Empathy in Your Classroom

TRY THESE ACTIVITIES TO BUILD EMPATHY AND COMMUNITY

#BuildEmpathy   TeachersGuild.org

Introduction

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In a 10-week design journey, **The Teachers Guild** asked its network of optimistic educators across the country to design and share ideas to cultivate empathy in their classrooms. This project generated over a hundred solutions, and sparked active conversations on and offline about the limits of empathy in schools and the role that student voice plays in building bridges across divides in classrooms today.

We launched this project because we believe in the power of empathy to positively transform student and teacher experience. If you've been in a school for any length of time, you know that whether you've asked for it or not, you're bound to encounter extremely vulnerable situations. For example, each day teachers and students are on the front lines of complex, deeply human questions—questions about difference and belonging, privilege and ability, acceptance and conflict. Teachers know the daily significance of modeling higher order emotional intelligence, including practicing compassion, love, and tolerance. As schools become more centered on the unique needs of each student, and as we continue to embrace the diversity of our schools, we will need to continue to practice and cultivate empathy for our students and for each other.

That's why we are excited to share this book of ideas with you. They highlight some of the community's most loved ideas from this past project. Use this book for inspiration. We hope you try out some of these solutions! If you do, please let us know. You can share the work you're doing to build empathy in your classrooms and schools with The Teachers Guild using the hashtags, #BuildEmpathy #TGuild, or by emailing us at hello@teachersguild.org.

With love,
The Teachers Guild
April 2017

Amazing Empathy Race

Bring your school together in a scavenger-hunt like experience to better understand each other, build empathy, and create new connections. Teams follow clues throughout the school to accomplish various activities related to empathy building. Each activity can be set up as a station within the school, with envelopes containing prompts and materials.

Example Activity: Students receive a clue about a staff member. When they correctly guess who the clue is about, they head to the staff person's office where there's an envelope waiting for them with instructions on how to conduct an interview and listen with compassion. Students then ask questions about the staff member's hopes, dreams and what makes their role fun or at times challenging.
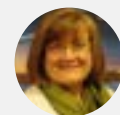
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Consider this

- Students can co-create the activities for the Amazing Empathy Race.
- Cross grade-level teams may help students build empathy across grade levels.
- Invite the community to experience the day with students and teachers.
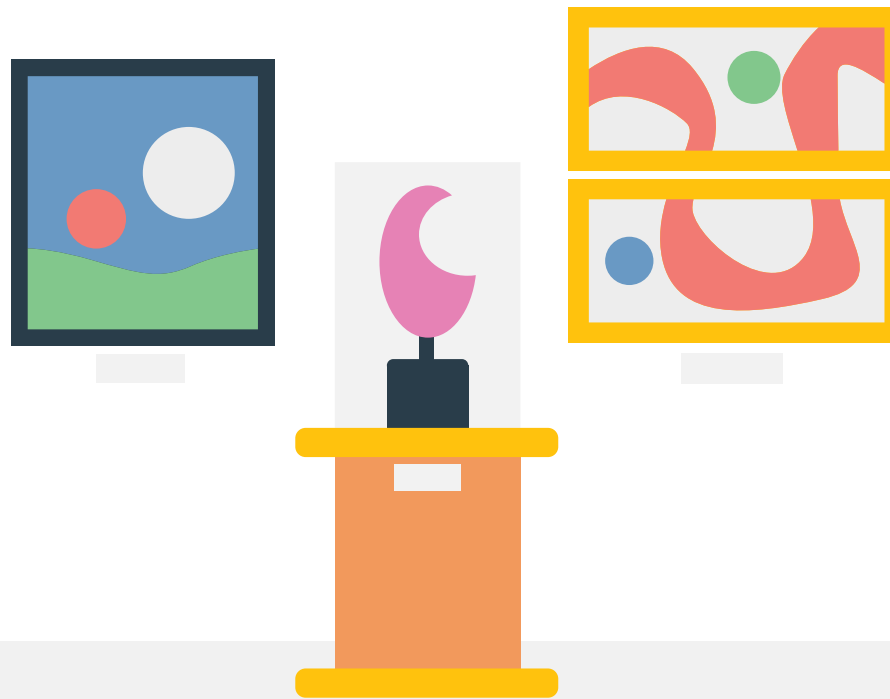- Great for the start of school year

Perfect for:

- Grades 6-12

DEA JONES
Middle School, Richland Two School District
Contact her **here**.

