



Enacting and Analyzing Empathy Plays

DIRECTIONS FOR THE FACILITATOR

The goal of this activity is for participants to observe, assess and reflect on empathic (or non-empathic) interactions between a teacher and student using the E.M.P.A.T.H.Y.™ Observation Protocol (General Protocol is in [Printables](#)).

- **Materials:**
 - One [Empathy Play Participant Version](#) of each play per participant
 - E.M.P.A.T.H.Y.™ Observation [Protocol General Tool](#) (two for each participant)
 - [Slideshow](#)
- **Structure:** You have 2 choices on how to facilitate this learning experience depending on what makes sense for your setting.
 - **Option 1:** *Three actors enact the play for the observers*
 - **Option 2:** *Read the play aloud for all or have each individual read the play silently*
 - *For both options, it can be helpful for participants to have their own physical copy of the play for reflection purposes (For Option 1, it is best if this is given out AFTER the play is enacted to allow for participants to pay attention to the human interactions taking place live).*
- **Activity Setup:** Consider giving a “**CONTENT WARNING**” to let participants know that there may be some scenes that might be offensive or set off some mental health symptoms. The first play contains scenes about racial stereotypes and the second about immigration stereotypes. You may choose not to participate in this activity if these scenarios may cause you stress and you can leave at any time. Also, establish [ground rules](#) for engaging in sensitive discussions.

Learning Goals (For Facilitator to guide the experience)

The first play represents a non-empathic interaction between a teacher and student. In this scenario, the student is a Black female who feels neglected by the teacher and accuses him of paying more attention to white students than her. He responds with a typical microaggression involving a baseless stereotype that Black students aren't good in STEM fields. In addition, you will notice that his discipline threat involves the school resource officer, which has the potential to perpetuate the disproportionately harsher disciplinary practices towards Black and Brown students.

During discussion of PLAY 1, it is important not to reinforce stereotypes that Black males and females are not good in STEM. It is also important not to assume that Black students eat breakfast in the cafeteria because they are on free or reduced lunch programs.

The second play represents an empathic interaction between a teacher and student. In this scenario, the student is a recent immigrant from a Southeastern Asian country who speaks English well but has difficulty translating during discussions. His parents also work during evening hours often relegating child care to him, making it difficult to complete out of school assignments.

During discussion of PLAY 2, it is important not to reinforce stereotypes that all immigrant families must work several jobs at night in order to provide for their families.

When discussing participants' entries in the E.M.P.A.T.H.Y.™ Observation Protocol, make sure to focus on the impact that each of the characteristics had on the students' mental state and actions. Address participants' (and the teachers') underlying biases that may have led to the empathic or non-empathic interaction. At the end of this document, each Facilitator Guided Play has notes throughout, pointing out certain empathy steps and/or microaggressions that should be noted somewhere during whole group reflection.

Facilitation Guide for Option 1 Acting the Play:

1. *Decide who will play the teacher, student, and narrator to read the scene.*
2. *It is best if each actor has read the play prior to the session and is ready to act it out. If that is not a possibility, give each actor time to read the play, taking note of the play cues, not just the dialogue.*
3. *Read aloud both the content warning and ground rules before beginning the play:*

CONTENT WARNING:

There are some instances in the play that might be offensive or set off some mental health symptoms. The first play contains themes about racial stereotypes and the second about immigration stereotypes. You may choose not to participate in this activity if these scenarios may cause you stress and you can leave at any time.

GROUND RULES:

Since these plays contain sensitive topics, it is important to set some ground rules about how we will talk about them.

