Taking Another Look At Empathy: Teaching Writing Now

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In the days and weeks following the 2016 presidential election, many scholars/teachers of Composition were questioning their own teaching in light of Trump's win. For example, a very unscientific search of the Writing Program Administrators listserv (WPA-L) revealed numerous popular threads from "Trump" and "What Way Forward?" to "Post-Truth Writing Assignments." These threads show how participants have tried to analyze what caused the election outcome and how our teaching must find new ways to stress critical forms of writing. At the end of the 2016 election, I returned to my first-year writing class and encountered some students who described feeling shattered, angry, and fearful, while others felt hopeful and vindicated. I'm sure my experience is not unique. One of my students, who identified as a Trump supporter, in an attempt to bridge the divide in our classroom, offered an article he read while researching the Black Lives Matter movement. In this article, controversial conservative commentator Glen Beck described his experiences watching an interview with the family of the gunman involved in the Dallas police shootings in July of 2016. Watching the heartache and sorrow of the gunman's parents, Beck revealed, enabled him to see the situation from their perspective and realize that the claims of the Black Lives Matter movement were not as outrageous as he had previously thought ("Empathy for Black Lives Matter"). My student, who didn't know about Beck's ethos, offered his plea for greater empathy as a way to move forward as a class. He believed that if we empathized and tried to see the other's position from their perspective, we could

locate a common ground to continue to work together as a class. Beck's call to practice empathy, to try to see issues from multiple perspectives by imagining ourselves in the other person's position, appealed to some students, but others weren't so convinced. "Does that mean I'm supposed to try to see things from the racist's or sexist's point of view? I mean, is every point of view equal?" one student asked. Students' responses to the suggestion that we try to practice empathy prompted me to question how I had theorized my own teaching. Although I hadn't considered the role of empathy in my teaching of this course, I had thought about its role in the service learning and teacher education courses I've taught. While I am suspicious of Beck's recommending empathy now after he's amassed a media empire by spreading paranoia, division, and panic, I also realize he hasn't been the only public figure calling for more empathy. From the publication of his autobiography, The *Audacity of Hope*, to his nomination of Justice Sotomayor, President Obama often highlighted the importance of empathy. While many political opponents equated the value placed on empathy with judicial bias, Obama stressed that what he valued was "experience that can give a person a common touch of compassion; an understanding of how the world works and how ordinary people live" ("Obama's Remarks on His Choice of Sotomayor"). Since his election, part of Trump's success with his supporters has been his ability to represent their values, desires, fears, and anxieties, but the staggering lack of sensitivity he displays towards migrants at the border, political opponents, and many others also demonstrates how insights into the feelings and experiences of others can inform a powerful political strategy to divide, confuse, and disrupt our civic life.

With such widely divergent public figures promoting and using empathy in different ways, to achieve different ends, I wanted to understand the role of empathy in writing pedagogy. Is it a civic virtue teachers should promote or just part of locating the available means of persuasion? The field of rhetoric and composition has addressed some of the issues surrounding empathy, but the current questioning of empathy's value in our civic life requires more careful study of its role in writing pedagogy. While the field of

composition studies has valued empathy as an affective and cognitive process that promotes effective, ethical communication, my classroom experience and the larger cultural/political ethos of the last three years suggest the need for a reassessment of empathy's role in writing pedagogy. To consider empathy's role in the teaching of writing today, I look to the work of scholars who have valued empathy's ability to help students negotiate the range of rhetorical contexts they encounter both in school and in the larger public sphere. In addition to analyzing empathy's value as a rhetorical strategy, I also examine empathy as an important disposition. Like creativity or perseverance, I argue that empathy is a disposition that writing teachers must nurture and promote to prepare students to navigate their future academic experiences as well as the polarized public sphere.

