



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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TEACHING COMPASSION

On October 8-9, 2009, I attended the *Educating World Citizens for the 21st Century* conference in Washington D.C. Panelists included neuroscientists, educators, and contemplatives, with His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama presiding. For six hours each day, the interdisciplinary dialogue attempted to answer such questions as, “How can our educational system evolve to meet the challenges of the 21st century?” and “How will we educate people to be compassionate, competent, ethical, and engaged citizens in an increasingly complex and interconnected world?”

In *The Outline of History* (1920), H.G. Wells wrote, “Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.” How many of us now feel this every day in the classroom? Most of my current course load is basic writing and reading classes for underprepared alternative learners, and their needs are far beyond what the traditional teaching model has to offer. As educators, we have the responsibility to prepare our students to survive and succeed. In this new, interconnected world, what does it take to do this?

For those interested in educational reform, *The Saber-Tooth Curriculum* by J. Abner Peddiwell (Harold Benjamin) should be required reading. Published in 1939, and even more relevant today, the book offers a tongue-in-cheek description of a groundbreaking discovery of the Paleolithic school system. According to Peddiwell’s “research,” the original purpose of schooling was to provide basic life skills to young people: saber-tooth tiger scaring, fish-grabbing, and woolly-horse clubbing. The entire educational system was built around developing these core skills.

As the Ice Age passed, the saber-tooth tigers succumbed to pneumonia, silt from receding glaciers made streams too murky to see fish, and the small horses went east to the dry plains. Yet schools continued to teach the same basic life skills, maintaining that they defined an educated person. Educators who suggested there was no relationship between real life and fish-grabbing were branded as heretics.

While written as a humorous satire, Benjamin’s message is painfully relevant 70 years later. Education must begin adapting to the world of today and tomorrow. Students will need to develop unprecedented levels of intercultural cooperation, and be competent, ethical, and engaged citizens. Education can no longer be measured simply in terms of knowledge and cognitive skills, but must address skills and qualities such as social responsibility, emotional self-regulation, and compassion.

Service-learning projects are excellent mechanisms for teaching social responsibility. There is research out there to attest to this, but I do not need the research to prove what I have seen first-hand. One of my writing classes is involved currently in a project to assist local non-profits with their websites. Working in small groups, they write a letter to the non-profit to offer their services; analyze the website for spelling and grammatical errors, broken links, and navigation problems; and report on their findings in a formal written presentation. The most interesting part of this project has been the level of engagement. The groups chose their own non-profits, and the majority were organizations that worked with violence prevention and extreme poverty. I have watched my bored and somewhat apathetic students becoming passionate advocates for not only their own project’s organization, but for the other groups’, as well.

But how does one teach emotional self-regulation, empathy, and compassion in a foundational college course? Panelist and developmental psychologist Dr. Nancy Eisenberg gave an excellent overview of emotional self-regulation as it relates to empathy and compassion. In her example, she described a girl named Isabella who watches a boy be rejected by other boys and feels the same emotion as the rejected boy. This is empathy. Her empathy might lead her to feel concern and motivation to help the boy to feel better. This is compassion, which leads naturally to engagement.

Empathy does not always lead to compassion, however, and as Dr. Eisenberg aptly stated, this is where it gets interesting. If Isabella has been rejected in the past and not developed emotional regulation skills,



then when she feels the boy's rejection (empathy), she begins to remember her own feelings of rejection and becomes focused on her anxiety and personal distress. Isabella now wants to make herself feel better, rather than the boy; so instead of experiencing compassion and engagement, she experiences avoidance.

I believe that most of my students experience that empathy, but I have seen a clear lack of emotional self-regulation skills and avoidance is increasingly common. If compassion leads to engagement—necessary both for success in the classroom and in life—can we teach it? Mentoring, the panelists agreed, is a well-documented way to encourage these skills and teach compassion, but it can be time-consuming and difficult to get an entire classroom to commit. The Dalai Lama pointed out that in order to experience true compassion, students need to understand that "all beings are equal...both in their desire for happiness and their right to obtain it." In doing so, they develop feelings of responsibility for others and wish to help them actively overcome their problems.

In trying to foster this sense of community within the classroom, I use a commonalities exercise. It is an excellent (and relatively brief) way to encourage the leap from empathy to compassion, and it helps to build camaraderie in the classroom, as well. I usually do it as a first week icebreaker activity. We begin in small groups with the instruction to recognize and list what all members have in common. When the groups come together as a class, they share such commonalities as the basic needs of food, shelter, and love. They also begin to discuss bigger ideas: "Just like me, everyone in my group wants to be happy," "Just like me, everyone in my group has known sadness and loneliness," and "Just like me, everyone in my group wants to be liked and belong." Once students realize that they have so many similarities, and once the foundation for caring relationships is laid, they recognize their own interconnectedness and begin to care actively for each other. I had two students hospitalized early in a semester, and classmates got together care packages and homework assignments—without any suggestions or prompting on my part. They had been strangers to each other prior to the start of the school year, but they made the leap from empathy to compassion in a few short weeks.

There were still many unanswered questions by the close of the conference, but all agreed that compassion is not merely a word, it is an action; and to teach compassion, we must emulate it. Panelist and educator Linda Lantieri shared a story from Ghandi's autobiography. In this story, a mother comes to Ghandi to ask him if he can tell her son to stop eating sugar.

Ghandi tells the mother to bring the child back in two weeks. The mother returns in two weeks with her son, and Ghandi lectures him on the dangers of eating sugar. The mother asks, "Why did you want me to wait two weeks?" Ghandi replies, "Because two weeks ago when you asked, I was still eating sugar." Thus, the only real way to teach social responsibility, emotional self-regulation, and compassion is to embody them. If we succeed, human history will shift from "a race between education and catastrophe," to a journey of enriched possibilities.

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