- **Center the Voices of Minoritized People:** *While multiple perspectives are necessary for growth, it is important to center voices of people of color and people that represent other oppressed populations (e.g., impoverished, LGBTQ2S+, multilingual learners/immigrants, students with disabilities, etc.)*
- **Do Not Impose a Teaching Tax:** *Do not expect people from minoritized populations to teach the group; they are not required to do so, and should participate in ways that are affirming to them.*
- **Speak Your Truth:** *Share from your own experiences and do not speak for others*
- **Seek to Understand:** *Listen to learn, not to find the flaw in someone's perspective; think about your reason for responding before doing so.*
- **Respect Others' Experience:** *We may have different OR similar stories to share, and contexts to draw from. All are legitimate.*
- **Disagree Without Discord:** *Disagreement is expected. HOWEVER,*
 - *Approach unexpected ideas with curiosity, not accusation.*
 - *If you disagree, ask questions to understand. Don't attack the speaker.*
- **Share the Air:** *Make room for all voices to be heard, and don't dominate the conversation.*

- **Confidentiality:** Do not share the experiences you hear in this space outside this space without the participants' permission.
- **Be Comfortable with Discomfort:** We are all learning and will make mistakes. Take risks and do not freeze someone in time if they make a mistake. Assume that each participant is engaging to learn.
- **New Ground Rules:** Ask participants if there are any other ground rules they would like to add

[Adapted from UMass Amherst Equity & Inclusion Learning Community Overview](#)

4. When all actors are ready, the play should begin while the observers take notes on the E.M.P.A.T.H.Y.™ Observation Protocol general tool.
5. After the play has ended, give 5-10 minutes for observers to make any last minute reflections on their E.M.P.A.T.H.Y.™ Observation Protocol. If participants do not yet have a physical copy of the play, this is a good time to share it with them.
6. Break into small groups of 2-3 participants
 - a. Have participants compare notes from their E.M.P.A.T.H.Y.™ Observation Protocols.
 - b. Have participants answer the **Reflection Questions after Play 1** in small groups or individually.
7. Debrief as a whole group.

Reflection Questions after Play 1:

- What assumptions is the teacher making about the student prior to the interaction? Where do those assumptions come from and have you made those assumptions in your past?
- When the teacher demonstrated empathic vs non-empathic behavior towards the student, what specific actions or behaviors did you notice that conveyed empathy or lack thereof?
- After reflecting on the example, at what point in the interaction could the teacher change their response? How and why?

8. After the debrief session, conduct the same protocol with the second play.

Reflection Questions after Play 2:

- What assumptions is the teacher making about the student prior to the interaction? Where do those assumptions come from and have you made those assumptions in your past?
- When the teacher demonstrated empathic vs non-empathic behavior towards the student, what specific actions or behaviors did you notice that conveyed empathy or lack thereof?
- After reflecting on the example, at what point in the interaction could the teacher change their response? How and why?

9. *Now that both plays have been analyzed, have participants write reflections to the Overall Reflection Questions. Answers can be shared in whole group or not.*

Overall Reflection Questions:

- Based on your observations, how would you describe the importance of empathy in a classroom setting and its potential impact on students' learning outcomes and emotional well-being?
- What action steps can you take right now to ensure that you are not making deficit-based assumptions about students?
- Identify one or more students with whom you can make stronger connections. Make an action plan for getting to know them better and developing a stronger relationship.

Facilitation Guide for Option 2 Reading the Play

1. Decide if you will read the play out loud or have each person read it individually.
2. Read aloud both the content warning and ground rules before beginning the play:

CONTENT WARNING:

There are some instances in the play that might be offensive or set off some mental health symptoms. The first play contains themes about racial stereotypes and the second about immigration stereotypes. You may choose not to participate in this activity if these scenarios may cause you stress and you can leave at any time.

GROUND RULES:

Since these plays contain sensitive topics, it is important to set some ground rules about how we will talk about them.

- **Center the Voices of Minoritized People:** While multiple perspectives are necessary for growth, it is important to center voices of people of color and people that represent other oppressed populations (e.g., impoverished, LGBTQ2S+, multilingual learners/immigrants, students with disabilities, etc.)
- **Do Not Impose a Teaching Tax:** Do not expect people from minoritized populations to teach the group; they are not required to do so, and should participate in ways that are affirming to them.
- **Speak Your Truth:** Share from your own experiences and do not speak for others
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- **Confidentiality:** Do not share the experiences you hear in this space outside this space without the participants' permission.