Empathy's Role in Pedagogy

Other disciplines, notably psychology and philosophy, have refined and added to our understanding of empathy in ways that are particularly relevant to writing pedagogy. Psychology has been helpful in understanding empathy's cognitive and affective components, and philosophy has provided a framework for understanding the ethical judgements involved in empathy. Martin Hoffman, a developmental psychologist and expert in moral development, defines *empathy* as "an affective response more appropriate to another's situation than one's own" (4). In other words, *empathy* is the understanding of another person's situation or circumstance from their perspective. According to Hoffman, evolution has provided us with two important prerequisites for empathy: the ability to use cognitive processes to take someone else's perspective and the ability to react affectively in response to others' feelings and sensations. For Hoffman, one of the key components of empathy is the cognitive process of perspective-taking: imagining how a victim feels or someone in the victim's situation. According to Hoffman, perspective taking developed through evolution in order to provide a flexible and smooth way for the social interaction that generates empathy and altruistic

responses. In his model, Hoffman tried to explain how these two abilities (perspective-taking and action for others) interact to produce specific empathic responses. A similar definition of empathy comes from philosopher Amy Coplan: "[*empathy*] is a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining a clear self-other differentiation" (40). In other words, as a complex process, empathy is both cognitive and affective, requiring the imaginative recreating of another's experience through a simulation that preserves the distinction between self and other. The work of psychologists like Hoffman and Coplan have helped to establish the neurological and social roots of the meaning of *empathy*.

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum's definition and analysis of empathy specifically addresses its role in teaching the humanities. She acknowledges that *pity*, *sympathy*, *empathy*, and *compassion* are often confused in the literature, both ancient and modern, making it difficult to agree on their role in pedagogy. In *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, she draws on her knowledge of the classics to define *empathy* as "an imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience without any particular evaluation of that experience" (302). *Compassion*, according to Nussbaum, entails both understanding someone is in distress and wanting to do something to alleviate it. *Sympathy* is also a closely related term that is sometimes used interchangeably with *compassion*, but Nussbaum differentiates them based on their degree of acuteness: "If there is any difference between 'sympathy' and 'compassion' in contemporary usage, it is perhaps that 'compassion' seems more intense and suggests a greater degree of suffering, both on the part of the afflicted person and on the part of the person having the emotion" (302). *Pity* is also often confused with sympathy and *compassion*, but Nussbaum points out that its contemporary use often conveys a sense of condescension that varies from the classic Greek usage, where *pity* is best understood as the English translation of *eleos* (mercy, goodwill) and *oiktos* (compassion)(301).

In *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* Nussbaum specifically addresses the important role of

empathy in teaching citizenship. Through the kinds of reading and discussion included in humanities courses, she argues, students should come to understand and appreciate a complex world representing multiple worldviews and mindsets. Graduates should be able to participate meaningfully in public and private conversations and debates that emerge from our differences. Nussbaum argues that an education in the humanities should develop the ability to think critically, recognize our interdependence, and engage the narrative imagination. She explains that this last ability is necessary "to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have" (10-11). Her explanation of narrative imagination lines up with her definition of *empathy*, but Nussbaum is careful to point out that narrative imagination is not random or unquestioning. In the context of a liberal arts education, in particular a literature classroom, she sees this type of imagination as part of a deliberative process that informs judgements about others, the world, and our role in it. Empathy requires cognitive recognition of the otherness of the other so that the observer doesn't conflate the victim's suffering with their own. In other words, empathy means awareness of others' suffering without colonizing it. According to Nussbaum, *empathy* may lead people to altruistic action, or conversely, enable the observer to exploit their understanding for their own benefit. In her larger argument, she makes the case that *compassion* includes both an awareness of others' suffering and the moral impetus to take action to alleviate suffering. It's difficult to conceive how *compassion*, as defined by Nussbaum, could occur without *empathy*, and Nussbaum argues that, in fact, *empathy* is often a prelude to, but she maintains they are separate cognitive and affective processes. Overall, Nussbaum's influential analysis has provided a broad framework for considering the ethical implications for empathy and its role in educating engaged citizens.