Sculpting Stories

With Sculpting Stories, students interview a person of their choice and create a visual representation of what they learn. Sculpting Stories will activate student curiosity, empathy, and the capacity to visually represent a story that needs to be told. You can connect this activity to the concept of reliquaries, which like shrines, offer a physical space for people to pay homage and respect.

After conducting their interview, students create a reliquary sculpture to illustrate the story and bring to life what they heard. Encourage students to select an interviewee whose story they think particularly needs to be told (i.e., homeless, veterans, residents in a nursing home).
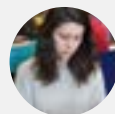
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Consider this

- Try empty shoe, match, or candy boxes. Size and shape does not matter.
- For the final showcase, invite in another class (a lower grade, for example.) or parents / community members.

Perfect for:

- Grades 3-12

LANE LANEY

High School, Richland Two School District
Contact her here.

Empathy Book Trailers

Sharing stories is a powerful way to build empathy. Students have access to hundreds of deep stories right on the bookshelves of their classroom or schools' libraries. With Empathy Book Trailers, students put into practice compassionate synthesis by doing a deep-dive into a character within a book they loved.

After reading their book, each student creates a short book trailer that focuses on the experience of a particular character within the book. By focusing on characters, students will practice synthesizing events from a person's life experiences into feelings or needs. Help students make the connection between empathy for a book character to building compassionate understanding for one another.
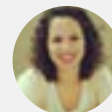
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Consider this

- If you don't have easy access to technology, students could do a brief write up and illustration that could be posted right next to the book location instead.

- Video book trailers could be posted online and students can use QR code reader apps on a smartphone to access them.

Perfect for:

- Libraries
- All grades

LORENA SWETNAM
Middle School, Richland Two School District
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The Athena Project

Students build empathy and compassion by putting research and inquiry into a cause they care about. The project is based on Athena, the Greek goddess of war, who fought for causes that led to greater justice in the world. As a PBL-style unit, the outcomes of student projects are flexible and up to the student.

Ideas include: A campaign to raise awareness, meeting with a political representative, letter-writing initiative, podcasts, or short film. Supporting students to take action on an important issue identified by them, sparks their curiosity and empathy for the people affected by this issue.

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Consider this

- Include empathy interviews of those most affected by the issue the student has identified, to help students build deeper understanding of the issue.
- Ask the students to consider the issue from multiple stakeholders viewpoints, to help students understand how the lenses we assume affect how we understand others.
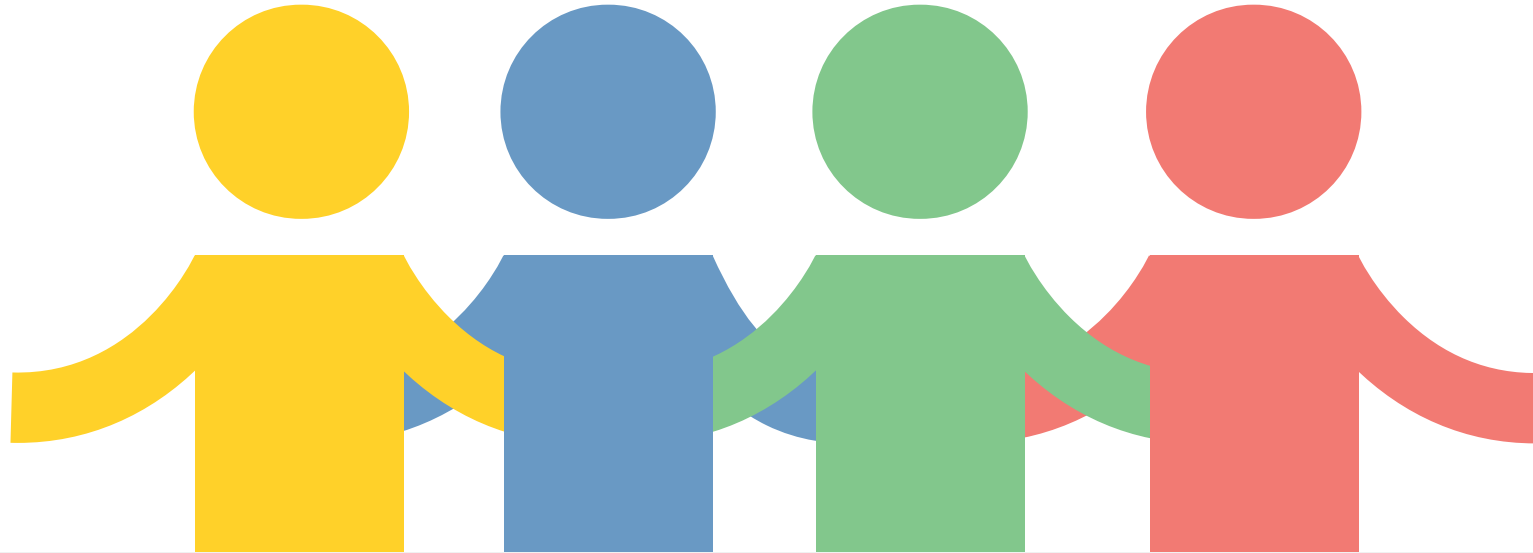
Perfect for:

