



Empathizing with Individuals

CLINT ELISON

Department of Sociology & Social Work

Focusing on individuals runs counter to sociology. Contrary to what many people think, sociologists do not provide counseling; we are scientific researchers who study groups of people. While sociologists often collect data about individuals, we look for patterns and trends across many people, recognizing that there are always going to be individual deviations from the patterns. One of the group patterns sociologists seek to identify and understand is inequality. A simplified way of thinking about inequality is to recognize that people are born into different social categories (e.g., generations, social classes, genders, ethnicities, etc.), which leads to different social opportunities and outcomes. As a result, people in different social categories generally have different opportunities, regardless of their individual choices. People with more opportunities can be referred to as “privileged,” and those with fewer opportunities are often considered “disadvantaged.” These social inequalities influence our interactions with other people, and may limit our ability to understand or connect with them.

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EMPATHY

Because of our different social backgrounds, empathizing with others is crucial if we want to teach them or learn anything from them. We must imagine and try to understand how another person is feeling if we want to help them. Since we work in academia and probably enjoy learning, we may forget that academic education feels like a chore to many of our students; some of them would not be in college if they thought they could find a good job without having a degree. We may not remember what it feels like to have no clear career path or knowledge about career options. We may have forgotten the confusion and disappointment associated with dating or what it is like to try to care for a young child and write a paper at the same time. A few months ago, as I was leaving work for the day, I passed one of my students who was studying in the building. She commented, “You are so lucky! You get to go home and be done for the day.” Even though studying all evening is something I experienced many times, it reminded me what it is like to be a college student.

Christ is our perfect example of empathy. He did not experience mortality in the same way as each of us. He had power over death; He did not sin and experience the repercussions of it. The Atonement was the ultimate

empathetic act wherein He chose to experience all of our mortal challenges, including suffering, doubt, guilt, and sorrow in order to redeem us and advocate for us.

[Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning] shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, *even more than man can suffer*, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his people. (Mosiah 3:7–8, emphasis added)

Because of the Atonement, He has perfect empathy for us, and can help us individually.

In the verse I refer to as “the sociology scripture” (2 Nephi 26:33), Nephi says:

[Christ] doeth that which is good among the children of men; and he doeth nothing save it be plain unto the children of men; and he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and *all are alike unto God*, both Jew and Gentile. [emphasis added]

This verse covers any differences related to social inequalities, including race/ethnicity, servitude/slavery, incarceration, government, gender, and religion (including atheism or secularism). Christ helps people individually, regardless of their social backgrounds or circumstances. We need to approach our relationships with students with Christ-like empathy.

GIVING UP PRIVILEGES

While we do not have faculty rank at BYU–Idaho (which is related to how we interact with one another as colleagues), we do have the teacher/student distinction. If we want to empathize with individual students, we must be willing to give up some privileges associated with the position of professor. We must think of students as fellow children of God, equal to us in terms of position. At the time the Lord revealed the Book of Mormon to Joseph Smith, the meaning of the word “condescension” included

the idea of relinquishing distinction or privileges in our interactions with others (see Webster’s 1828 “American Dictionary of the English Language”). So this meaning is appropriate when we read, “the Lord God showeth us our weakness that we may know that it is by his grace, and his great condescensions unto the children of men, that we have power to do these things (Jacob 4:8). Christ’s condescensions for us are “great,” not minor; He is “the Creator of all things from the beginning” (Mosiah 3:8), but He helps imperfect people on an individual basis. He is willing to give up His privileges to help us. For example, He prayed to the Father, “the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one” (John 17:22). He gave His life for every person, and is willing to give His glory to any person, not just a privileged few. He loves our students just as much as He loves us.

There are many ways we can give up privileges to help individual students. In relation to students, our privileges include position, education, income, and sometimes even our gender, race, ethnicity, or upbringing. We often forget all the learning we have accumulated since we were undergraduates. To counter this, we can remember what it is like to sit in a classroom and be confused about something, or not know how to ask a question, or feel intimidated going to a professor’s office. Perhaps we should stop and ask students if any terms or concepts we are using are unclear. Maybe we should use an inexpensive textbook instead of the free review copy we got from the publisher, even if it means changing our assessments. We can even give our students some control over how they will learn in our courses.

In our classroom interactions with students, our rank may be important to maintain order, moderate discussions, provide feedback, assign grades, etc., but, in our individual interactions with students (even in classroom settings), relinquishing the privileges associated with our position may help us reach them. We should remember that a student’s insight may be just as good as our own, that we make mistakes, and that we still have a lot to learn. Students may have good ideas about how to improve a course, so we can ask them for feedback about the course midway through a semester, or utilize the SCOT program to get feedback about our teaching from

a student perspective. We can recognize that a student may be able to explain something to another student better than we can, and change how we teach that concept/process in the future.

In short, we can give up privileges associated with our position as professors in order to have greater empathy for our students. If we feel that we are more righteous or more intelligent than our students, we may struggle to help them learn.

INDIVIDUAL INTERACTIONS

In addition to empathy, if we want to reach individuals, we need to have individual interactions wherever possible. Memorize names. Get to class early and try to talk with individual students (not just the ones who sit at the front of the room near the podium). Ask students how they are doing when responding to their questions through email. Make ourselves available and encourage students to meet with us, even if they do not have questions related to class. Keep our office doors open whenever possible. Stop and talk with students when we pass them in the building. Avoid spending too much time with just a few students.

Often, it seems like we interact the most with two types of students: 1) those who want an A and will do whatever it takes to get it, and 2) those who are passionate about the course subject. Many students do not fit in either of those groups, especially in lower-level or required courses. And sometimes we are teaching such a large number of students that it is nearly impossible to have interactions with each one. So, how do we reach individual students if we are not able to interact with each of them? We must rely on the Holy Ghost.

TEACHING WITH THE HOLY GHOST

We are all mortal creations of Christ; His creative imprint is part of us, like an artist signing his/her work. We have social differences, but the Spirit of Christ is a universal attribute. All people have the ability to feel the Holy Ghost.

Principle Two of the BYU–Idaho Learning Model states: “No matter what subject we study, whether spiritual or temporal, the Holy Ghost may instruct us as to the truths contained therein. Through instruction by the Spirit, our learning can be tailor-made for our personal development.”

As faculty at BYU–Idaho, we study our disciplines, but we also study how to be more effective teachers. So even if we are not able to interact individually with students, the Holy Ghost can provide personalized learning experiences for them if we seek the Spirit as we prepare to teach.

The Holy Ghost can reveal specific things to us to help us empathize with people in our interactions and also help us reach individuals even if we are not able to interact with them individually. But, we must ask God for the revelation to guide us in our group and individual interactions. “The object of prayer is not to change the will of God but to secure for ourselves and for others blessings that God is already willing to grant but that are made conditional on our asking for them” (Bible Dictionary, emphasis added). Thus, if we want to reach individual students, we should ask God to reveal to us how to empathize and interact with students, and then follow the revelations we receive. We may help students directly through our interactions with them, or we may simply be a catalyst to encourage them to seek Christ and learn directly from Him.