Nussbaum's consideration of empathy's role in preparing students for an ethical, engaged, civic life has broadly influenced

research and scholarship on teaching. In *Teaching and Learning in the 21st Century,* Fernando Reimer and Connie Chung explore how school systems in six countries are promoting the skills students will need in order to thrive as global citizens in the future. They argue that empathy is a core interpersonal competency that extends beyond individual acts of empathy to encompass an interconnected worldview that recognizes that what we do impacts others. Students, according to Reimers and Chung, need to learn empathy to transcend a fragmented culture where people only relate to those who they perceive as like them. They conclude that a twenty first century education should produce students who can see difference as an opportunity for growth and diversity as a source of strength. In "Framework for Twenty-First Century Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement," the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement emphasizes the teaching of empathy across the college curriculum. Like Reimers and Chung, the authors point to the current rise of isolationism and fragmentation to argue for the need to equip students "to be agile, creative problem solvers who draw their knowledge from multiple perspectives both domestic and global, who approach the world with empathy, and who are ready to act with others to improve the quality of life for all" (23). These sources demonstrate how the current moment in our country has prompted teachers and scholars to call for curricula that teach empathy as part of a larger goal of valuing and practicing social action and deliberative democratic decision-making. As Hoffman observed, "acts of empathy join and sustain communities," providing the means for individual and collective action (151). The task force connects empathy to respect for human dignity, the engagement of multiple perspectives, and moral discernment. These two examples demonstrate that educators have seen the increasingly toxic effects of social and political fragmentation and have identified empathy as part of the solution.

Empathy in Writing Pedagogy

Taking the insights from psychology and philosophy, scholars in composition studies have understood empathy to be a cognitive and affective process that enables a person to comprehend another's situation or circumstances from their perspective. They have argued for a view of empathy that values it as a mechanism for listening and understanding but have also recognized the need for critical approaches to the use of empathy that question its social and civic purposes (Lynch 4-5). The concept of empathy has been taken up most directly in Rogerian rhetoric, which explicitly applies the concept and practices of empathy to rhetoric. Although Carl Rogers never directly referenced empathy, he did develop a practice of radical listening that inspired composition scholars like Maxine Hairston to see empathy as a rhetorical strategy. Rogerian rhetoric asks participants to imaginatively place themselves in the other's circumstances before giving participants the opportunity to understand their position and its effect on how they see others. For Rogers, the default tendency of people to take an adversarial position that recasts and evaluates others' statements from their own perspective blocks effective communication ("Communication" 62). Authentic communication, according to Rogers, requires that participants in the conversation see the "expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view" and then be able to feel and understand multiple "frames of reference" (62). The clinical/therapeutic focus of Rogers' work is often forgotten in discussions of empathy, but for him, it remained central. For Rogers, practicing this kind of radical listening was part of a therapeutic method meant to help people achieve change through self-understanding. He was not concerned with effective persuasion; he was promoting the power of listening and understanding to change human relationships. By placing ourselves in another's frame of reference, Rogers believed we come to understand the other both cognitively and emotionally. The practice of Rogerian rhetoric remains influential in composition studies because it offers a less adversarial, more cooperative and inquiry-based approach to teaching argument. The core practice of

restating the other's position in non-judgmental terms, draws on students' ability to empathize with the perspectives of others. Ideally, this practice should help students appreciate and strengthen their voice while also realizing that their ideas are socially constructed and negotiated. Rogerian rhetoric assumes, however, that power circulates equally when students engage in empathetic listening and non-judgmental language. For students who are part of a marginalized group, understanding the position of the mainstream has often been a stressful part of their daily survival and using non-judgmental language can at least temporarily deprive them of the emotion that sustains their learning. Feminist scholars have pointed out this problem, observing that empathic listening in Rogerian rhetoric looks too much like female submission and non-judgmental language mirrors male indifference (Lassner 225).

For empathy to be a useful/meaningful practice in the teaching of writing, writers must be conscious of the ways empathy has been used to appropriate, alter, or erase the experiences of the other. Writers must understand that empathy opens a channel of communication that flows two ways: we empathize and are the objects of empathy (Lynch 6-7). Empathy is not just a practice of the privileged that functions as a "humble brag" in constructing an ethos. Empathy involves both affective understanding of others and the possibility of personal change and social action. A critical practice of empathy would balance its affordances for listening and understanding with questions about how power circulates when we empathize and what the ultimate goal of empathizing is.