- Middle School or High School

ELLEN FOX

Middle School, Richland Two School District
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The Spark Club

Start a SPARK club at your school to reduce bullying, create deeper community ties, and build empathy. SPARK stands for Students Promoting Attitudes of Respect and Kindness. The goal of SPARK clubs is to promote inclusion on school campuses, by creating a space for safety and openness; especially for students of underrepresented racial identities, sexual orientations, religions or cultural backgrounds.

SPARK members work collaboratively to build opportunities for inclusion and share their message through stories, events, and posters. SPARK pins can be made and disseminated at orientation or other school events so that a broader cross-section of the student population can learn about and demonstrate support for the SPARK club's mission.

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Consider this

- Depending on grade-level, allow SPARK clubs to be entirely student-led.
- Connect your campus' SPARK club with community organizations who might fund events in support of SPARK's mission.
- Faculty advisors can support SPARK students to identify points of exclusion within the school environment, across a variety of identifications.

Perfect for:

- Upper Elementary School, Middle School, High School

STEPHANIE SAPAKIE

High School, Gilbert School District, AZ
Contact her **here**.

Empathy Map

Empathy maps can be a powerful tool to build deeper understanding of how our words and actions connect to our thoughts and feelings. Empathy maps are divided into four sections: Think, Feel, Say. Do. Lead students through an example, using yourself as a model. (Ex: When I **feel** nervous, I might **think** I'm making mistakes. When I feel this way, I apologize a lot (**say**) and often take a deep breath (**do**).)

On a whiteboard or bulletin, draw a circle at the center and label it "our class". Then divide the board into four quadrants, labeled: **Think, Feel, Say, Do**. Each student receives four post-it notes. Ask students to write down one emotion they sometimes feel, a thought they connect to that emotion, an action they take when they have that feeling, and something they might say. Each student takes turns posting on the board. Set the tone at the start of the activity to ensure active, compassionate listening.

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Consider this

- Depending on the age of the group, highlight that sometimes we say something that is the opposite of what we're actually feeling and discuss why.

- Leave the bulletin up for the year and invite students to continuously add to it as they build deeper understanding.
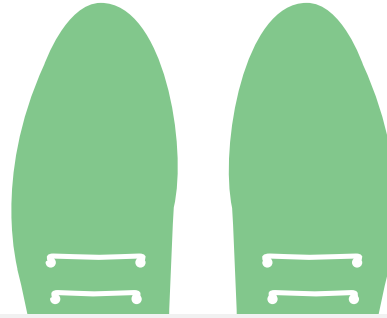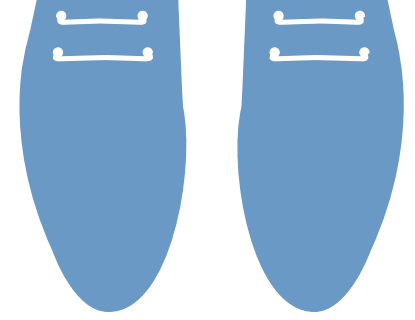
Perfect for:

- Upper Elementary School or Middle School

CLAIRE PARTLOW
Art Teacher at large, Savannah, GA
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Walk The Line

Walk the line is an activity to build empathy and understanding through movement and reflection. A masking tape line is placed on the floor in the middle of the class. Students divide with half the class about 5 steps off each side of the line, silently facing each other. The teacher reads off a series of questions, from less to more personal. If the student can answer yes to the question, they silently approach the line and stop.

