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Empathy as a Christian Calling

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the recent study of care in my teaching, and the role empathy plays in enacting an ethic of care. Using current research in empathy, along with reflections on my own teaching practice, the ACTS model offers some practical ways to foster and model empathy in teaching. Several case studies exemplify this approach within a variety of educational settings. Current brain research is also explored in the discussion of the model in this essay.

Introduction

After His miraculous resurrection, Jesus breakfasted and conversed with His disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. In one of His last earthly conversations, Jesus turned to Peter and said to him: “Take care of my sheep” (John 21:16, NIV). Jesus often referred to the people He ministered to as His sheep and even described those who were not walking with God as “lost sheep.” Thus Peter would have understood that to take care of Jesus’ sheep meant he was to step into the role of being a teacher, healer, confidante, and friend to those in his care, much like Jesus had been to him and others.

Jesus’ words to Peter are also a call to me, one that is both personal, in my role as a wife and mother, and professional, in my work teaching children and adults. This calling means that there are certain people God has entrusted me to watch over and care for during my brief time here on earth. I felt the importance of this calling in a deeper way after some serious medical challenges and scares recently. In this time of uncertainty and sickness, I was overwhelmed and humbled by the care I received from others. This experience left me wanting to not only understand care in a deeper way but to fulfill the calling to care for others. As a result, I have spent the past year studying how to care for others, in particular, those directly under my care, which includes my students. This in-depth study has revealed the importance of empathy as

part of caring for others, which has convinced me that it is an essential element of my teaching practice.

Cooper’s (2004) definition of empathy resonates with my experiences. She defines empathy as the ability to “accept others for who they are, to feel and perceive from their perspective and to take a constructive and long-term attitude towards the advancement of their situation by searching for solutions to meet their needs” (p.14). Empathy has also been described by Lam, Kolomitro, and Alamparambil (2011) as “an individual’s capacity to understand the behavior of others, to experience their feelings, and to express that understanding to them” (p.163). Along with these definitions, Slote (2018) offers two classifications for empathy, projective empathy, and emotional or associative empathy. While projective empathy allows an individual to imagine what another is experiencing consciously, associative empathy entails feeling emotions alongside another. Considering the key pieces of these definitions and Slote’s classifications, as well as my own views of empathy within an educational setting, it seems Peck, Maude, and Brotherson’s (2014) description best captures an understanding of empathy for the purposes of this article in stating that “empathy is the ability to feel what the child or family member is feeling, understand what the child or family member is feeling, communicate that understanding to them, and then respond in ways that meet their needs” (p.170).

In addition to educational settings, the idea of empathy is gaining traction in other aspects of society, but I question whether it is truly lived out. Brené Brown’s (2012; 2013) books and short films have begun to bring empathy to a mainstream audience, and yet, current political and digital climates seem to have shifted away from empathy in speech and treatment of others with differing views. An increase in the charged and often

anonymous rhetoric found on internet interactions is a primary example of this shift. Fulfilling the call of Jesus in these current times can be challenging, but ultimately essential. I also recognize that if I can better understand and implement empathy in my classroom, perhaps I will model tools for my students to use in practicing care in an often harsh world.

My Sheep

My professional life is split between two educational worlds. I spend several days a week substitute teaching in elementary classrooms and balance the rest of each week working as a teacher-educator at a Christian university. Both of these worlds bring me fulfillment, but a highlight is the opportunity to offer real-life examples to my undergraduate students about what it is like to be an elementary school teacher. Diversity in student ability abounds in both of these environments. Some students can easily focus and do their work without assistance, while others face daily physical and mental challenges, something that I have experienced personally since the birth of my son.

