

Introduction:

[Several studies](#) have shown that reading fiction may help to improve an individual's level of empathy and their ability to understand others. When we dive into a piece of fiction, we often become emotionally attached or have strong feelings about the characters in that story. This activity asks participants to consider the importance of empathy within fiction, the relationship between empathy and culture, and how their empathy for fictional characters might translate to empathy for real people or situations.

Objectives:

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

1. Define empathy.
2. Recognize how we develop empathy for fictional characters.
3. Discuss the relationship between empathy and culture.
4. Articulate how empathy for fictional characters might translate to empathy for real people or situations.

Time:

1 hour.

Group Size:

Entire Group.

Materials:

Internet access; Equipment to listen to podcast (computer/tablet/smartphone and speakers); Paper; Pens/pencils; Participant Instructions (in [Downloads](#)).

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Denial
- 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).

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.

Activity Instructions:

1. Listen to the episode of Alan Alda's podcast Clear + Vivid titled "Ann Patchett on Novelists and the Sources of Empathy in Story" up until the 9:50 mark. Advise participants to take notes on points that they find important.
2. The facilitator should then lead participants in a short discussion about empathy and fiction using the following questions:
 - What is empathy? How do we define it?
 - Alan Alda differentiates between empathy and compassion? Do you agree with his distinction? Why or why not?
 - Why is empathy important in a work of fiction?
 - What makes us feel empathetic toward fictional characters?
 - In the podcast episode, Ann Patchett says that she has difficulty writing villains because she always ends up empathizing with them. She and Alan Alda then go on to discuss how sometimes villains or antagonists become the most popular characters in a fictional story. Why do you think this happens?
 - What makes a character villainous or antagonistic? Do you think the qualities of a villain are universal, or are they more culture-dependent?
3. Make sure each participant has a paper and a pen/pencil. Ask them to write about a villainous or antagonistic character for whom they felt empathy. This character could be in any form of fictional media: novel, television show, movie, short story, comic book, etc. After they have identified their character, they should answer the following questions:
 - Why do you consider this person villainous or antagonistic?
 - Why do you feel empathy for this character, despite the bad things they may have done?
4. Once participants have finished writing, ask them to first pair and share and note the similarities and differences between their responses. Then, ask for several volunteers to share with the entire group.
5. End the activity by debriefing with the following questions:
 - What were the similarities and differences that you noticed between your and your partner's responses?
 - How might culture affect how we characterize villains/antagonists? How might it affect our empathic responses?

- How might the empathy you feel for your chosen character translate to real people and situations in your life?