After about 5 seconds of silent reflection, students return to their position. The teacher continues reading out a series of 15-20 questions. Examples of prompts on the more personal end might include: I've lost a family member, I've had to stay overnight in a hospital, I've been bullied at school. At the end, students return to their seats and have the opportunity to reflect on what they have learned by writing and discussion. Make sure to set norms at the beginning of the lesson to ensure that students feel safe to move.

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Consider this

- Co-create the prompts with students.
- Set norms with students at the beginning.
- As a follow up, ask students to write a letter to a classmate who moved on one of the same prompts they moved on and share more about that particular experience.

Perfect for:

- Middle School, High School

LORI FITZMUARICE

High School, Northside Charter High School, NY
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#WeNeedDiverseBooks Project

Students read books with diverse characters and develop empathy for the characters by connecting an aspect of their own life to that of the character's. Using this as inspiration, they will write their own stories featuring and celebrating their unique identities.

This project strives to harness the power of storytelling, reading other's stories, and writing our own stories to build empathy and connection.

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Consider this

- Students could make zines with their story and illustration or photos.
- At the end of the project, host a Storytelling on Stage event for students to share their stories, highlight the book they read, and celebrate diversity.

Perfect for:

- Upper Elementary School, Middle School, High School

JENNIFER BARTELL
High School, Richland Two School District, SC
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Belief System Map

A belief system map visually represents our unique value systems and its connection to our life experiences. By visually representing who we are and what we value, we can celebrate our differences and share points of connection. This activity can be done in connection with discussions of culture, psychology, group dynamics and beyond. Start by asking students to reflect on important life moments. Then guide them through a series of reflective activities that help to pull out how those life experiences impacted what they believe and value.

Prompts might include:
- I identify as (male, female, young, black, etc.)
- I often worry about (grades, family, etc.)
- I feel most at home when (I'm listening to music)
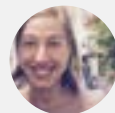- I feel insecure about (my height, etc.)

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Consider this

- Showcase students' maps in the classroom or a school hallway.
- Allow students to continue to add to the map through the year / semester.

Perfect for:

- High School

FALLON PLUNKETT

High School, Scarsdale School District, NY
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The Seven Norms of Collaboration

This system of classroom management adapts the Seven Norms of Collaboration to create a classroom that is student-led, collaborative, and empathetic towards the needs of all students. Each week a new norm is introduced and modeled; as the week progresses, students have many opportunities to use the norm and reflect on their own practice.

Students will learn the social and emotional skills to not only individually succeed in the classroom, but to also empathize with others in order to work together.

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Consider this

- Continue adding your own classroom norms or student selected norms to learn and practice throughout the year.
- Use this system to support students with reflective practices and set goals.

Perfect for:

- Grades 3-8

ELIZABETH FITZGERALD
Primary, Cherry Creek Schools, CO
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Drum Circle Monologues

Movement and rhythm enable students to connect and be vulnerable with one another. Through drum circles, students create a beat and share something about their unique identities that the group can collectively celebrate. After starting the beat, the teacher shares a personal story.

One by one, students have the opportunity to change the beat and then share their own story with the group. All students in the drum circle will join in, creating the changing rhythms in an empathetic and cathartic way for each individual.
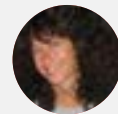
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Consider this

- If you don't have access to drums, create the beat on a desk top, or by clapping, snapping, other types of body percussion, or tapping two objects together.

- Students can incorporate beatboxing or rap to create the rhythm and tell their stories!

Perfect for:

- Grades 3-8

BARBARA SCHWARTZ-BETCHET
Elkins Park School, PA
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Thank You

the TEACHERS GUILD