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# Empathy Activators: Strategies for Developing Empathy in Service-Learning Students

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# Empathy Activators: Strategies for Developing Empathy in Service-Learning Students

**Abstract**

This poster presentation explores the link between service-learning and the development of student empathy. It will share the initial research results of a pilot study on student empathy, service-learning, and key ingredients for cultivating empathy. It also offers instructors concrete ideas for teaching tools that activate student empathy.

**Keywords**

service-learning, community engagement, higher education, engagement, community, VCU

**Disciplines**

Higher Education

# Empathy Activators:

## Strategies for Developing Empathy in Service-Learning Students

Katie Elliott, Robin Everhart, and Lynn Pelco, Virginia Commonwealth University

### What is empathy and why should we care?

Empathy is:

- A *learnable skill* that can be developed, taught, practiced, and cultivated.
- Comprised of *perspective-taking*, empathy's cognitive component; and *compassion*, empathy's emotional component.
- College students now show **40% less** empathy than students in the 1980s and 1990s (Konrath et al., 2011).
- *Service-learning is an ideal platform* for empathy development: When students experience social issues firsthand, preconceived beliefs are challenged and cognitive dissonance occurs.

### Empathy Development Study: Methods

Everhart studied student empathy development in an existing service-learning Human Services Fieldwork course in VCU's Dept. of Psychology (12 students).

Two requirements were added:

- 1) **Empathy Self-Assessment:** Students asked to read article by Wilson (2011), determine current level of empathy (shock, normalization, engagement) and write 4-page paper. Reassessed at end of semester.
- 2) **Empathy Reflections:** Added "Empathy what?" section to the well-known "What? So what? Now what?" heuristic of service-learning reflective writing (Driscoll, 2007).

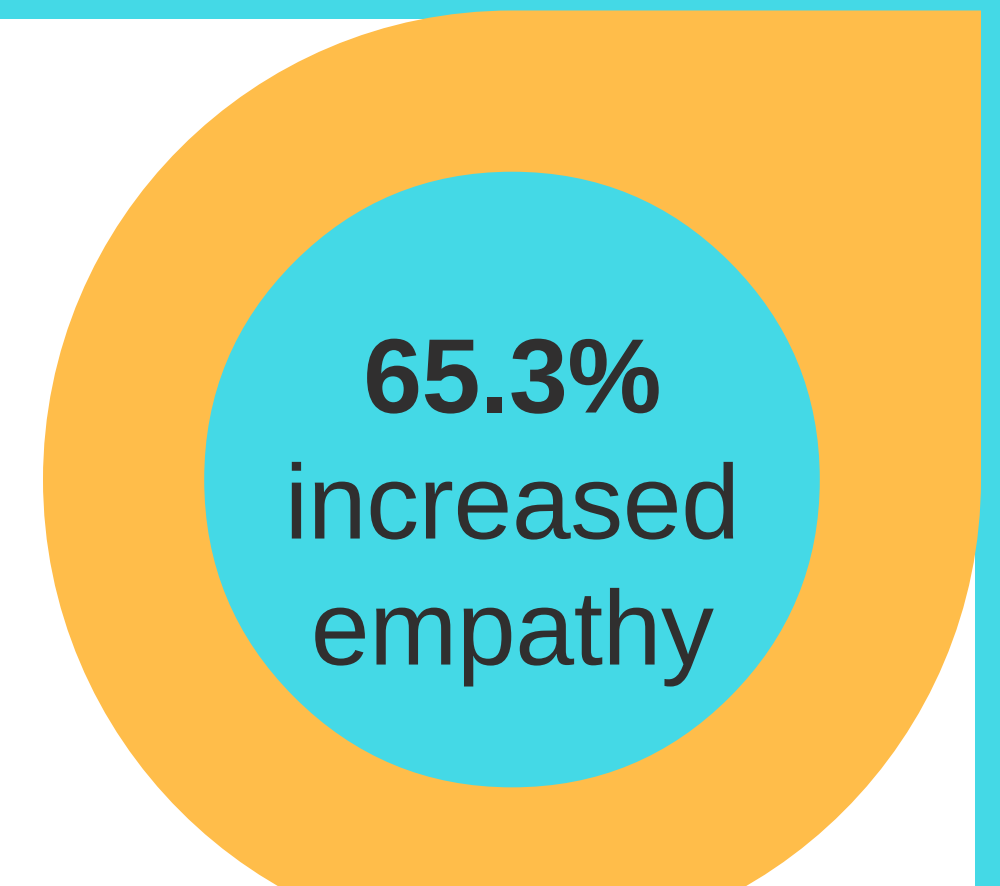
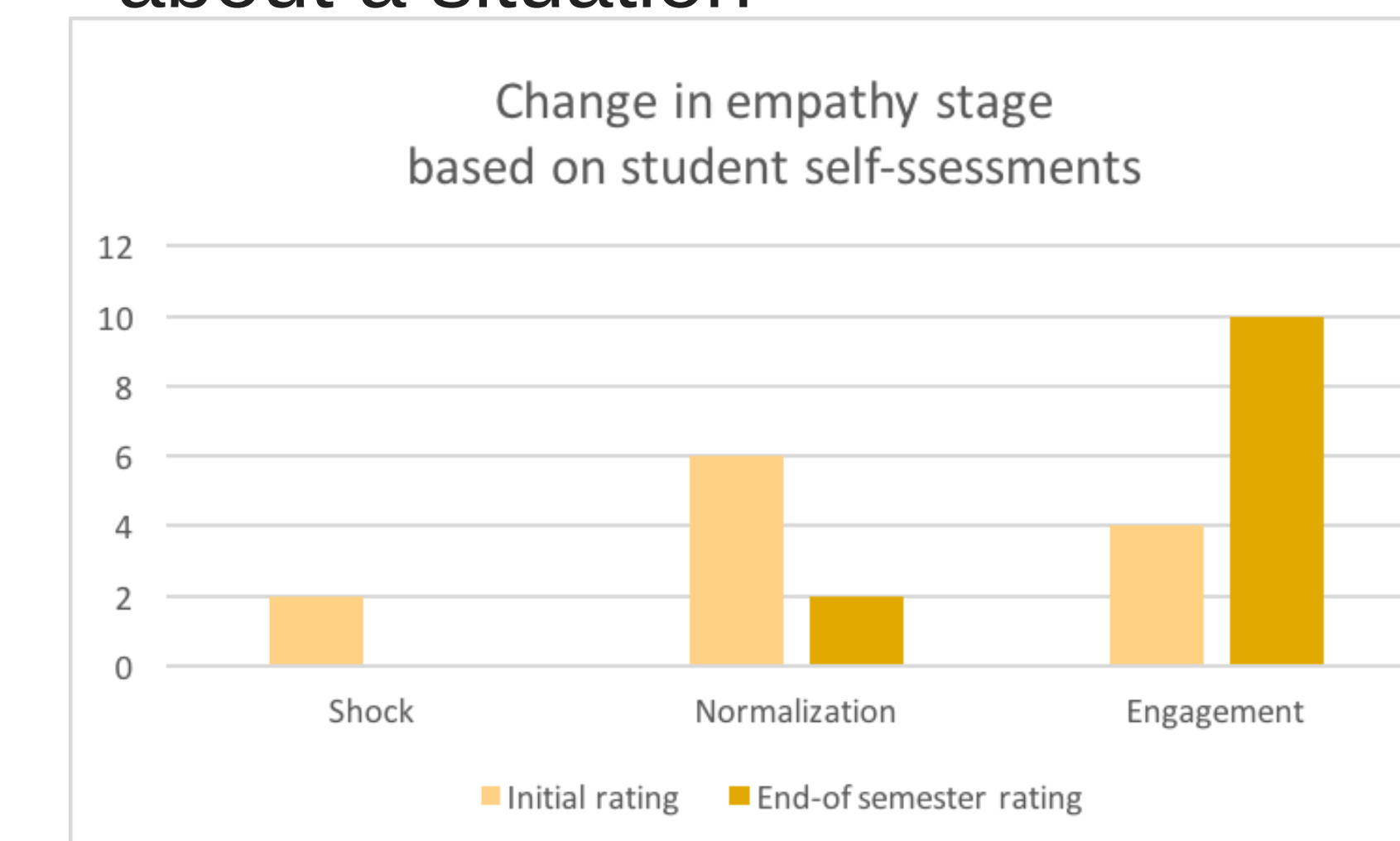
Student empathy levels at the beginning and end of semester were extracted. Reflections were coded independently by two doctoral students for empathy changes, critical incidents, and themes.

