Educating Empathy: Combining Active Listening and Moral Discovery to Facilitate Prosocial Connection

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Abstract : Cognitive and dispositional empathy is decreasing among students worldwide, particularly those at university. This paper looks at the effects of encouraging empathetic positioning in divisive topics by teaching listening skills and moral discovery to university students. Two groups of university students were given the assignment to interview individuals they disagreed with on social issues (e.g. abortion, gun control, legalization of drugs, involvement in Ukraine, etc.). One group completed the assignment with no other instruction. The second group completed the assignment after receiving instruction in active listening and Jonathan Haidt's theory of moral foundations in politics. Results show that when students are given both active listening techniques and awareness of moral foundations, they are significantly more likely to have socially positive interactions with those they disagree with on issues as compared to those who listen passively to ideological opponents. As students interacted with those they disagreed with, they evidenced prosocial behaviors of acknowledgement, validation, and even commonalities with their opponents' viewpoints, signifying a heartening trend of empathetic connection that is waning in students. The research suggests that empathy is a skill that can be nurtured by active listening but that it is more fully cultivated when paired with the concept of moral foundations underpinning political ideologies. These findings shed light on how to create more effective pedagogies for social and emotional learning, as well as inclusion.
Keywords : empathy, listening skills, moral discovery, pedagogy, prosocial behavior
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