

Teaching Empathy Through Self-experience and Diary Reflections

Chalalai Taesilapasathit, Thammasat University, Thailand

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Abstract

To prevent any repeated human wrongdoings such as war, in the future, many people say that humans need to learn from their own past mistakes. However, classroom-based education about history of wars may not be adequate in order to create sense of empathy among students toward others. Empathy is important not only in the field of psychology, but also peacebuilding process; yet it is challenging for teachers of how to effectively encourage empathy within students. This study aims to explore if students can develop empathy from participating in an extracurricular project and whether students' self-experience or classroom-lecture styles of learning could better encourage empathy among students toward war trauma and war victims. The author created a three-day academic field trip to the WWII historical sites and Sangkhla Buri District Office at Kanchanaburi, Thailand, which there were eighteen students in psychology major who volunteered to participate in this project. All of the students were assigned to take parts in self-experience and class-lecture styles of learning, and that dairy writing as a tool for self-reflection was required at the end of each day. Using discourse analysis methodology, the results suggested that 94% (n = 18) of the students could develop empathy toward war trauma and war victims. Moreover, the results implied that self-experience style of learning was more efficient in teaching empathy when compared to classroom-lecture learning style.

Keywords: Empathy, Empathic learning, Self-experience, Self-reflections

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Introduction

Empathy is an emotional phenomenon when you imagine putting yourself into other people's shoes. This allows you to understand others' emotion and feeling as if you were experiencing the situation by yourself. When empathy occurs, it results to emotional connection between two, or more, parties. People start to think and concern about, not only for themselves but, others' wellbeing (Hoffman, 2000). With empathy, positive and genuine relationship can be promoted (McAllister & Irvine, 2002), and that moral development can stem from (Joliffe & Farrington, 2006).

Smith (2006) suggested that the concept of empathy can be divided into two broad categories, which are emotional empathy and cognitive empathy or mental perspective taking. While emotional empathy discusses about compassionate feeling between two or more parties that could possibly lead toward helping behavior, cognitive empathy focuses on the accurate perception and understanding of emotion between each other (Hodgers & Myers, 2007). In 2014, Decety and Cowell expanded the idea of empathy as the notion that involves three separated processes: emotional sharing, emotional concern, and perspective-taking, where emotional sharing has similar connotation with emotional contagion, the automatic emotion that happens when you learn about others' experience; emotional concern is associated with care; and lastly, perspective-taking is another term for cognitive emotion. Despite different attempts to clarify empathy, the idea gathers around two dissimilar but closely related acts, concern and positive intention to help others.

Today, empathy is a key term that is popularly mentioned in many fields of knowledge. According to the field of psychology, empathy is a useful technique that helps therapists understand what clients emotionally carry with them, which could lead to positive therapeutic outcome (Lambert & Bergin, 1994). In the same direction with psychology, empathy is addressed as an important skill that enables social workers to perform more productively with their client works (Gerdes & Segal, 2011). Additionally, empathy also plays a crucial role in the field of politics and peacebuilding due to its characteristic of being a powerful soft skill for problem solving (Pedwell, 2012), and a chief supporter for social contact (Gerdes, Segal, Jackson, & Mullins, 2011). Empathy is not only benefit professional works in any particular fields, because of its ability to strengthen human relationship; it can also benefit mankind as a whole. Like Gerdes et al. (2011) once mentioned that, "Lack of empathy underlies the worst things human beings can do to one another; high empathy underlies the best." (p. 109).

Although empathy seems to be crucially important, there is still misperception about it. People usually think of empathy as an innate capacity or a personality trait; however, this is not true. In fact, empathy is a skill that can be trained and promoted (Everhart et al., 2016). Notwithstanding the fact that empathy is teachable, the challenges facing today are how to instruct and assess whether the lesson is learned (Blasco & Moreto, 2012). Several scholars suggest that empathy can be delivered inside classroom (Aronson, 2002; Everhart et al., 2016; Gerdes et al., 2011; Salmon, 2003). Nevertheless, with the nature of empathy that deals with self-experience, Pepler, a psychologist and professor from York University, argued that classroom lecture is inadequate for teaching this topic (as cite in Hammer, 2017). Lastly, people seem to be aware of empathic teaching only when the conflict has already occurred,

which is not appropriate. Empathy needs to be encouraged in everyone as potential ways for nourishment of human relationship and prevention toward any social harms in the future.