Kristie Fleckenstein echoes many of the salient ideas from the field's view of empathy in her analysis of empathy's role in writing pedagogy. She acknowledges the diverse meanings of empathy across different disciplines, but agrees with Nussbaum's assertion that all emotions, including empathy, involve a complex process of "perceiving, valuing, and believing" (704). An important part of the process in empathizing, according to Fleckenstein, is discernment. Like Nussbaum's emphasis on the role of judgement in compassion, discernment involves the ability to assess information and make informed decisions. In preparing students for participation in their

social and civic lives, practicing empathy develops the critical abilities necessary to understand and respond to personal and political exigencies. Martin Hoffman's empirical argument for the connection between cognition and affect in empathy helps Fleckenstein see the important role of language in evoking and mediating empathy. Through talking, reading, and viewing, we perceive the suffering of others and match our emotional states to the other. Fleckenstein also derives her sense that empathy is multidimensional, including aspects of thinking and feeling, from Hoffman's stress on both feeling and evaluation in empathy. Hoffman's theory establishes five modes of empathic arousal, but Fleckenstein is less interested in empathic modes of arousal that are purely passive or involuntary and more interested in the empathic responses that Hoffman identifies as demanding higher cognitive processing. In particular, Fleckenstein focuses on experience mediated through language that induces empathy and the emotional and rationale aspects of empathy that promote dialogue and agency in the public sphere. A writing pedagogy that values empathy, according to Fleckenstein, enables students to recognize "difference in the midst of identification" and consider their role in civic life (714). In each of the three cases she examines, Fleckenstein shows how empathy is integral to the inward and outward movement of our thinking, the shaping of our attitudes and the actions that flow from them. Some of the skills she associates with the practice of empathy in the writing classroom include listening, analyzing, reflecting, and clarifying. Teaching empathy, for Fleckenstein, means helping students bring together emotion and thinking through careful dialogue that forms community and energizes collective action. In the current cultural/political climate, Fleckenstein's theory of empathy offers a powerful way for teachers to equip students to find ethical ways to advance our cultural/political dialogue, but the successful implementation of empathy in the writing classroom depends on students' ability to use empathy habitually, honing it for each new context. If the implication of Fleckenstein's analysis is that empathy is more than a set of skills and abilities, but, in fact, a disposition including patterns

or sets of behaviors, how are dispositions taught? Can the disposition of empathy be taught?

Empathy as a Disposition

Although student dispositions have not been widely addressed in composition research, a substantial body of work on dispositions and their impact on learning can be found in the fields of education and psychology. Ron Ritchhart, professor of education and a researcher at Project Zero, has developed a thorough and inclusive definition of dispositions for educators:

- Dispositions are acquired patterns of behavior that are under the individual's control and will as opposed to being automatically activated. push

- Dispositions are overarching sets of behaviors, not just single specific behaviors.

- They are dynamic and idiosyncratic in their contextualized deployment rather than prescribed actions to be rigidly carried out.

- More than desire and will, dispositions must be coupled with ability. Dispositions motivate, activate, and direct our abilities (20).

According to Ritchhart, dispositions are not innate, but learned and subject to individual control. This view challenges the common assumption that some people are "born" more empathetic than others, and focuses instead on how we develop habits of thought, emotion, and action. In describing "sets of behaviors," not just single skills, he highlights how dispositions are composed of a complex integration of skills and behaviors. Empathy, for example, requires a mix of skills and behaviors. Some of these skills, including attending to what others are saying and feeling, and maintaining a

self-other distinction, reflect the definitions of empathy offered by Hoffman and Coplan. Other skills, like imagining alternate ways of thinking and being, temporarily suspending personal thoughts and feelings, and applying specific strategies to novel contexts, were identified by both Nussbaum and Fleckenstein as part of empathy's role in promoting a healthy civic life. As a disposition, however, empathy also entails developing the habit of recognizing opportunities that call for empathy as well as the inclination to apply the skills associated with empathy. Complicating this further is the increasing pace of change which creates new contexts that require the adaptation of the skills, knowledge, and abilities associated with dispositions like empathy.

