

EMPATHY MAPPING



MAIN FEATURES

Reinforced skills (TASC Cluster)	SUPPORT, FOCUS ON SOLUTION
Suitable for	Teachers
Difficulty level	Middle
Setting	Individual, group
Minimum number of participants	1
Average time length	few weeks/month or a year
Special equipment	No
Online version	Yes

1. DESCRIPTION

The process of empathy mapping has its origin in product development and was originally designed to help companies understand the needs of their customers [6] , but can very easily be adapted to the teaching and training classroom to help us better understand the people we are working with, their pains and their motivation [4].

Empathy is the ability to put oneself in another's place, to see the world as one sees it (Rogers and Kinget, 1965). In this definition, the adverb “as” has great importance: in fact, empathy differs from other forms of relationship feelings (e.g., sympathy or identification) in that the empathic person try to grasp the other's system of values without making any judgement based on its own reference system and world-reading, and in doing so he/she does not become the other (identification), nor does he/she feel the same emotions of the interlocutor (sympathy), but maintain a distance from this.

This exercise can be used by individual teachers or small groups of teachers, or the whole classroom council to find solutions to situations which negatively impact the class climate and require broadening one's knowledge of a specific student (or a category of students).

The exercise helps build a more global and holistic view in an empathetic and non-judgmental way about a person or their behaviour.

The teacher goes through a sort of “research activity” where asking questions to get familiarity with students (what do they need/see/say/do/hear/think?, how do they feel?) is key for understanding students’ experiences and building a wider perspective. Acquiring a more global perspective allows teachers to have a better understanding of the situation and to take actions into a broader range of solutions.

This “research phase” is preparatory to the identification of possible actions to improve the relationship with students and the classroom climate in general.

When the practice is successful, the teacher(s) acquire useful and sometimes unexpected insights and solutions.

The duration of the exercise strongly depends on the complexity of the situation and the time that can be devoted to it. It might require a few weeks or months or even an entire scholastic year.

This is certainly an exercise to practice when the challenge at hand requires well-thought-out solutions rather than easy and immediate ones.

Although it is possible to build an empathy map as an individual teacher, working in a group and involving other stakeholders is always advised in order to enrich the experience.

2. AIM / BENEFITS

- Better understanding of students and their life/academic circumstances and needs
- Develop an holistic view of a potential or ongoing conflict situation
- Develop empathetic skills with students
- Share the same visual reference about students' information with colleagues
- Share a common understanding among adults in a school
- Adopt a positive attitude towards conflict resolution
- Get insights to make informed-decision
- Unlock previously hidden solutions
- Build collaboration and team-working skills due to a medium/long-term practice

3. RELATED COMPETENCIES CLUSTER(S)

SUPPORT, Focus on SOLUTION

Why

The proposed exercise is mainly linked with two clusters of the TASC framework:

- **SUPPORT:** by applying this practice the teacher strengthens and develops skills such as:
 - **Empathy:** this is the core skill reinforced by this practice, that is, the ability to put oneself in another's place, to see the world as one sees it;
 - **Avoiding blame:** the focus of this practice is to get familiar with the students experiences without assigning responsibility for a bad or conflict situation to someone in particular;
 - **Suspending judgement:** the aim is to discover the perspective of the students by being free of prejudice as much as possible;
 - **Curiosity attitude:** the practice encourages an open-minded, focused and curious attitude towards the situation at hand. It is essential to observe, experiment, ask questions, make hypotheses, and gather information from many different and apparently unrelated sources of information. In such a way it is possible to acquire an holistic and global view of the situation and therefore make more informed-decisions and take actions in a supportive environment where empathy is actively developed;
- **FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS:** by applying this practice the teacher strengthens and develops a **solution-focused approach** by first understanding students(s) social and personal values, resources and perspectives and then getting insights and solutions rather than only analysing

the behaviour(s) which negatively impacts on the classroom climate. The ultimate goal of the exercise is in fact to move from a problem solving attitude to a **solution building mindset** where the construction of solutions prevails over the full understanding of the aetiology of the problem.