- **Be Comfortable with Discomfort:** We are all learning and will make mistakes. Take risks and do not freeze someone in time if they make a mistake. Assume that each participant is engaging to learn.
- **New Ground Rules:** Ask participants if there are any other ground rules they would like to add

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3. After the play has been read or all participants have read the play individually, give 10-15 minutes for participants to write reflections on their E.M.P.A.T.H.Y.™ Observation Protocol.
4. Break into small groups of 2-3 participants
 - a. Have participants compare notes from their E.M.P.A.T.H.Y.™ Observation Protocols.
 - b. Have participants answer the Reflection Questions in small groups.
5. Debrief as a whole group.

Reflection Questions after Play 1:

- What assumptions is the teacher making about the student prior to the interaction? Where do those assumptions come from and have you made those assumptions in your past?
- When the teacher demonstrated empathic vs non-empathic behavior towards the student, what specific actions or behaviors did you notice that conveyed empathy or lack thereof?
- After reflecting on the example, at what point in the interaction could the teacher change their response? How and why?

6. After the debrief session, conduct the same protocol with the second play.

Reflection Questions after Play 2:

- What assumptions is the teacher making about the student prior to the interaction? Where do those assumptions come from and have you made those assumptions in your past?
- When the teacher demonstrated empathic vs non-empathic behavior towards the student, what specific actions or behaviors did you notice that conveyed empathy or lack thereof?
- After reflecting on the example, at what point in the interaction could the teacher change their response? How and why?

7. Now that both plays have been analyzed, have participants write reflections to the Overall Reflection Questions. You may choose to debrief in whole group or not.

Overall Reflection Questions:

- Based on your observations, how would you describe the importance of empathy in a classroom setting and its potential impact on students' learning outcomes and emotional well-being?
- What action steps can you take right now to ensure that you are not making deficit-based assumptions about students?
- Identify one or more students with whom you can make stronger connections. Make an action plan for getting to know them better and developing a stronger relationship.

Play One
You Never Help Me!
Facilitator Version with Notes

Narrator: *The scene for this play is a 7th grade second period standard mathematics classroom. There are 25 students (17 white, 5 Black and 3 mixed race students). The class has been learning how to write an equation in the form $y=mx + b$ from a graph, table and contextual form. Mr. Smith, a white male teacher with 17 years' experience teaching middle school mathematics, passes out the assignment that presents a contextual problem and asks students to create a table, graph and equation for the situation. About 60 seconds after passing out the paper and asking students to work independently, Shelby, a Black student, starts fidgeting in her chair and sighing loudly,*

Shelby: *[starts to sigh slightly audibly] Huhhhhh...this is stupid [under her breath but loud enough for students around her to giggle]. I don't get this.*

Mr. Smith: *[noticing students around Shelby giggling] Rob, I'm in the middle of something, can you help Shelby?*

Facilitator Note: Rob is a white, male student and, by calling on him to help, Mr. Smith is setting up a power imbalance. This communicates to a Black girl that a white boy is smarter than her in math.

Shelby: Can you just help me?!

Mr. Smith: OK, go back through the guided notes we did this week and I will be there in a sec...

Facilitator Note: Essentially, Mr. Smith is dismissing her, putting the onus on her to figure out the answer to her question.

Narrator: *After 3 minutes, Mr. Smith is still working with other students. Shelby starts tapping on the table with her pencil. Another student, Debra, yells at Shelby to stop tapping on the table with her pencil. Yells that it's annoying.*

Facilitator Note: Shelby's mental state is now unbalanced. She is embarrassed that other kids notice her frustration and that Mr. Smith still hasn't come to help her. Tapping her pencil on

the table is a neurological response, helping her regulate her stress response system. Another student telling her to stop is embarrassing as well as pushing her to stay imbalanced.

Shelby: Mr. Smith, I have a question!

Mr. Smith: Don't worry about it Shelby. It's not that important that you understand it. We will go over it in a few minutes anyway.

Shelby: Screw this [*in a low, frustrated voice and walks out of the classroom*].

Facilitator Note: When Mr. Smith tells her it's not that important she understands the material, it is an example of a microaggression that is typically leveraged against Black girls and boys, telling them that it's not important that kids like them understand math anyway.