The complex nature of dispositions also makes it difficult to study their role in learning. In surveying the research on knowledge transfer, Perkins et al. determined that most of the research on teaching and transfer only focused on individual intellectual skills and abilities and neglected to consider the dispositions individuals may use to retrieve and use intellectual traits. (270). They also argue that while researchers often try to explain behavior in terms of skills, knowledge, or aptitude, viewing students' learning through dispositions can help explain how students acquire and use knowledge. Bronfenbrenner and Morris extend this argument and conclude that dispositional qualities don't just influence learning, they promote and/or constrain all development (795). In other words, student dispositions allow or prevent successful development from taking place. In looking at a range of desired student outcomes – from general education outcomes to more specific learning goals in composition courses - empathy emerges as an important disposition for advancing student learning.

A dispositional approach to empathy recognizes that students must be able to identify situations that call for empathy, have the basic skills to act empathetically, and have the ability to follow through and behave empathetically. Perkins et al. have argued that dispositions can only be learned through a process of enculturation and not through traditional methods of direct instruction and transmission. Like character traits, dispositions develop in response

to immersion in particular cultural settings. To develop empathy as a disposition in the writing classroom, instructors must create a culture of empathy in both tacit and implicit ways. First-year composition courses can create this culture of empathy by focusing on three elements: including opportunities to practice empathy, providing models of empathizing, and creating activities and assignments that enhance the skills associated with empathy: listening, perspective-taking, evaluating, judging, and reflecting.

Providing students with opportunities to practice empathy must go beyond organizing a few icebreaker activities at the start of the semester. A pedagogy that values empathy must set out to develop a comprehensive understanding of empathy through sustained practices of empathy. In assessing the impact of the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, Carol Severino observed that while the framework provided a comprehensive overview of the skills and habits of mind needed to develop as a writer, it lacked any guidance for establishing the kind of good classroom citizenship or classroom culture that would promote and sustain important learning experiences, like workshop or peer review. Although Severino never mentions empathy, many of the collaborative activities and assignments that are often included in first-year writing courses rely on empathy to be successful, and the opportunity to practice empathy in these activities and assignments creates a habit of empathizing. The civic engagement we seek to stimulate in our students must begin with the practice of empathy leading to good classroom citizenship. For example, regular workshop or peer review activities develop students' ability to take on the perspectives of others without losing a sense of their own identity. Peter Elbow's believing game may be the most challenging example of the opportunity students have to empathize with each other through a text. He developed the believing game as a series of reading, writing, speaking, and listening strategies to improve students' thinking. The varied elements of the game bring together two mutually opposed ways of thinking: believing and doubting. Whether students begin with a believing or doubting stance, Elbow's game guides writers as they make deliberate moves to

challenge their initial position through doubting or believing. The goal of the game is to develop a deeper awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of any position and provide direction for students as they negotiate and possibly alter their stance or perspective. Nathaniel Teich explores the role of empathy in the believing/doubting game and finds through his analysis of students' experiences that its emphasis on empathic listening leads to deeper understanding of others' perspectives. As he describes the kinds of assignments and activities he uses in his own classroom to promote the believing/doubting game, he also acknowledges that the empathic listening and "say back" associated with the believing game may be less effective when students are dealing with issues that confront their unwavering beliefs or values. This observation suggests writing prompts and assignments that rely on the inquiry model or begin with a writers' sense of perplexity may promote the practice of empathy more than asking students to write about something they feel passionate about (16). Teich's observation also suggests that empathy has limits. Students in my class were willing to engage with students they disagreed with until they didn't see the dialogue advancing in any meaningful way. If empathy is viewed as an important disposition and not simply a rhetorical strategy, students must make its practice habitual. Even when students cannot fully enter into the believing game, Teich argues, their effort to do so produces a better understanding of differences along with tolerance and civility (20). As a method for guiding teacher response or writing workshop, the believing/doubting game requires responders to not only accurately restate the writer's position, but also view it from the inside as a believer and from the outside as a doubter. Beyond skills in summary and recall, responders must also occupy the writer's perspective and from their position, identify strengths and areas for development. The success of the Elbow workshop depends on students' ability to recognize a context that calls for empathy and their inclination to act when presented with the opportunity. In this way, empathy is a disposition that may stimulate all subsequent choices the writer makes. Fleckenstein also emphasized empathy's role in fostering

