How a Simple Visual Tool Can Help Teachers Connect With Students

Teaching Strategies

Pulling together information about a student into what's known as an empathy map can help teachers provide better instruction.

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Being empathic toward students directly correlates with our ability to share in their feelings and perspectives and understand their academic needs.

Empathy maps can be a scaffold that individual teachers or grade-level teams use to begin empathizing with students while simultaneously increasing their knowledge of them—which is critical for raising equity in schools. The empathy-mapping process had its beginnings in product development and was initially created to help companies understand their customers' needs.

In education, an empathy map is a simple visual that captures knowledge about the behaviors, attitudes, needs, strengths, struggles, emotional states, and other key attributes of a particular student or group of students. In my coaching work with schools, the empathy-mapping process primarily becomes a helpful tool to assist grade-level planning teams in empathizing with their students and developing more equitable and personalized lessons.

Creating maps helps teachers consider things from the students' perspectives and takes into account a child's interests and challenges.

Empathy maps also provide the following benefits:

- Additional opportunities to make better instructional decisions based on the true needs of students,
- A better understanding of students and their life/academic circumstances,

- Pertinent student information in one visual reference,
- Callouts of key insights gleaned from data or research,
- A common understanding among adults in a school, and
- An equity-based, collaborative tool for teachers and other stakeholders who interact with the same students—which can be helpful for systemic diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work.

How to Begin Empathy Mapping

Creating empathy maps is relatively simple once you gather pertinent information about your students. This may include their goals, hobbies, interests, and areas of academic, career, and social needs, as well as data from assessments. Traditional ways of collecting this information about students can be through polls, surveys, and looking at student work (e.g., reflection journals, essays, digital portfolios, and passion-project-based learning projects).

However, knowledge about students can also be gleaned in classroom discussions aimed at checking in and building rapport, paying attention to what they care about (e.g., social issues), recognizing their gifts and abilities in how they transfer learning and in things they voluntarily talk about.

I encourage educators to update this data throughout the school year. Sometimes the kids change, and so should our perspective when empathizing with them. The key here is to use what we know to create a better school experience for them. Some examples of using what we know about students through our curations may include developing unit or project themes they care about, considering how they may want to transfer learning through the products they create, and the themes of other class-based activities (field trips, clubs, etc.).

Constructing the Map

Now that we have some pertinent data, we can begin the mapping process. Treat this as a fun and informative experience—we're creating an artifact for increasing our understanding to help students. We won't always get it perfect, so it should be considered a working outline.

If you want to freehand your empathy map or collaborate with others, the only materials needed are paper, sticky notes, and markers. I prefer to print worksheets from a template I created with the following five sections:

1. Interests and goals. These items should motivate, inspire, and emotionally compel them.

2. Areas of strength. These are areas that a student excels in. Knowing their assets can be leveraged by using what they are good at to help them build on what they need to improve.

3. Academic needs. Areas of academic weakness in this section of the empathy map will vary among the content areas (i.e., English language arts, math, science, and social studies). Pay close attention to important concepts and skills that they will need for making cross-curricular connections. Here are some examples of concepts and skills that cut across multiple disciplines:

- Ability to interpret informational text
- Understanding cause and effect
- Unit conversion (proportional reasoning)
- Developing habits of mind
- Using design thinking for designing from the perspective of the end user
- Disaggregated summative and formative assessment of key data points can also be addressed here for helping to drive future remedial/instruction focuses.

4. SEL needs. The integrated framework developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL, offers essential competence areas that students need to hone their understanding, abilities, and attitudes across. These include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

5. Career needs. Career needs are an optional label in empathy mapping, as not all teachers focus their instruction on careers. However, content-area teachers should make career connections to the academic concepts and skills that they teach. Essential career skills like self-management, problem-solving, and the four Cs (communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking) can be addressed as needed.

Career and technical education (CTE) teachers should map to identify areas of weakness that prevent learners from being fully informed about the benefits of developing or following an individual college and career plan.

It's important to point out that educators are not bound to use only the five labels suggested above. Feel free to personalize the process and include labels relevant to your teaching context.

Using Empathy Maps

The empathy maps we design are helpful only if we use them. I like to use mine to guide instructional decisions that best support my learners (e.g., instructional scaffolds and personalizing learning) and to avoid cognitive overload for them by incorporating activities in lessons that promote learning as productive struggle—and not frustration.

In my DEI work, I have found the empathy mapping practice extremely useful for determining where I needed to become more socially and culturally competent regarding the students with whom colleagues and I are striving to empathize.

The push for advancing equity in schools has made educators aware that we must find creative but practical ways to understand students culturally, socially, and academically. Through empathy mapping, you may discover those essential points to consider to help them learn and apply the life, social, and academic skills that are appropriate for them.