Overview:

When we hear the word “tribe,” we might think of the past—a way humans used to organize themselves for the sake of survival against a perceived “other” or common enemy. However, research shows that the United States has become increasingly polarized ideologically. In other words, “us vs. them” mentalities have caused U.S. citizens to separate themselves in ways that resemble tribes.

This lesson plan will challenge participants to interrogate the relationship between tribalism and empathy. They will listen to (or read) Purdue President Mitch Daniels' 2018 commencement speech and NPR’s “Should We Have Empathy for Those We Hate?” and then participate in a class discussion, individual free-write, and small group discussion.

Objectives:

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

1. Define both tribalism and empathy.
2. Discuss how current events and social media have contributed to tribalism and a decline in empathy.
3. Describe their experiences with selective empathy and their participation in “tribes.”

Time:

30 minutes

Group Size:

Large group

Materials:

Instructions (see below), access to Mitch Daniels’ speech/transcript and NPR recording (see Links), paper, pens/pencils

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

• Polarization
• Minimization
• Acceptance

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Cultural Self-Awareness:

• To articulate insights into own cultural rules and biases (e.g., seeking complexity; aware of how their experiences have shaped these rules, and how to recognize and respond to cultural biases, resulting in a shift in self-description).
TRIBALISM AND EMPATHY
LESSON PLAN

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

Other Skills:
Friendship, Teamwork, Diversity & Inclusion

Activity instructions:

1. Together as a class, listen to (or have participants read) Purdue President Mitch Daniels’ 2018 commencement speech and NPR's “Should We Have Empathy for Those We Hate?”

2. Discuss the following questions:
   • How do these resources define tribalism and empathy? What are the similarities and differences in how they discuss these two terms?
   • Tribalism uses language to dehumanize enemies (“out” groups). Why?
   • Why do humans instinctively form tribes (safe spaces)?
   • What are the advantages and disadvantages of tribalism? Consider members of the tribe who feel like they must conform or face peer pressure.
   • Who benefits from tribal conflict?
   • The NPR piece notes how Professor Sara Konrath found a 40 percent decline in empathy, which began primarily with students in the year 2000. What do you think caused this decline?
   • In his commencement speech, President Daniels argues that social media fuels tribalism and generates hostility towards those who are different from us. Do you agree? Why or why not? Are there ways that social media can instead promote an appreciation of difference?
   • President Daniels suggests that the solution to tribalism is empathy, yet in the NPR piece, Professor Fritz Breithaupt says that empathy in fact causes tribalism. In what ways does empathy foster divisions between those who are different? How might we rethink the concept of empathy so that it is more conducive to acceptance and understanding of difference?

3. Both resources name students as either the cause or the solution to increased cultural, political, and social divisions. Therefore, ask participants to take some time to examine their own experiences with tribalism and how they employ empathy. Ask them to free-write answers to the following questions and then discuss their answers with 2-3 other participants:
   • Describe a situation where you might have used selective empathy to reinforce your own point of view and block out others. Who were you empathizing with? Who were you blocking out?
   • Can you think of an instance where you withheld empathy from someone you disagreed with, or someone whose views you felt were harmful? After engaging with these readings/recordings, do you still feel the same way?
   • What are some “tribes” that you belong to? What are some of their values, beliefs, and practices, and from where do they originate?
• Conversely, who are some of your “enemies”? What are some of their values, beliefs, and practices, and from where do they originate?
• What are some strategies for better understanding and finding common ground with those different from you? How might you employ those strategies with your own “enemies”?

Related Tools:

Similar tools:

• Disagree Better: Empathy Gym
• Empathy and Fiction
• Empathy and Tourism: Limits and Possibilities
• Empathy Bingo Exercise
• Empathy for Those We Hate
• Empathy Not Sympathy
• Limits of Empathy, The

Tools to use before this lesson:

• Ethno-Cultural Empathy Scale

Tools to use next:

• Match the Bias Type (Quiz)