Learning Empathy

**Introduction/Purpose:** The purpose of the training is to deepen our understanding of empathy in order to learn a new skill that serves to deepen our connection with others in order to promote civility when in controversy. Controversy with civility is the act of respectfully and willingly engaging in dialogue around disagreements that arise from the sharing of diverse perspectives and opinions (Alvarez, 2009; Higher Education Research Institute, 1996). Skills to cultivate include how to: engage in active listening, gain an understanding of worldviews other than one’s own, criticize ideas without demeaning the persons who express them, admit a lack of knowledge on a subject, slow the urge to judge, draw analogies in a discussion, and support others’ right to express ideas even if they are unpopular.

**Theory:** Part of learning how to understand different perspectives is finding the path to empathy. Empathy is the capacity to know emotionally what another is experiencing from within the frame of reference of that other person, the capacity to sample the feelings of another or to put one's self in another's shoes. This workshop is designed to help tap into those feelings of empathy in an effort to help improve communication skills and build connections. (Introduction and theory, 5 minutes)

**Exercise 1:** Divide the participants into groups of three or four. Have them sit in a circle. Supply them with half sheet note cards. Have each group member write down a conflict that they are currently dealing with in their lives on the card. Have them drop the cards in a pile in the middle of the group and then have each member randomly pick a card from the pile. Taking turns each group member is to then read the contents of the card as if the problem were their own. After each card is read all group members are then to give advice and feedback, including the member whose conflict was being presented, to the person speaking. The person speaking should stay act
like this is their conflict the entire time that they are receiving advice. It is important that they know that for the entirety of this exercise this is their conflict. At no point should group members out themselves as the owners of a conflict that was read by someone else. This would defeat the purpose of the exercise.

The goal of the exercise is to put oneself in the position of another individual and empathize with that individual and the conflict they are experiencing. This exercise creates a safe place to empathize with others and feel others empathize with your conflict (R. Powers & K. Kirkpatrick, personal communication, April 25, 2009). (20 minutes)

**Debrief:** Bring the group back together for a few moments of reflection and debrief. Ask participants the following: 1) How did it feel to take on someone else’s conflict as your own? 2) How did it feel to hear someone else living your conflict? 3) What was it like giving advice on your own conflict? (5-6 minutes)

**Exercise 2:** Now that the group understands what empathy is the next exercise is designed to practice ways in which we can give empathy. Divide into groups of three or four. Ask participants to use the language “Are you feeling ________?” as a question. Have a moment of silence for each group member to think of a situation in which they would like to receive empathy. This can be a conflict, past or present traumatic event, frustrating situation, or even a recent cause for celebration or joy. Allow each group to begin with a volunteer. When the volunteer is completely finished describing their situation or telling their stories have the other participants ask if the other person is feeling a particular emotion that they heard, until all appropriate feelings are exhausted. Then allow the volunteer to reflect on the feelings presented and either agree or disagree with the feeling and offer up feelings that may not have been mentioned. Have the volunteer verbally reflect on the feelings that resonates the most. Have
participants repeat the process until all group members have had a chance to receive empathy.

(10 minutes)

**Debrief:** Bring the group back together for a few moments of reflection and debrief. (5 minutes)

**Exercise 3:** The final exercise is in self-empathy. For this exercise the language of Nonviolent Communication is going to be used. Make sure to explain to the group that this language can be used when giving empathy to others as well as when engaging in self-empathy. Again split the participants into groups of three or four. Allow a moment for participants to think of something they are really hard on themselves about. For example, “I am really lazy during the week. When I get home from school all I do is watch TV. I should either workout or do homework.” Have the other group members give empathy to the speaker by connecting a feeling and need. Have group members say “Are you feeling ______ because you need ______?” Repeat until all participates have gone. (L. Lowe-Charde, personal communication, April 18, 2010). (10 minutes)

**Debrief:** Be sure to emphasize that this exercise is a way to get in touch with your inner voice of negativity and receive self-empathy. Ask if participants the following: Would you be willing to give yourself the same kind of empathy that you just received the next time your inner voice of negativity acts up. (5 minutes)

**Theory/Conclusion:** There are several other ways to give empathy that we did not practice today. Often we can show that we were listening and attempting to empathetically connect by repeating what the speaker just told us. For example, “It really sounds like you are frustrated and hurt because you wanted to go to the movies on Saturday, but your date called five minutes before they were supposed to pick you up to cancel.” Another way we can express our empathy is by mirroring the emotions that we are seeing. Sometimes we have an urge to be extra cheery
when faced with someone’s sadness in order to cheer them up. Challenge yourself to move away from this urge, unless someone requests a distraction. Instead try being sad with them if they are sad, or happy with them if they are happy. (5 minutes)

**Closing Question:** How might you apply the skills learned in this training in a situation of controversy?