forms of dialogue, like those occurring in workshop, by pointing specifically to Todd DeStiger's classroom study which concluded that these forms of dialogue produced both a sense of shared "affinities" and the acknowledgement of differences. With empathy, students learned to accept the "dissonance" often produced when difference is recognized, and even view it as a "prelude to change" (715). Complex forms of dialogue can be seen in peer review workshops where students must use empathy to understand and respond to a peer's text, but dialogues of this kind can also take place when students work collaboratively, for example, producing a classroom wiki with key terms for the course or deliberating over how to divide work in a group project. Both Teich and Fleckenstein have described the kind of encounter and dialogue that can motivate action–both as writers and citizens, but this important point may ignore an even more fundamental role for empathy in our classrooms: building a sense of community where students support each other in accomplishing a shared goal. Both Teich and Fleckenstein theorize a kind of classroom citizenship that forms a community, so that when classroom communities reach the limits of empathy, they retain their shared commitment to pursue a common goal.

Empathy and Service-Learning

Opportunities to practice empathy can also be found outside the classroom through community engagement. In the classroom, understanding what others are thinking/experiencing from within their frame of reference can be challenging, but when a course seeks to connect students to the surrounding community, the opportunities and challenges are expanded. Service-learning composition courses represent one form of community engagement that depend on empathy to promote shared learning and make a collective impact on the community. While service-learning composition courses can take many forms, generally they collaborate with a community partner to identify a goal and work together towards meeting that goal. Empathy and compassion are emotions frequently referenced in service-learning scholarship. In

fact, developing empathy and compassion are often the underlying purpose for such courses. Those who promote service-learning's potential to produce multicultural awareness, for example, argue that students' engagement with the needs of the larger community develops empathetic awareness that integrates school and community (Boss; Boyle-Baise and Langford). Scholars and teachers who advocate for service-learning as a way to improve civic education often claim that because empathy motivates humans to act on an individual, personal level, as well as a social level, it is integral to civic engagement (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee).

For three years I taught a service-learning composition course that partnered with a local family literacy program, providing Head Start, after-school programs, and evening ESL classes for adults. My students worked within the preexisting structures and activities of the Family Literacy Center to support community literacy, and collaborated with the Center staff each year to accomplish a special project, like developing a library for the Center or making a promotional video. Students also extended and built on what typically took place at the Center, with particular attention to developing literacy practices. Part of my planning for the course included creating experiences for students that allowed them to empathize and engage with our community partners. I organized opportunities for students to work with Head Start instructors and children as well as the after-school program for older students and the adult ESL classes. To help students understand their experiences, we also read about emergent literacies, learning theory, and public policy related to literacy education. I expected students to empathize in one way by demonstrating an understanding of the scope of the problem, from the struggle to pass legislation and allocate resources to the many difficulties individuals face acquiring literacy. They would also have many opportunities to open channels of communication with our community partners using empathy as a mechanism to learn about the process of becoming literate, examining their own experiences as they engaged with the people at the Center. Not only did students practice empathy, but they also observed others

empathizing and at times became the objects of empathy when they failed to understand the culture of the Center.

Working with Head Start children and adult language learners afforded students the opportunity to observe and experience how diverse groups practice empathy: from small children helping a classmate struggling to complete a group game to adults spontaneously sharing work opportunities with a classmate who recently lost a job. These acts, prompted by empathy, showed my students that empathy isn't something the powerful alone practice, but a disposition developed and practiced as part of a healthy society. Students often commented in their fieldnotes on the ability of their community partners to recognize an opportunity to empathize and respond in a timely way. Seeing others practice empathy made students more aware and critical of their own position and actions. As they reflected on what they observed, some students reassessed their view of the importance of our work at the Family Literacy Center, and others looked more directly at their own motivations and impulses to act empathically. As part of their overall learning experience, students had the opportunity to see, experience, and practice empathy. Sharing fieldnotes provided important opportunities for reflecting together on our representations and interpretations of experiences at the Family Literacy Center.

