



More Than Kindness:

Practical Ways to Support Students
with Empathy *and* Boundaries



Agenda

Defining “Empathy”

Values & Boundaries

Flexibility & Consistency

Empowering Students

Random Tips

Discussion



Defining “Empathy”



Defining “Empathy”



Empathy

“An emotional skill set that allows us to understand what someone is experiencing and to reflect back that understanding”

Cognitive Empathy

“The ability to recognize and understand another person’s emotions”

Affective Empathy

“One’s own emotional attunement with another person’s experience”

Attributes of Empathy



1

Understand
the person's
perspective.

2

Listen.
Don't judge.

3

Recognize
emotions.
Remember
similar
emotions.

4

Communicate
to be sure you
understand
the person's
emotions.

5

Feel the
emotion
rather than
avoid it.



“ We need to dispel the myth that empathy is ‘walking in someone else’s shoes.’ Rather than walking in your shoes, I need to learn how to listen to the story you tell about what it’s like in your shoes *and* believe you even when it doesn’t match my experiences. ”



Brené Brown



Check-In Questions

How do these ideas about “empathy” add to your own definitions and understanding of “empathy”?

How might they impact interactions with students?





Check-In Questions: My Response

- When a student experiences something I haven't, I can connect through shared feelings, such as grief, stress, pain, joy, nervousness, etc.
- When a student shares an experience, I can believe them – even when I don't understand.





Values and Boundaries





Examples of Values

- Honesty
- Accountability
- Compassion
- Curiosity
- Fairness
- Inclusion
- Kindness
- Respect
- Teamwork
- Flexibility
- Serenity
- Grace
- Connection
- Knowledge
- Belonging
- Excellence
- Trust
- Vision
- Growth
- Responsibility



Check-In Questions

What are your top values?

How might your top values affect the way you interact with students and make decisions?





Check-In Questions: My Response

- One of my values is serenity, so I make decisions that lead to simplicity, calmness, and ease.
- I value honesty, but I also value respect and trust. As a result, I tend to give students the benefit of the doubt rather than ask for proof.



Boundaries



- Boundaries are the limits we set for ourselves in order to maintain healthy relationships with others.
- They allow us to live by our values.
- They allow us to act if we do not feel safe (emotionally, physically, etc.).
- They are not about controlling others, punishing, or giving ultimatums.

YES: If you ____, I will ____.

NO: You must/must not ____.

Setting Boundaries with Students - Guidelines



- Set boundaries that take *your* highest values into account.
- Focus on what *you* need in order to have the best relationship with students (both specific and in general, present and future).
- Remember that your goal is (at least) two-fold: to support students *and* to do so in a way that is sustainable so that you can continue to teach.
- Be compassionate *and* self-compassionate. Students are often very hard on themselves and care what you think. We're hard on ourselves, too.
- Set boundaries by communicating about what IS okay *and* what IS NOT okay.
- Remember that boundaries help people on both sides of the line. Structure and clearly communicated expectations are *truly* kind.

Boundaries - Examples



YES: If you ____, I will ____.

NO: You must/must not ____.

YES: If you email me to ask what you missed in class, I will not respond with a detailed account of everything we discussed.

YES: If you set up an appointment to discuss what you missed in class, I will be happy to meet with you.

NO: You must not email me to ask what you missed in class.

Setting Boundaries with Students - Example



Situation

A student fails to meet a deadline and asks to submit the assignment late

Possible Boundaries

- No late work is accepted for any reason
- Late work is accepted with a penalty
- Extensions are allowed under exceptional circumstances only
- Extensions are allowed if reasons are documented
- Extensions are allowed upon request
- All work is accepted late – no check-in needed



Check-In Questions

What other situations can occur with students that require you to know your values and set boundaries?

What boundaries might work best for you?





Flexibility & Consistency



How can we be flexible *and* consistent?



- Focus on equity rather than on equality.
- Give each student what *they* need to succeed.
- Communicate with students that their responsibility is to tell you what they need.
- When students tell you what they need...believe them.
- Prioritize serving the vast majority of students who are honest rather than stressing over the small minority who may not be.
- Trust that most students are doing the best they can with the tools they have.
- Provide options so that students know your limits and what options are possible – as well as what options are not possible.
- Build clear policies into your syllabus. Review the syllabus when you ask for student feedback for a mid-semester check-in.



Check-In Questions

What are examples of times when students need us to be flexible?

Why is flexibility so important?





Check-In Questions: My Response

- I am super-flexible with deadlines on major projects, and I distinguish them from “class prep” assignments, which I do not accept late.
- Flexibility allows me to extend grace to students, and in turn, they extend it back to me.





Empowering Students



How can we empower students without enabling them?



- Reach out to students who show signs of distress: absences from class, missing or lower-quality work, changes in behavior and/or appearance, etc.
- Schedule one-on-one meetings at least once per semester.
- Build class community – between students and with you.
- Discuss how engagement in class can look different based on varied personalities, comfort levels, anxiety, etc. Give students permission to “just show up” if needed.
- Thank students for being engaged. When an absent student returns, take notice and let them know you’re glad they’re present.
- Remember that traumatic and/or difficult circumstances may be impossible for students to share with you. Avoid requiring explanations.
- Communicate that you are here for support but also respect privacy.



Check-In Questions

What are specific ways that we can empower students?

How do boundaries help us to avoid enabling them?





Check-In Questions: My Response

- When students fall behind due to unexpected or difficult circumstances, I ask *them* to set deadlines. I'm often surprised by how little they ask for.
- Boundaries are about protecting ourselves and letting students know what is and isn't okay.





As Assortment of Random Tips



What else can we do?



- Take care of your own needs first. Giving to others when depleted is not sustainable.
- Read literary fiction (and encourage others to read it, too). Several studies, including Kidd and Castano's work published in 2013 in *Science*, link increased abilities to understand others with reading complex narratives based on multi-faceted characters.
- Abide by the belief that most people are doing the best that they can and set boundaries that reflect your values. Even if that's not the case, *you* will be more likely to let go of anger and grief, and instead, reside in a place of joy and compassion.
- Remember that trauma and other difficult experiences have long-lasting effects.
- Put your time and energy towards supporting students who need it and don't waste time and energy worrying about those who might take advantage. Don't let those in positions of privilege dampen your attempts to boost those who lack privilege.

One final thought...

YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

You may not know until years later, or you may never know, but what you do has an impact.

On those rare occasions when someone tells you what you mean to them, believe them, and know that there are countless others who feel the same way.

Tell someone – today – what they mean to you.





Thank you



Melissa Glaser

msg@ksu.edu



Discussion

