstances over time and take a step back from the situation, they were better able to develop empathy.

Reflections: Increase in metacognition related to empathy development. In addition to determining key factors related to empathy development, this study also evaluated whether student metacognition related to empathy occurred as a result of integrating these teaching tools. As seen in Table 1, all 12 students recognized an increase in their awareness of level of empathy. One student stated,

Being required to take inventory and be mindful of these changes has contributed to me in turn being more empathetic because I am hyperaware of them. I have acquired a more healthy form of empathy over the course of the semester and have developed knowledge of how to be empathetic.

Discussion of Implications

Analysis of student self-assessments and reflective writings suggested that students experienced positive changes in their level of empathy across the semester. Moreover, students developed metacognition related to empathy in that they were aware that their empathy was changing and could identify certain factors that promoted or challenged such change. Although this work is in the preliminary stages, these pilot data suggest that integrating teaching tools related specifically to empathy has the potential to enhance empathy development in service-learning students. All 12 students in this project experienced improvements in their level of empathy at some point in the semester, as demonstrated by the percentage of reflections describing an increase in empathy. It is noteworthy that this change appears to occur even in students having limited direct contact with individuals in their placements. Class discussions may have served to increase empathy among those students with limited direct contact. Given that only 12 students participated in this pilot

study, replication is needed to determine whether these findings hold in larger samples of service-learning students. Implications of this study and recommendations for teaching, therefore, are based on a limited pilot sample with a need for replication and should be interpreted within this context.

Key Factors Influencing Empathy Development

This pilot project contributes to the existing literature on empathy development in service-learning by outlining important facets of students' interactions and experiences in their placement settings that may contribute to growth in level of empathy. Using a qualitative approach in evaluating student reflections, it was possible to isolate critical incidents that may have encouraged empathy development among students. Although students were at a number of different placements, there was overlap in type of incidents across placements, suggesting that a focus on these categories of critical incidents may have widespread applicability for other service-learning courses.

Findings suggested that students were more likely to experience a change in empathy when they were able to observe the emotional experiences of others and see how a person reacted to a particular, emotionally salient event. Students commented on being able to put themselves in the shoes of the other person (e.g., teacher, student, facilitator) and imagine how he or she was feeling at that time. These experiences were observational in that students were not directly involved in these incidents; nonetheless, observing others' emotions and how the situation was resolved led to an increase in empathy for students. Additionally, students experienced a change in empathy when they were given more responsibility at their placement sites. For several students, this was a sign that their presence was appreciated and that they were doing a good job. In essence, students may have internalized their site supervisor's confidence in them; this confidence may have enabled them to become more invested in their work with others and may have allowed them to develop deeper connections with the individuals at their sites. Increased responsibility also offered them new experiences, which gave them the chance to further develop their level of empathy.

In a third category, students experienced increases in empathy when they learned more about an individual's background and personal life. This aspect of developing empathy is consistent with previous research that has highlighted the importance of better

understanding an individual's circumstances in order to break down an "us" versus "them" viewpoint (Vogt *et al.*, 2011; Wilson, 2011). Students noted that it often took time to get to know certain people at their placement, suggesting that students who have limited contact with individuals may not benefit as much from this category in enhancing their empathy. Interestingly, for students in this pilot project, learning more about individuals was just as commonly linked to empathy development as observing the emotional experiences of others and being given more responsibility at their site. It may be that instructors can work to improve empathy in students with limited direct contact or fewer hours in their placement by integrating vicarious experiences into their classroom that allow students to observe the emotional experiences of individuals (e.g., role play, video clips) and reflect on those observations. Instructors may also consider encouraging students to take the initiative to ask for more responsibilities in their placement or to speak up if their supervisor is asking for a volunteer to assist with other duties.

Findings from this project also suggest that a shared personal connection between the student and individuals at their placement site contributes to increased levels of empathy. For several students, these connections had a basis in events that occurred when they were younger (e.g., being reprimanded by parents) or memories of grieving after a family member passed away. Such personal connections seemed to increase the students' ability to put themselves in an individual's shoes and understand what that person may have been experiencing at the time. This may be one aspect of empathy development that instructors could consider priming students to pay attention to in their interactions with others. Depending on the circumstance, students may benefit from initiating a discussion about that shared experience when it is brought to their attention.

Changes in empathy were also noted when an interaction with an individual challenged a student's thoughts about a situation. As previously highlighted, theory suggests that empathy develops from experiencing cognitive dissonance and being able to resolve that dissonance by rethinking one's beliefs and attitudes about a particular situation (Wilson, 2011). In this pilot study, "challenges to previous thoughts" was the least commonly described critical incident. Although this area is clearly important in empathy building, it may be that instructors can introduce other themes related to critical incidents in their discussions of empathy and not solely focus on the aspect of cognitive dissonance.