While our main focus was on the understandings we developed through fieldnotes, we also read published work on the role of empathy in civic engagement. Ruth Behar's *The Vulnerable Observer*, for example, offered students compelling examples and analysis of the role empathy plays in ethnographic research. While she doesn't use the term empathy, it's clear that the disposition of empathy is key to Behar's description of vulnerable reading and writing. Vulnerability requires researchers to open themselves to others' lives as participants/observers and seek the full range of individuals' lived experience in culture in order to gain the emic (insider) understanding of the culture and share that with others. Vulnerable writing, according to Behar, abandons the discipline of objectivity in order to reveal the researcher's emotions and invite readers to

be vulnerable as well. Behar shows how vulnerable writing and reading can lead to deeper, more comprehensive understandings of others' experiences as well as our own identity. Her own struggles to find the limits of vulnerability also helped students think critically about how they wished to position themselves as researchers and writers. While students had many opportunities to observe models of empathy at the Family Literacy Center, Behar provided both a model and an extended analysis of her experiences that students found stimulated their own reflection. In Behar's work, empathy is the hinge for vulnerable writing: providing a means for thoughtful engagement, reflection, and action on behalf of others.

All of the activities and assignments for my service-learning course tried to teach students how our classroom experiences should engage with the larger community. The curriculum offered students ways to practice and learn through empathy as well as observe, analyze and critique how empathy works. In assessing students' fieldnotes, I observed how many students recognized the importance of empathy in two key ways. First, their fieldnotes showed their efforts to understand others' experiences from the other's perspective. Often doing so produced insights about their cultural assumptions. For example, many students were initially disturbed by what they thought was a lack of "play time" in the Head Start class, but what they came to realize was that they had assumptions about childhood and play time that weren't well founded in research or practice. In a similar way, students working with ESL students were initially very frustrated by the constant changes in the enrollment of the class, but as they learned to prepare classes that could include new and old students, they also discovered that the turbulent lives of immigrants often constrained their ability to attend classes regularly. Students' fieldnotes also included analyses where they tried to reflect on and interpret their experiences, often connecting them to the course readings about literacy and ethnographic methods. In one example, a student used an article we read about writing in early childhood classrooms to understand their interactions working with a Head Start student struggling to compose a story. The course reading helped my

student understand what the Head Start student was experiencing. The effort and impulse of students to understand their community partners and represent the experience in writing gave them another opportunity to practice empathy.

In the service-learning composition course, we used empathy to establish a classroom community based on a set of shared goals and as a mechanism for engaging with our community partners. Students studied models for empathizing and through our activities and assignments, practiced empathy during the course of the semester. The pedagogy for this course connected developing the disposition of empathy with students' success as readers and writers. The dialogue that empathy created helped students assess and reassess the choices they made as students and citizens.

Empathy After the 2016 Election

The classroom experience I recounted at the start of this essay, initiating my inquiry into empathy, was from a required, first-year writing course (not service-learning), focused on developing a semester-long inquiry into a subject of each student's choosing. As part of our effort to understand where texts come from and how they evolve, we were studying and creating assemblages (a type of remix) representing the presidential campaign. In particular, we were examining alphabetic text and video versions of assemblages derived from the presidential debates. In alphabetic text versions in newspapers like *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, the assemblages offered summary and analysis. In video versions of debate skits from *Saturday Night Live*, the skits assembled material from the debates to create satire. My goal with this activity was to use a timely example to help students see how texts are built using other texts. I had not considered the disposition of empathy or its critical role in both our productive engagement with each other and the texts we considered. I planned the assemblage activity as a way to understand intertextuality and research writing but found myself questioning the role of empathy in my teaching of this course, especially in relation to my teaching of service-learning courses. In the incident I recounted, my students showed all the promise and

danger of empathy in the classroom. The Trump supporter wanted to continue the conversation with his classmates. He believed practicing empathy as Glen Beck suggested, would lead to greater understanding of multiple perspectives and a continuation of our conversation/dialogue on the election. Some students immediately saw his suggestion as an attempt to further subject them to ideas they found deeply offensive. In various ways other students explained how their identity demanded they spend their whole lives empathizing with a dominant culture even as it othered them. As I reflect on this incident in light of my review of the research on empathy and my teaching since 2016, I understand students' movement away from empathy as a way to preserve their own dignity, their own ability to learn in our class.

