

Cultivating Empathy through Perspective Taking

It is vital for our students to learn how to listen and understand the perspective of others. This skill builds compassion, understanding, and leads to empathic communities. Students must acknowledge and respect that all students have different experiences, values, and beliefs that shape their perspectives. Understanding how this uniquely shapes a person's actions and responses is key to building community in the classroom. Here are some activities that you can do with your class to build your students' ability to shift perspectives and empathize with others.

Different Chair, Different Views: For this activity set up 3 to 4 chairs, depending on the amount of characters you want represented in this activity. Each chair represents a different person or character in the scenario. You can use scenarios tailored to your class or you can use stories from famous literature such as *Romeo and Juliet* or *Charlotte's Web*. Label each chair with a character's name and get volunteers to sit in each chair. Given the scenario or conflict each person must say how they would feel or what they would think from their character's point of view. Those same volunteers would then switch chairs and again articulate their new character's perspective. Younger kids could use simplified stories such as *Three Little Pigs* or scenarios that have presented themselves from recess.

Different Decisions: This activity is centered around understanding why decisions might be made and what could have or should have been done differently. This activity can be paired with decision making maps. You can use this with movies, literature, or current world events. Select a critical decision that was made within this story and have students explore

how the character's experiences, values, and beliefs impacted his or her decision. This activity can dig deeper down by comparing the decision the character made with the decision your students would have made.

Questions for this activity may include:

- ❖ First define the decision that was made and identify what happened as a result of this decision.
- ❖ What experiences in this character's life do you think played a part in this decision.
- ❖ What people in this character's life influenced his or her decision?
- ❖ What role do feel age, gender, race, culture, etc played in the character's decision?
- ❖ What role does status (either socially or economically) play in the character's decision?
- ❖ What role do you feel environment (where the character lives) played in the character's decision?
- ❖ What role does the time (the year in which the story occurred) play in this character's decision?
- ❖ What may have caused the character to make a different decision?
- ❖ Would you have made the same decision and why? - This is a good opportunity to explore how different life experiences and belief systems can cause us to make different decisions.

Self Identification and Value Maps: Activities such as these help students understand why they might think, feel, or act as they do. This helps kids grasp that life is seen through individualized belief systems.

Understanding their own belief system and hearing that of others guides them to explore the vast differences and similarities within their learning communities.

Check out these resources for developing and facilitating identity maps.

- <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/discovering-my-identity>
- <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/sample-activities/social-identity-wheel/>

Literature/Movie Analysis: Using popular movie or literature pieces explore a variety of perspectives. Given a select topic, action, or problem within a selection, have students compare and contrast what the character did, said, or felt with the way they themselves would have acted or felt. It may be helpful to utilize a basic graphic organizer such as a Venn Diagram or T-Chart. Host a class conversation presenting the wide range of differences among your students and explore the “why” behind their answers.

Questions may include:

- ❖ What experiences in your life do you feel led you to your opinions or thoughts?
- ❖ What role do you feel the character’s age, race, gender, culture, family dynamics etc (depending on the context of the story) played in the character’s actions, thoughts, or feelings?
- ❖ How might the character’s thoughts, feelings, or actions be different if he or she had different experiences? (i.e different gender, age, race, community, household etc)
- ❖ Do you think you would have different opinions or thoughts if you were a different age, race, gender, etc (depending on context of the story) and why?
- ❖ What do you feel would be important to know more about this character to better understand their thoughts, actions, or feelings?