Narrator: *Rob shouts to Mr. Smith that Shelby has left the room. Mr. Smith walks hurriedly out of the classroom and notices Shelby sitting along the wall down the hallway.*

Mr. Smith: [*yells*] Shelby! Get back in this classroom! Hurry up before I send you to Officer Richmond.

Facilitator Note: Note the loud voice and the threat to send her to the school resource officer. Such a threat has the potential to lead to a more violent altercation that could have devastating consequences for Shelby. These types of threats occur more frequently with Black and Brown children.

Narrator: *Shelby slowly rises and walks back towards the classroom. In the hallway, just outside the open door to the classroom, Mr. Smith stands tall with raised a finger near Shelby's face.*

Facilitator Note: The aggressive stance should be noted on the *E.M.P.A.T.H.Y.*TM *Observation Protocol* as well as the fact that this is a public interaction, given that he left the door open for other students to witness.

Mr. Smith [*with a condescending look*]: What were you thinking? You can't just leave class like that!

Shelby: Well, I needed help and you never came by my desk [*says loudly*]. You never do! [*faint giggles from inside the classroom*]

Mr. Smith [*angered by the accusation and the fact that students heard it remains standing above Shelby who is looking down at her feet*]: I was making my way over to your desk, but I have 24 other students in that room and I can't get to you as quickly as you want all the time.

Facilitator Note: Mr. Smith is likely put off by the accusation and attempts to defend his behavior.

Shelby: [*with a low volume*] You have plenty of time for those white kids.

Mr. Smith: [*in an accused tone of voice*]: What did you say?

Shelby: I said that you never help me, you always go to Rob and Debra's desks.

Facilitator Note: Notice that the teacher sidesteps the fact that Shelby tells him that he has a pattern of helping mostly white students. Noting his tone, she quickly recovers and changes to students' names rather than name race as the factor.

Mr. Smith: Well, they usually catch on quickly, so I swing by them first before I come to you. Math just comes quicker to them.

Shelby: I can do it, I just need a little help sometimes.

Facilitator Note: The deficit view of Shelby is very evident in this exchange. She knows she is good at math but her teacher assumes that she can't handle the material.

Mr. Smith: Well, you can always stay after school and come to my tutoring session for extra help.

Shelby [*with a bit of shame on her face*]: I have to ride the bus home.

Mr. Smith: Well, how about before school?

Shelby: I eat breakfast in the cafeteria then.

Mr. Smith: During lunch?

Shelby: I have to stand in line for my food so I don't have time to get to your room.

Facilitator Note: Participants should note the shamed look on the *E.M.P.A.T.H.Y.*™ *Observation Protocol* as well as the lack of positive affect given by Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith: Well, I guess I can't help you then. I asked Rob to help you but you refused. Why don't you let him help you?

Facilitator Note: Mr. Smith again positions a white male as more knowledgeable than Shelby.

Shelby: He makes fun of me and I feel stupid. He thinks I'm dumb, so I'll just figure it out myself. Maybe when my brother gets home from work.

Mr. Smith: Well, why don't you come back in the room. It's time to go over the problems anyway and you can ask your questions then.

Facilitator Note: Shelby's low self esteem is verbalized when she says how Rob makes her feel and that is left unheard.

END OF PLAY

Play Two

I Used to Be Good at Math

Facilitator Guide with Notes

Narrator: *Ms. Rogowski teaches 6th grade math and her class is working on the distributive property. Bisaam is a sweet kid who comes to class each day with a smile on his face. He and his family recently immigrated from Malaysia, and while he speaks English very well, he often has difficulty translating during discourse among the teacher and classmates. Bisaam, which translates to “one who is always smiling”, goes by Sam to fit in at school. He often puts his head down during class; the only time he participates is when he can work in a group. At lunch Sam is active and chatty with his friends. He has not completed any assignments outside of class and rarely turns in classwork. In class today, Ms. Rogowski hands out an activity to provide independent practice rewriting expressions using the distributive property. Sam immediately places his head down even though he was taking notes and working with his group earlier. Ms. Rogowski walks up to Sam’s desk, places her hand on his shoulder, quietly asks him to step outside and shuts the door.*

Ms. Rogowski: Let’s sit down here next to the wall and talk for a minute. [*looking him in his eyes with concern*] Sam, I noticed you had your head down as soon as I passed out the paper. Are you feeling ok?