Factors Promoting and Challenging Empathy Development

In addition to providing five salient areas for instructors to focus on when discussing empathy development, findings from this pilot project also suggest several factors that could be used to increase the likelihood that students will develop empathy (outlined in Table 2). Instructors may be able to use this list in initial discussions of empathy development, perhaps even before students begin work at their placements. This could serve as a “lessons learned” introduction to empathy and enable students just beginning their service-learning course to think about how these factors may help or hinder their empathy development. For instance, students may recognize that getting to know an individual well at their site may contribute to building empathy but that they may need to be patient, as it may take time to establish a relationship. With this knowledge, students may begin their placement knowing that they would benefit from taking the initiative to start conversations with individuals, including supervisors, coworkers, and the individuals being served. If students find it hard to make such connections, they could brainstorm as a class or in small groups to form strategies for developing such relationships.

Further, students should be reminded that, consistent with one of the critical incidents (gaining more responsibility), seizing opportunities to take on new experiences might contribute to empathy development. Such new experiences may serve to increase the student’s confidence that they are doing good work at their site and that their service is valued; this confidence may allow them to become more invested in their work and in learning about the people with whom they are interacting. If students are struggling to feel confident in themselves and how they are valued at their sites, instructors may need to spend time helping the students unpack reasons for the difficulty and generate strategies for increasing their self-confidence. Students may also benefit from hearing others share incidents of feeling insecure at their sites and learning how they overcame such obstacles.

Instructors could also use the list of factors that challenged empathy development as starting points for small group discussions on how to overcome such issues, or even as targeted questions in reflective writing. For instance, instructors could ask, “How could you move from feeling sympathy for someone to feeling more empathic?” or “What might prevent you from understanding the perspective of another person at your placement?” In courses with less of a focus on empathy, students may benefit from such a

list of “lessons learned” to reference throughout the semester as needed. This list may raise awareness in allowing students to think at a deeper level about how their service-learning experience is contributing to their personal development.

Additionally, service-learning instructors are encouraged to share information about empathy development in face-to-face conversations with their community partners at students’ placement sites. In strong service-learning partnerships, instructors and community partners have relationships with each other that are essential for the success of service-learning. Communication, personal connections, and collaborative planning are often cited as determinants of effective relationships between instructors and community partners (*Sandy & Holland, 2006*). Discussions around student empathy may be an additional way to build the relationship between instructors and partners; these discussions would ultimately benefit both students and the individuals that are served at their placement sites. For instance, instructors could discuss with community partners the idea that students may develop empathy at their sites when they are given additional responsibilities. With additional responsibilities, students may feel more confident in their work at the site, which may prompt them to develop deeper relationships with the individuals they are serving. Further, partners could help students develop empathy by giving students opportunities to learn more about an individual’s background and personal life. If the student is more likely to work with groups of individuals, the partner could perhaps carve out time for that student to work individually with someone at the site over the course of several weeks. The list of five categories of critical incidents and information from Table 2 may be a useful resource for instructors to share with their community partners. Together, instructors and community partners could discuss and tailor these suggestions to ensure that students are able to increase their level of empathy for individuals at that particular community site.

Limitations and Next Steps

Although the integration of these two specific teaching tools, a self-assessment on empathy and targeted reflections, demonstrated considerable promise in enhancing student empathy, the current project had some limitations. First and foremost, this pilot study was limited by its size (12 students), and findings cannot be generalized. This study needs to be replicated with larger samples in order to verify the themes and critical incidents that emerged from this pilot sample. The author plans to compile data from

multiple semesters of integrating these teaching tools to determine additional themes regarding empathy development that may arise from student self-assessments and reflections and verify that themes generated from this sample of students are consistent across semesters. Additional data points would also allow the author to determine whether any specific critical incidents lead to greater empathy development than others. With this limited sample, it was not possible to tie specific experiences to movement from one particular level of empathy to another. Such findings would be useful for service-learning classes that are not empathy focused by supporting inclusion of such experiences. Instructors could then ensure that students experience that particular incident through class discussions, role play activities, or short video clips. Further, it was not possible to compare empathy development between this group of 12 students and students in a service-learning course that lacked these teaching tools. Thus, it is not possible to determine how much these teaching tools contributed to empathy development in students above and beyond that already gained from a service-learning course. Next steps for this project include comparing student reflections between this section and another section of the Psychology Department's service-learning course that does not include empathy-focused teaching tools.