A couple of months before the birth of my son, I closed my 2nd grade classroom doors and became the vice principal of my school. I was excited to start a new adventure of being a mom and an administrator at the same time. However, about four months after the birth of my son I was diagnosed with Stage III colon cancer. As a newer mom, I had no idea how I was going to take care of my son, while also starting my treatments. During the next six months of treatment, my husband, my son, and I were cared for by those around us, by people who felt our pain, understood, and graciously responded in practical and helpful ways. As a recipient of this thoughtful care, I gained a new understanding for students with health struggles and their need for care, recognizing empathy as a powerful tool for meeting the needs of struggling students. Yet even with my own experience of care, the busyness and demands of the classroom can cause me to forget to engage with empathy towards my students. I believe this is also true for others. A recent collegial conversation highlighted that empathy is not always our first response. As a result, I began to think about ways to make empathy more prevalent in my teaching and interactions with others.

Finding Empathy

This year one of my undergraduate students has been struggling with various medical issues, including chronic migraines resulting from computer usage. When his migraine hits, he is often bedridden for up to three days. Several months ago, this student had two migraines in a row, causing him to miss a full week of classes. During lunch one day, my colleagues raised concerns about how often this student had asked for extensions in each of our classes, which led to questions about the validity of his medical struggles. Knowing that each of us profoundly cares for our students and that we have chosen to work at a college where we can be teacher-educators, I wondered how we might express empathy to this student through our actions. I attempted to turn the conversation toward an empathetic response by bringing up my own experiences with migraines and how they affect me. I proposed that this student probably needed our empathy first, rather than our criticism. My colleagues admitted that they were probably not thinking with empathy or compassion towards this student, but were instead focusing on the extra work they had to take on because of his absences. This conversation proved a turning point for me in my considerations of empathy as it caused me to reflect on how easy it is to become focused on the class or course objectives that I can become numb to the personal needs of my students. I wondered how to help myself move from a theoretical understanding of empathy to incorporating it into my teaching practice and modeling it for others.

My journey into the study of empathy has led me to many researchers: however, these are not the only voices of authority to whom I listen and learn. As a Christian, I also seek wisdom and knowledge through God's Spirit and His Word. I found the Bible offered insight into empathy as it states, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15, New International Version). This verse is a direct call to feel alongside others, reaffirming a key component of Slote's (2018) associative empathy. Considering the idea of feeling alongside another and responding in the context of both Cooper's (2004) and Peck et al.'s (2014) definitions of empathy, it appears that there is a component of action to engaging in empathy. In fact, I would state that action is the crux of

empathy. We are called to not only recognize emotions and feel alongside others but to also respond in some way towards the well-being of the individual. Noddings (2005) supports this idea by stating, “I must take into account the feelings and desires that are actually there and respond as positively as my values and capacities allow” (5th para.).

Starting with Self-Reflection

I started this journey of studying care and empathy by setting time aside for self-reflection, to better understand the places where I find myself resisting empathy and the places I recognize my own need for it. Part of my self-reflection process was to understand how care and empathy would impact my students in future situations. The other part of the process was to engage in Schön’s (1983) type of self-reflection, known as reflection-in-action, to see how care and empathy would benefit my current student population. Although the self-reflection process can be difficult during busy times, I have seen the benefit of how self-reflection helps adjust and change plans based on needs and interactions from the day. I also knew that one’s beliefs about empathy would impact how it is expressed to others (Warren, 2015), and I wanted to delve into my own beliefs about empathy.

In addition to self-reflection about care and empathy, I found it important to reflect on my teaching style. With oversized classrooms and current testing pressures, it is easy to fall into thinking about students as a group versus seeing each student as an individual. Understanding how this viewpoint influenced my decision at times to ignore a student’s individual need was eye-opening. I found that my assumptions that everyone must be doing well when the class was moving along led to students feeling overlooked.

During this time of self-reflection, I also sought the advice of some trusted mentors: I have found that others can help me clearly identify positive or negative aspects of my teaching. This time of reflection made it possible for me to begin to build empathy into my day-to-day practice with my students.

The ACTS Model

While contemplating empathy, I used personal journal writing to explore my interactions with students, as well as my own thoughts about what I was learning in the research and feedback from mentors. I began to recognize the need to slow down the busy moments of my teaching in order to contemplate the spaces for empathy.

