

Overview:

This lesson plan will challenge participants to practice empathy and understand others' point of view using the act of imagination. They will each be given a flower and asked to imagine and write about the flower's point of view.

Objectives:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Exercise imaginative empathy.
2. Identify both possibilities and limits of empathy.

Time:

20 minutes

Group Size:

Entire group

Materials:

A container of fresh flowers, pens/pencils, paper

Note: This activity can also be done with any animate or inanimate object or being (It was once done successfully with a fallen leaf.). Flowers are likely to elicit particularly strong reactions that participants can appreciate but nevertheless depersonalize in a debrief. If there enough flowers, you can also send everyone away with one.

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Minimization
- Acceptance

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Empathy

- To interpret intercultural experience from the perspectives of own and more than one worldview.
- To demonstrate ability to act in a supportive manner that recognizes the feelings of another cultural group

Activity Instructions:

1. Ensure that all participants can see the flowers. If someone is blind, offer them a flower to interact with as they write.
2. Ask participants to imagine the point of view of the flowers. Invite them to write from that point of view in the first person (using "I" or "we"). Announce a time limit, e.g., 8 minutes. *Note:* More reflective groups can easily write for 10+ minutes. Other groups may be more comfortable with just 4-5.
3. Invite participants to share what they wrote with a partner.
4. Call the group together for a debrief with the following questions:

- How did it feel to try to write from the flower's point of view?
- What information did you use to imagine the flower's point of view?
- What surprised you, if anything, about similarities and differences with what your partner wrote?
- When you look at what you wrote, does it connect to anything you're feeling now or have felt recently? Explain.
- How might this activity have been different if I'd asked you to write from the point of view of someone in the room? From the point of view of your pen/pencil/keyboard?
- What did you learn about empathy and the limits of empathy from this activity?
- How might you apply what you learned to your "real" life?

Takeaways:

- Empathy is an act of imagination that can be practiced.
- "The other" ultimately remains unknowable. We draw on information based on appearance or what we know about past or current experiences to try to understand someone else's feelings but risk projecting our own feelings or creating feelings we think the other person must have.
- This risk can be mitigated with other humans if we have the opportunity to gather clues and validate through communication whether or not we are empathizing.
- Working toward empathy is valuable.
- Listen, listen, listen.

Questions for Exploring Empathy Further:

- Can you think of circumstances where you assumed empathy would look a certain way and then learned that the person really needed something different?
- Who benefits from empathy?
- In what circumstances might empathy be the end goal, and in what circumstances might it be a tool to other end goals, including the goal of exploiting those to whom it is offered?

Notes about Exploring Empathy Further:

- It may be helpful to provide definitions of empathy, including from the AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence VALUE Rubric.
- You might want to think about examples when empathy is used to exploit, e.g., in marketing/sales, for torture, etc.

Related Tools:

Tools to use in conjunction with this lesson:

- [Empathy not Sympathy](#)
 - Use this tool to help students understand empathy before completing this lesson.

Similar tools:

- [Lemons](#)
- [Potato Activity](#)
- [Scenery, Machinery, People](#)