Additionally, next steps include further determining how to enhance empathy development in students with limited direct contact. Findings are encouraging in that students with limited direct contact (three students) were still able to experience growth in empathy during the semester. Given the small subset of students with limited direct contact, it was not possible to determine whether these students actually experienced less growth in empathy than students with direct contact. Student comments suggest, however, that these students did feel they had to work harder to develop empathy in that it often took more time to get to know an individual's background or that they needed to focus more on developing empathy for supervisors and coworkers. Next steps for this line of research include conducting focus groups with students with both direct and limited direct contact to determine how empathy may develop differently in the respective groups.

As this project moves into the next phase, the author plans to add a final self-assessment paper in which students are asked to describe their level of empathy at the end of the semester and why they believe they achieved that level. In the current pilot study, there was not a formal end-of-semester assignment related to empathy; students were asked to indicate their level of empathy and provide

comments if they so desired. In particular, it would be interesting to learn from those students who overestimated their level of empathy at the beginning of the semester and determine when and how they realized they might have overestimated their level of empathy. Doing so may elicit additional themes related to empathy building that could be integrated into a service-learning course. It would also be interesting to explore other aspects of student reflections and determine how students believe a higher level of empathy will affect their personal and professional lives as they move forward. Further, given that levels of empathy have been declining among college students (*Konrath et al., 2011*), it would also be interesting to learn students' thoughts on the societal implications for increasing empathy and how other students could be encouraged to continue their empathy development.

Improvements to the course based on findings from this pilot project also include distributing the list of factors identified in Table 2 to students at the beginning of the semester in conjunction with initial discussions of empathy. This list will also be distributed at the end of the semester to determine whether students believed these factors were relevant for their placements, as well as whether they have additional thoughts on factors that promote or challenge empathy development. Additionally, a focus group will be conducted with students taking this course over the next academic year to determine the acceptability of these teaching tools and to expand on critical incidents that could be tied to empathy development.

Considerations for Other Service-Learning Courses

Components of this pilot project have promise for other instructors teaching service-learning courses and aiming to improve student empathy. It is suggested that instructors incorporate an initial self-assessment of empathy into the course, as well as a component of reflective writing that is focused specifically on empathy. An "Empathy what?" section was added to eight reflections in this pilot project; instructors may choose to decrease that number if they are just beginning to adapt their class to include a focus on empathy. These two tools, self-assessment and component of reflective writing, will likely increase student metacognition related to empathy development as well as improve student empathy overall. The list of factors promoting and challenging empathy development in Table 2, as well as the themes related to critical incidents, can also serve as points of discussion throughout the course. These

themes included (1) observing emotional experiences of others, (2) being given more responsibility at site, (3) learning more about the people being served, (4) having a personal connection with others, and (5) experiencing challenges to previous thoughts about a situation. Class or small group discussions could be tailored to focus on one or two of these critical incident categories as instructors recognize correspondences between these themes and student reflections. Depending on the focus of the course and/or placement settings, different levels of emphasis may be attached to various themes in class discussions.

The current project was piloted in a smaller classroom setting with 12 undergraduate students. For larger classes, instructors may choose to use smaller group discussions that focus specifically on the key components of building empathy that were generated from this project. These smaller groups could be maintained throughout the semester to build a sense of openness in discussing empathy among students. Findings from this project also suggest that these teaching tools are useful for students with limited direct contact hours. Small group discussions that pair a student who has limited contact with a student who has direct contact may further elicit growth in students who have limited contact. Also, priming students with limited contact to pay attention to particular aspects of their experiences (e.g., shared personal connection, challenge previous belief) may help to enhance their experience by making them more likely to recognize these opportunities and seize upon this potential for empathy development.

For classes that are not empathy-focused, the author suggests that instructors spend some part of a class discussion focused on the importance of empathy in service-learning. Empathy is an abstract concept for many students, and bringing this aspect of service-learning to their attention may prompt awareness of empathy to some degree. If instructors are able, they may also wish to integrate empathy into class discussions throughout the semester, again using factors from Table 2 or the critical incident categories as launching points for discussion. It is likely that even without a formal assignment focused on empathy, students will still benefit from increased awareness of empathy development through service-learning.

In sum, findings from this project are encouraging in suggesting that instructors can tailor their service-learning courses to include empathy-focused teaching tools that improve student empathy. Replication of this pilot study is needed to confirm that these themes resonate across other service-learning courses and

groups of students. Ideally, these tools could be adapted and used in a variety of service-learning classes across institutions. As it stands now, this project contributes to the literature on service-learning outcomes by highlighting specific themes and processes that may contribute to increased empathy development among students. The author encourages other service-learning instructors to use scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) methods like those described in this article to add new knowledge around other constructs relevant to service-learning classes, including identity development, ageism, and morality. This important research has the potential to benefit both students and the larger community that is served by university service-learning experiences.

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