Facilitator Note: Participants should note the eye contact from the teacher on the *E.M.P.A.T.H.Y.™ Observation Protocol* as well as the fact that she physically gets on Sam’s level. Instead of asking “What’s wrong with you?”, she asks how he is feeling.

Sam: Yes ma'am. Just tired.

Ms. Rogowski: Do you want to talk about it? It’s ok if not.

Sam: It’s ok.

Facilitator Note: Participants should notice that she empowers him to decide if he wants to talk about what is going on in his life.

Ms. Rogowski: I notice that when we have small group discussions, you are much more active, but you put your head down when it’s independent work. What’s the difference for you during that time?

Sam: Well, when we work in groups, we get to talk to each other and that keeps me awake.

Ms. Rogowski: I see. Are you only sleepy in math class or other classes?

Sam: Mostly in the morning and then after lunch.

Ms. Rogowski: How much sleep do you get at home?

Sam: Not much.

Ms. Rogowski: [*in an empathic tone*] Why aren't you getting sleep?

Sam [*looking down at his shoes embarrassed*]: My mom and dad go to work when I get home. I take care of my two sisters, get dinner, and get them to bed.

Facilitator Note: Participants should note the empathic tone of voice on the *E.M.P.A.T.H.Y.*™ *Observation Protocol* as well as the embarrassment that causes him to stop eye contact.

Ms. Rogowski: [*In a kind voice*] Sam, look at me. When I was your age, I had to babysit my brother sometimes too. That's a hard job for a kid, I know! And they can be so annoying [*both laugh*]. I am very impressed that you are able to do all of that and you're only in 6th grade. That's a lot of responsibility for a kid. Are you having trouble with the math part of class?

Facilitator Note: Participants should note Ms. Rogowski kindly asks Sam to make eye contact once again. She attempts to relate with him by sharing her own experience and makes a joke to lighten the mood.

Sam: [*looking at her in her eyes*] Not really. Sometimes.

Ms. Rogowski: When is math the easiest for you and when is it hardest for you?

Sam: When we work in groups, it is easier because they keep me awake and I can ask them about words I don't understand. It's harder when you are talking or we are having a class discussion because sometimes my English isn't so good. If we don't have small group time before you ask us to do it by ourselves, I have trouble. So, I just sleep instead.

Ms. Rogowski: Well that makes a lot of sense now. I notice when you are talking with your group that you have a lot of good math to talk about, but since I don't see any homework or class work, it's hard for me to see how good you are at it.

Facilitator Note: Participants should note the eye contact has resumed by Sam and that the teacher affirms her belief that he is good at math because she has heard his math talk.

Sam: I used to be good at math in Malaysia and I loved coming to school, but now it is different.

Ms. Rogowski: Well, what do you think about this suggestion? Any time we do independent work, I will give 5 minutes to everybody to ask questions to anyone in the room before starting.

Sam: Yeah, that sounds good.

Ms. Rogowski: But I still want you to do your homework. How can we make that happen?

Facilitator Note: Participants should notice that the teacher does not lower expectations for Sam and continues to require the same amount of homework.

Sam: Hmmm...I don't know.

Ms. Rogowski: Would you be comfortable if I called your parents to share my concern and see if we can figure out a solution together?

Sam: They don't speak English very well.

Ms. Rogowski: That's ok. I will work with Mr. Rodriguez to figure out a way to communicate. I bet we can figure this out so you can get that homework done. Thank you for sharing your situation with me.

Sam: Sure. When we go back in, can I work with my friends on this assignment?

Ms. Rogowski: You bet. Since we are at the point of independent work, why don't you ask them the questions you have and then, when ready, see what you can do on your own?

Facilitator Note: If participants do not note this, point out the fact that Ms. Rogowski is attempting to develop a relationship with Sam and his parents which is one of the most important actions for Sam's future success, and a hallmark of empathy. She also allows Sam to interact with his friends on the assignment.

Narrator: *Ms. Rogowski and Sam go quietly back into the classroom and Sam starts working on the classroom assignment.*

END OF PLAY