Purpose and Methodology of the Study

This study aims to study if students can develop empathy from participating in the academic field trip and explore whether students' self-experience or classroom-lecture styles of learning could better encourage empathy toward war trauma and war victims among students. The author conducted a three-day academic field trip for senior year undergraduate students in psychology major at Thammasat University, Thailand. Using the WWII historical sites and Sangkhla Buri District Office at Kanchanaburi, the author planned the program of the trip so that every student had opportunities to self-educate through self-experience about the WWII events that happened in Kanchanaburi, and listen to the lectures provided by a descendant of a wartime hero, Khun Boonpong Sirivejaphan; and the Deputy District Chief of Sangkhla Buri District office who provides assistance for Karen refugees at Ban Ton Yang refugee camp.

Students were given information of this project prior to the field trip. They were required to participate in every activity of the trip and reflected their thoughts, emotions and feelings in their own diaries at the end of each day. After the trip was completed, students were asked to hand in their diaries, which the author employed discourse analysis as a methodology to analyze the extent of empathy that projected through vocabularies used in students' diaries.

Conclusion

There were eighteen students ($n = 18$), between the ages of 20 – 23, voluntary participated in this academic field trip, which comprised of sixteen females and two males. Among this number, there was only one student who originally came from Kanchanaburi, another one student was from the Southern part of Thailand; and other sixteen students were from the Central region of Thailand. Eight students out of the total eighteen reported having visit Kanchanaburi before, and three students out of the total number of participants addressed having no historical knowledge about WWII at Kanchanaburi at all.

Diary was analyzed as a written discourse type, which the author viewed diary as a tool for communication that students narrated their emotional reactions toward the trip to the author. Using Kanchanaburi where is home to many WWII historical sites as a location for this project, students reflected themselves by connecting the past with their present emotional states.

One diary was excluded from the analysis due to the lack of content. Student decided to draw pictures instead of writing, therefore it could not be examined by discourse analysis. This resulted to the total number of seventeen, out of eighteen, diaries left for analysis. All of the vocabularies reflected in students' diaries can be categorized into two groups, intellectual and emotional contents. According to the purpose of this study, the emotional content is the type of content that the author focused upon. After translating the Thai words into English, it was found that words closely related to the

concept of empathy that students often echoed in their diaries are sympathetic, compassion, deeply moved/reflected, depress and downcast, respectively.

Table 1: Activities of the Academic Field Trip Separated by Days and Percentage of Students Reported Empathy

Day	Activities	Percentage of Students Expressing Empathy
1	River Kwai Bridge WWII Museum Boon Pong's Residence Khao Pun Cave	47.06
2	Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum and Walking Trail	82.35
3	Sangkhla Buri District Office	5.88

After the completion of the trip, sixteen out of seventeen students (94%) expressed vocabularies that reflected empathy towards war trauma and war victims. Examination of empathy that occurred each day (Table 1) showed that the visit to Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum and Walk Trial encouraged the highest percentage of empathy (82.35%), and that visiting Sangkhla Buri District Office yielded the least empathy (5.88%) when compared to other activities.

Table 2: Students' Diary Reflections Reported by Each Type of Activities

	Self-experience (Observation)	Lecture (Historical Event)	Self-experience (Experiencing)	Lecture (Professional Work)
Activities	River Kwai Bridge WWII Museum Boon Pong's Residence Khao Pun Cave	Boon Pong's Residence	Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum and Walking Trail	Sangkhla Buri District Office
Students' Reflections	- Emotional vocabularies - Empathy	- Emotional vocabularies - Empathy - Intellectual vocabularies	- Emotional vocabularies - Empathy - Intellectual vocabularies	- Emotional vocabularies - Empathy - Intellectual vocabularies

In addition, the author studied students' diary reflections followed by each type of learning activities (Table 2). The results revealed that self-experience in the form of observation could activate emotional reactions and empathy within students toward war trauma and war victims. Nevertheless, it was less effective when compared to the self-experience style of learning that allowed student to physically participate in the activity. Interestingly, although classroom-lecture style of learning may develop less empathy when compared to self-experience learning type, it could promote

intellectually concerns among students toward war victims and well-being of Karen refugees that currently lived in Ban Ton Yang refugee camp.

This study contained several limitations. Short timeframe due to limited funding and small number of participants were among them. Plus, the results from this study was concluded with no follow up plan; therefore, it cannot be determined at this point whether empathy that emerged from this project could last long. Future studies should focus on these limitations.

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Contact email: tchalalai@tu.ac.th