4. HOW TO DO THE EXERCISE

Pre-work

Before doing the exercise it is advised to study some literature and articles about empathy mapping (see section "Bibliography - Sitography" below). If you work in a group, share team norms for collaboration.

Step 1 / Define the problem focus area:

A single teacher or a small group of teachers, or the whole classroom council identifies the problem focus area -- an area of urgent and important need for improvement confronting the class climate.

Example problem areas could be, for instance, "persistently low grades in maths" or "foreign students with strong difficulties in reading/writing", "rowdy and turbulent class especially during English lessons", "a student sleeping in class and getting bullied for it".

Step 2 / Define the students:

Think about a specific student or a group of students which are involved in the challenging situation for which you want to find a solution. Example: a specific student, BES students, foreign students, etc.

Step 3 / Select the techniques to adopt to understand students' experiences

Select the approaches that you will adopt to gather pertinent information about your students. This may include their goals, hobbies, interests, and areas of academic, career, and social needs, as well as data from assessments. This step only consists in the study, identification and selection of proper activities according to the problem at hand. The selected activities will then be implemented in step 5. Available commonly-known activities are:

- interviews;
- surveys;
- looking at student work (e.g., reflection journals, essays, digital portfolios, and passion-project-based learning projects);
- classroom discussions aimed at checking in and building relationships, paying attention to what they care about (e.g., social issues), recognizing their gifts and abilities, listening to what they voluntarily talk about [3].

Some more specific “empathy mapping” activities exist, for instance:

- empathy interview protocol
 - student shadow activity
 - identity charting
- (see doc [empathy mapping activities](#))

You can use available empathy mapping activities as they are or adapt them or make new ones according to your needs.

Step 4 / Select the empathy map template

Choose with your team the empathy map template you want to use.

Use available templates (see subfolder “empathy map templates”) or adapt them or make new ones according to your needs.

Step 5 / Apply the techniques on the field

Gather information about the students’ experience.

Step 6 / Filling in the map

Once you gather all the information you need about the students, fill up the empathy map according to the chosen template. If you work on a whiteboard, after the map is completed take a picture and make sure that every team’s member has a copy of it for further reference.

5. DEBRIEF

Once the empathy map has been completed, the real work starts. The map is a shared reference tool that needs to be transformed into an actionable plan. Take a moment to reflect first individually and then discuss within your team what has been shared. Try to focus the conversation on the following points:

- How do we feel and what we think after this experience?
- What were the main difficulties?
- Do we think/feel we empathize enough with our students? If not, what do we think are the obstacles which prevent us from putting ourselves in the “shoes” of our students?
- How confident and optimistic are we about the idea that we can improve the classroom climate?
- Is there anything we discovered about our students that we couldn't expect to find and that now changes our perceptions about them?
- What are the main needs identified? What are the similarities between them?

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- Given what we discovered about our student(s), how can we improve their well-being and the classroom climate in general?
 - How can we use the strengths of our student(s) to benefit the classroom climate?
 - Where are the pain points? How can we deal with them?

Record the main discussion points and the actions to take on a chart paper or a shared digital document.

6. SPECIAL MATERIALS

The only materials needed are paper, sticky notes, and markers. It could be very useful to print worksheets from a template (see folder “empathy map templates”).

7. TIPS AND TRICKS

Try to be always open, listening and curious to discover new things, take a moment to reflect, needs should be expressed from the student perspective; avoid deficit perspective and solutions.

8. ON-LINE VERSION

It is possible to set up an online version using both video conferencing tools (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Zoom, etc.) and online co-creation tools (e.g., [InVision Freehand](#)) which entails empathy maps. The preparatory activity is the same, as well as the steps to follow.

9. BIBLIOGRAPHY - SITOGRAPHY

1. Lammers, J. (2021). [Empathy Mapping: Bridging cultural and linguistic divides in international online education.](#)
2. [Teaching Matters - Empathy](#)
3. [Edutopia - How a Simple Visual Tool Can Help Teachers Connect With Students](#)
4. [Peachy Publications - Empathy Mapping in the Teaching and Training Classroom](#)
5. [Teacher Empathy Map - Focus on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](#)
6. [Gamestorming - Empathy Map](#)