From the concepts and definitions of empathy in research and my reflective process, I was able to develop a model to help me engage with empathy and care towards my students in day-to-day interactions. The model is known by the acronym ACTS, which stands for Actively Listen, Communicate Back, Think with Empathy, and Speak a Response. Practicing the ACTS model has enabled me to do a better job of approaching each student with the empathy required to care for their needs. A recent interaction with one of my first-grade students indicates how this model works for me.

The ACTS Model for the Elementary Classroom

The class was already late for lunch when I felt a tug on my sleeve and a little voice saying, “Teacher! Teacher! He cut in front of me!” I looked down to find a slightly red-faced girl, Susan, tugging on my sleeve. I followed her pointing finger to find Peter in line waiting to go to lunch. As I glanced around the room, I noticed that a handful of students were still hanging out by their desks, and a pile of papers had been knocked to the floor. I will admit that my first thought was to tell Susan that we were all going to make it to the cafeteria, so one’s place in line doesn’t really matter that much. Yet I also could tell by Susan’s exasperated tone of voice and angry facial expressions that she was unhappy. So instead of dismissing her obvious emotion, I decided to practice the ACTS model.

I asked her to tell me what happened and chose to actively listen to her (rather than thinking about the students still standing by their desks instead of lining up for lunch, or the upcoming meeting I had scheduled with the principal during my lunch break). After Susan finished telling me what had happened, I communicated back to her what she said while validating her feelings. I asked, “You are feeling frustrated because you were in line and he cut in front of you?” I have found the step of calmly

communicating back to be especially vital in ensuring that I have heard the student. I also want to make sure I have accurately identified the emotions the student is experiencing. My experience in using the ACTS model has shown that this step not only validates my students' feelings but begins to calm the situation immediately.

Once Susan confirmed that she was frustrated by Peter cutting in front of her, I moved into the critical stage of ACTS, which is to think with empathy. I took a moment to reflect on what it means to be a first grader and to have someone cut in front of you while you are in line. Although this scenario does not seem like a big deal to adults, I do know that young children think in black and white terms with regards to fairness and justice. Susan knew that an injustice had been done to her: She had followed the rules, while someone else had broken the rules in a way that impacted her.

Even though we were now five minutes late to lunch, I knew that empathy for my student required me to speak a response to her. I affirmed it was not kind to cut in front of others and walked with her over to Peter. I gently prompted Susan on how to talk with Peter and express to him how she was feeling. Peter apologized for cutting in front of her and went to the end of the line. Susan returned to her spot in the line, content with the resolution. I gathered up my remaining students, and we headed to the cafeteria.

The ACTS Model for the University Classroom

This relatively simple scenario in first-grade was well-served with the ACTS model, but I need to state that this model is not just for young children. The ACTS model can be applied at any level. Last week, a sophomore in my undergraduate education class came to me, visibly upset. He shared that his girlfriend had just broken up with him at breakfast, an hour before class. He was expected to give a presentation in my class that morning, and I could see he had all of his materials ready. The ACTS model helped me to recognize this student needed a caring and considerate response to his emotional distress. After listening and communicating back, I then thought with empathy towards his situation and responded with a resolution that worked for both of us; I informed him that he could do the presentation at our next class session. At the following class, he

came up to me and said, "Professor, thank you for really listening to me on Tuesday. I appreciate that you gave me an extra day, even though you didn't have to."

The ACTS model has helped me to communicate empathy in new ways. My experiences have shown that all four principles of the model are necessary to create effective and relational interactions with others. Skipping steps results in frustration. Choosing to not engage in active listening or communicating back can result in inaccurate assumptions about what a student is saying or experiencing. These faulty assumptions lead to a lack of empathy. Beyond that, if one chooses to actively listen and communicate back, but forgets to engage with empathy, the response could lead to a failed sense of resolution or connection.