As we fumbled through the rest of the semester, students shared drafts of their projects in workshop activities and mini-conferences, but it was clear the vocal Trump supporter researching Black Lives Matter had more difficulty finding people willing to share drafts with him because the information and interpretations he developed made it clear he was expecting others to make the effort to understand his position without empathizing with others. The debate assemblage activity that led our class to this estrangement should have been more deliberately introduced not just as a means, to understand intertextuality but also as an interrogation of the role of empathy in our learning and civic life, its value and limitations. If I had framed it this way, the choices of some students to eventually limit their engagement with some ideas and perspectives could have been understood as a possible outcome of the classroom dialogue and not a failure.

With another presidential election season upon us, I hope reflecting on the role of empathy in first-year writing pedagogy can show its critical role in learning and civic life. Even as we recognize the possibility that empathy may reproduce unequal power relations or be used to achieve unethical goals, it remains an important disposition for academic success and a vital civic life. Practicing empathy in our composition classes helps students discover and evaluate multiple perspectives so that their positions

are always informed, and in our civic life empathy enables different groups of people to cooperate, compete, and contribute to our democratic processes. In designing the daily activities of our classes, we should create opportunities for students to practice empathy, define it, and re-define it when necessary. Through class discussion and reflection, students are able to define empathy and assess its role in their learning. For example, this could include adding a prompt to peer review reflection that asks students to describe how empathy enabled and/or constrained their dialogue with their review partner. This kind of reflection doesn't make assumptions about how empathy may work in a particular context and creates a space for exploring the fashioning and re-fashioning of our ideas. In selecting readings, we should look for texts that both model empathy for students and require that students practice empathy. For example, in my service-learning class we read Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* as an example of how a researcher and writer must practice empathy to ethically represent others' lives. For my composition student who was researching Black Lives Matter, I recommended *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nahisi Coates as a way for him to understand the movement from the perspective of the black community, not Glen Beck. In these kinds of activities, we challenge ourselves to see and re-see our positions, but also recognize empathy may have limits. We shouldn't need to avoid contentious or controversial examples or texts, but we should be explicit in framing our engagement with the texts we select so that we can question the empathy we practice and consider its affordances and constraints in facilitating meaningful conversation and learning.

Reading and writing pedagogies have long histories critiquing the role of empathy. Our present moment, with its ever-growing flood of information and more narrow flows of information through social media, degrades our ability to know and understand the complicated world we live in. Empathy is a disposition that leads students to consider multiple perspectives, delay judgments, and extend reflection. Like curiosity, perseverance, or other dispositions key to developing life-long learners, empathy can't

simply be taught as a strategy applied to a reading or writing task. Students have to be given opportunities to practice empathy, provided with models of empathizing, and through our assignments and activities, allowed to reflect and analyze the ideas and rationales of empathizing. Students will then be more likely to identify contexts that call for empathy and be willing and able to exert the cognitive and emotional effort necessary to practice empathy. Empathy is certainly more than a rhetorical strategy to build counter-arguments, although students have no difficulty identifying examples from politics, popular culture and their own lives where knowledge obtained through empathy has been used to damage individuals and the public sphere. It may be politically expedient to use knowledge gained through empathy to undermine trust, promote fear and anxiety, or sow division, but the long-term consequences to all public dialogue are damaging, eroding forms of cooperation needed for democracy. When empathy is defined as a disposition framed by ethical practice and critical skills like listening and judging, it becomes an important civic virtue. As a habit essential to the health and success of the larger community, civic virtues promote the common good and ensure the health of our shared discourse. Empathy does this best when it opens channels of communication and energizes shared social action aimed at creating a more just world.

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