### Results /Key Findings

**5 critical incidents were tied to empathy change:**

- 1) Observing emotional experiences of others
- 2) Receiving more responsibility at site
- 3) Learning more about the people being served
- 4) Forming a personal connection with others
- 5) Experiencing challenges to previous thoughts

about a situation



Across all students, 65.3% of reflections described an increase in empathy.

#### Factors that promote growth:

get to know individuals over time, hands on experiences, gain confidence in work at site

#### Barriers to growth:

focus on sympathy not empathy, hard to understand perspective of other person

## Research into Reality: Five strategies instructors can use to encourage student empathy development

### Create meaningful student-community interactions.

- Incorporate the five critical incidents described above, key ingredients of empathy development, into direct and indirect student service.
- Teach students about the factors that promote empathy development and encourage them to seek out such opportunities.
- Talk with community partners about the impact of critical incidents and brainstorm mutually beneficial ways to include them in direct or indirect service.

### Incorporate empathy into student reflection.

- Ask students to complete an empathy self-assessment before and after their service-learning experience.
- Add an "empathy what?" component to the commonly used "What? So what? Now what?" reflection heuristic, and ask students to consider it frequently.
- Include an *expectation examination*: have students articulate their pre-service expectations, then reflect on the change in expectations following their service.

### Teach the empathy toolbox.

- Teach the related skills that fall under the umbrella of empathy, such as: empathic communication and active listening; cultural competency; entertaining cognitive complexity; and respect.
- Identify, teach, and discuss these skills with students, and give them opportunities to practice and reflect on them.
- Contextualize empathy as part of the Emotional Intelligence skillset and articulate ways these skills function in your discipline or profession.

### Reimagine classroom design and culture.

- Adjust room design for collaboration: create small-group discussions within larger classes; let students physically reorient themselves so they see each other eye-to-eye; sit amongst students instead of standing at the front of the room.
- Include activities that help student practice empathy, perspective-taking and interpersonal engagement.
- Cultivate class cultures and group dynamics that make room for vulnerability and failure, not just success and mastery.

### Add empathy to learning objectives and coursework.

- Treat empathy as a valuable learning objective and incorporate it into class readings, discussions, and assignments.
- Share and discuss the ways empathy matters in your field or profession.
- Incorporate perspective-taking components into research and writing projects.
- Assign required readings and/or writing geared towards empathy development.