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## The Empathetic Tutor

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27 April 2021

## The Empathetic Tutor

### Abstract

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, writing center tutoring moved online, and fewer social interactions occurred. This issue led to researching how to empathize with people, and specifically students in a virtual setting. Many people have emphasized the importance of focusing on the student and their individual needs. There has also been a shift in the focus of being a compassionate listener and ally to students. This essay compiles research from various academic journals, websites that list essential job skills, and news articles on empathy. This paper also researches standard methods used to implement empathy and how this looks in the everyday virtual setting. The results conclude that through intentionally choosing to be vulnerable and showing compassion and emotion, people can find ways to connect and empathize with individuals in a virtual setting.

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I recently found myself in a tutoring session where a student was sharing a deeply vulnerable experience. Suddenly, the connection started cutting out. The conversation was honest, but the choppy internet connection interrupted the flow of communication.

The recent pandemic caused the switch from in person tutoring to online tutoring. This switch leaves us vulnerable to the qualms in technology. Although this change has allowed many positive benefits, virtual tutoring eliminates human touch and impedes personal connection.

Well-educated and knowledgeable sources advised the general public to limit contact with people. The public health administration requested individuals to keep at least 6 feet apart from another person. Masks were worn, hugs were seen less, and many bustling streets became empty. The pandemic resulted in the necessary retraining of brains accustomed to human connection, to pull back, physically and emotionally, from other people. After a year, developments in vaccines are starting to allow the miracle for people to begin socializing together. As we begin moving towards a progressive state of learning how to connect with people again, there is a word that burns in my mind—empathy.

Empathy is defined by Berkeley's *The Greater Good Magazine*, as "the ability to sense other people's emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else may be thinking or feeling." Although this definition seems straightforward, there are three types of empathy that can play into being a successful practitioner of human connection. These types of empathy are "cognitive, emotional, and compassionate" (Skills you need). Each of these pieces of empathy can look different in a tutoring session at the writing center. The question is how

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can one convey empathy digitally, and has this practice of connecting with others strayed in the last few years (Miyamoto, Folk, Lyubomerski, and Dunn). People have physically and emotionally moved further away from each other in the last year. To regain this skill, we need to become aware of the three factors that influence a robust empathetic connection and apply these to virtual and in-person tutoring settings. The first factor is cognitive empathy.

Lesley University defines cognitive empathy as "how well an individual can perceive and understand the emotions of another." This approach is comparable to the saying "walk a mile in someone else's shoes." When we as individuals listen to someone's experiences and the life they have lived, we have an opportunity to choose how we respond. I remember a session with one student who shared that their native language wasn't English. They shared their experiences in learning English and the process of learning not only a new language but a new culture. I remember listening and having a moment to reflect after the session. The thought came to me that I didn't understand exactly how the student felt and the challenges they were facing. However, I could try to put my life in their perspective. I thought about what the experience of learning English would be like, as they had explained. I tried to avoid my own bias of hearing stories of people's experiences of adapting to a new culture. I listened to my student share their experience about their family. I tried to think about how that would look and sound in my life. Although this idea of "walking a mile in someone's shoes" is helpful in the path to empathy, there is more to be done to create a genuine connection emotionally.

A study done by the Korean Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry defined emotional empathy in an article titled *Cognitive and Emotional Empathy in Young Adolescents:*

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*an fMRI study* as "the ability to experience affective reactions to the observed experiences of others or share a feeling. It involves emotional contagion, motor emotion, and shared pain" (Kim, et al.) When the student shared about their experience in learning a new language, I thought about my own experience when I was learning a new language. I remembered the experience of living in a new country where I knew nothing about the culture. Granted, I understood my experience didn't even come close to the magnitude of what this student had experienced. Trying to find some way to connect allowed me to glimpse the emotion that the student felt. The effect of emotional and cognitive empathy allowed a student to feel seen and valued and allowed me the experience to grow my perspective in the way that I see the world. There is power when cognitive and emotional empathy are combined. However, there is one more aspect that can allow a genuine synergetic connection—compassion.

Skillsyouneed.com describes compassionate empathy as "feeling someone's pain, and taking action to help." The most significant difference with this type of empathy compared to the other types of empathy is the force and action that it takes to progress forward. In the scenario discussed earlier, there wasn't a heavy weight on the compassion in the empathetic response. In the moment, it didn't feel appropriate to find some way to *fix* something. The student later expressed the challenges that they were having with citing sources. Together we found a website that explained things clearly and we were able to move forward together. Each type of empathy is beneficial in the tutoring experience as both the tutor and the student learn together. As we become more familiar with the three types of empathy, this leads to understanding if someone can genuinely empathize with someone digitally. That being, can

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someone have the same empathetic connection virtually in comparison to an in-person experience?

In an online, face-to-face, Zoom tutoring session, students have their video camera set to the on position. The student may decide whether they would like their video to be seen.

Although a good conversation is plausible, many uncontrollable factors influence the flow of a session. Some of these include but are not limited to WIFI connection and delay. Clues such as facial expressions, body language, and simple social cues are taken out of the equation.

Although unprecedented challenges arise with virtual tutoring sessions, some students have had a more positive experience in an online tutoring session. According to a study done by Scott E. Caplan and Jacob S. Turner called *Bringing theory to research on computer-mediated comforting communication*, "those who are lonely or socially anxious, develop a preference for online social interaction; they feel safer, more efficacious, more confident, and more comfortable with online interpersonal interactions and relationships than with traditional FtF social activities" (Caplan & Turner). This study helps us understand that even if some students prefer some in-person experience in tutoring, studies have shown that in a safe environment, empathy is present, even in an online tutoring experience.

We, as tutors, have learned from previous writing center scholarship the importance of creating a safe space. When we intentionally provide a safe environment, we create a space for empathy. There is a time and a place for each type of empathy. Some kinds of empathy are better suited when coupled together. Sometimes a student needs someone to see them.

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Sometimes a student needs someone to listen to feel understood. As tutors we can intentionally implement empathy in every situation.

Each person can take the steps as an individual to start practicing empathy. We can start by understanding our own bias. In an interview in The New York Times, Erin L. Thomas suggested that "[t]he most important ways to confront bias and privilege in your life is to hear from others about their everyday lives, and consider how they're different from yours" (Miller).

We have an opportunity as tutors to help people feel seen and heard actively. As we take these steps in listening to what an individual has to say, see life from their perspective, and focus on connecting with the feelings that are present, we will have the opportunity to be able to communicate with people regardless of whether we share an experience with someone in person or virtually. We have the opportunity and the knowledge to tutor with empathy.

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### Key Words

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- Pandemic
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