The ACTS Model and Brain Research

With the increased awareness and study of brain research in education, new information is continually being made available that is helping shape and develop new teaching practices. One of the more recent discoveries in brain research is Rizzolatti, Fogassi, and Gallese (2006) discovery of mirror neurons, a concept that was further clarified by Iacoboni's (2009) practice of mirroring. This research has highlighted that mirroring has been shown to influence one's ability to connect empathetically. Gallese, Gernsbacher, Heyes, Hickok, and Iacoboni (2011) note that the concept of mirroring enables individuals to understand "the meaning of other's behavior from within" (p. 370). New information has also revealed that mirroring has more value than just confirming and validating another's feelings. Mirroring also produces a calming effect on the individual expressing their emotions (Reid, 2012). Although the terminology of mirroring is not used in the ACTS model, the concept is seen in the step "Communicate Back." Through the process of communicating back to the student what they have said, the teacher is able to start the process of calming the student before moving onto the next step of the ACTS model. In the case of younger children, this mirroring step can also help provide language for an emotion the teacher recognizes, but the student may not have been able to articulate yet.

Another area of brain research is the study of empathy gap occurring between individuals when one person has gone through the same experience that another is currently experiencing (Ruttan, McDonnell, & Nordgren, 2015). People who have had similar experiences may assume that empathy comes more naturally because of the shared experience, but hindsight for the individual who has overcome the experience can bias their view of the other person's situation and emotions (Nordgren, Plicht, & Harreveld, 2006). This is why the third step in the ACTS model, "Think with Empathy," is especially vital. This stage compels teachers to consider what specific background knowledge they have about the student and how this may be impacting the student's emotions. Even if we ourselves have had a similar experience, we must not assume we know how the other person is feeling. I know I have engaged, unintentionally, in the concept of empathy gap when interacting with others. When colleagues have expressed their level of stress from busyness, I may discount their stress compared to the stress I have experienced as a wife, mom, student, and teacher. Instead of choosing to "Think with empathy" and considering the other teacher's feelings, I found myself assuming that the teacher was feeling the same kind of stress as myself. It is only through a conscious effort that I am able to overcome my own empathy gap and truly empathize. Awareness of an empathy gap is a beginning step in the process of connecting with others.

Empathy and Expectations

It is important to note that even when I consciously use empathy with my students, I do not always resolve a situation the way the student wants. A colleague asked me about this recently. She wondered how I balanced showing empathy to my students while continuing to maintain high standards and expectations. Learning this balance is where the practice of empathy can become murky. There is no easy answer to this question because each student and situation is unique. Responding to sick students using the ACTS model, I feel the student's stress of not being able to do their work with looming deadlines, and I express empathy to the student about their dilemma. However, at times I must maintain that the established deadline is still in effect and that their late work will face the

appropriate consequences. I have both felt and expressed empathy for my student, but the academic standards remain the same. For these situations, I have learned to rely on my knowledge of the student, the immediate situation, and reasonable expectations, trusting that care is often more important for the student to experience than lowered expectations.

The ACTS Model and Jesus' Call

Empathy is not always the easiest course of action, particularly in the bustle of busy classrooms. During the last several months of self-reflection, I have noted that there have been times that I did not engage in the ACTS model towards my students because I was overwhelmed or tired. In those moments, I found myself responding quickly and thoughtlessly. One particular day I saw an elementary student sitting at her desk with her head hanging low after a recent conversation with me. Seeing the student upset, I went to her and tried to engage her in conversation. After a few minutes of talking to the student, I was able to get her to share that she had felt unheard when I had brushed off her concerns. Despite my desire to be empathetic, I had not done so. With sincere apologies to my student, I asked her to share again what she had tried to tell me before. This time while she was speaking I consciously employed the ACTS model. A hug and smile at the end of our conversation let me know that I had not only resolved the situation for my student but had also reconciled with her. Although I may still miss opportunities for empathy, my hope is that ongoing practice of the ACTS model in my day-to-day teaching will cause these incidents to become less and less overtime. The ACTS model has allowed me to connect with others in more meaningful ways, and I believe that this type of connection is a vital element of Christian caring. As I move forward grateful for the example of Christ and others, I will continue to learn, seek feedback, and practice empathy in all aspects of my personal and professional life, growing in Jesus' calling to care for His sheep.

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