Developing Empathetic Leaders through Storytelling: The Global Citizen Story Exercise

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Abstract

The global citizen story is an exercise aimed at developing empathy in leaders and aspiring leaders in cross-cultural settings. The exercise, which was designed in the context of a MBA course in International Business, asks students to write and tell stories about fictitious characters in other countries. It gives students the opportunity to research the circumstances surrounding their characters, imagine their lives, re-write, and re-tell their stories in the first person in front of the class. By asking students to speak in the first person while putting themselves in the shoes of characters from other countries and cultures, the exercise aims at increasing empathy for others. The exercise can be useful in university courses or leadership development workshops that target empathy as an essential leadership skill.

Keywords: Storytelling, Empathy, Leadership, Global Citizen Story

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The poet, autobiographer and civil rights activist, Maya Angelou (1928–2014), spoke to *New York Times* journalist Kate Murphy about the paradox of empathy, saying that although it is a universal human trait, oftentimes we fail to express it. She said that "We *all* have empathy. We may not have enough *courage* to display it" (quoted in Murphy, 2013, p. SR2, emphases added). Angelou was speaking about the Ghanaian diplomat, United Nations General Secretary and Nobel Peace Prize winner Kofi Annan, and his capacity to put himself in other people's shoes. Angelou's curiosity about Anan's empathetic abilities were prompted by her quest to understand his contributions to achieving peace in global trouble spots. Therefore, taking guidance from Angelou, empathy is as vital for global leaders, like Kofi Anan, who express leadership on the world stage, as it is for those in local communities working in businesses and social enterprises. But what is empathy?

Salovey and Mayer (2004) note that empathy can be defined as the capacity to comprehend the feelings of another person and to re-experience them. They say that it consists of two dimensions: *cognitive*, understanding another person's feelings; and *affective*, feeling with the other person. In sum, empathy is a complex response to others involving the ability to understand them, feel with them, and support them with sensitivity and compassion.

In this paper I explore how empathy can be developed through the global citizen story, an exercise designed in the context of a Master of Business Administration (MBA) class in International Business. Learnings from this project can be applied in other courses focusing on leadership development. After reviewing the theoretical foundations on the role of empathy in leadership theory and on its development through stories, I describe the activity and its implementation. Finally, I discuss the results of the exercise and explore some of its limitations. Through research, imagination, writing, and storytelling, the assignment to craft a global citizen story allows the students to empathize with a person in another country who is facing a challenge, helping them identify with that person's circumstances.

Theoretical Foundations

In the literature, empathy is mentioned, either explicitly or implicitly, as an important skill that prompts transformational, charismatic, and authentic leadership, along with emotional intelligence. Kock et al. (2018) argue that as leaders understand and support their staff's affective states, they provide the kind of support which translates into excellent performance. Thus, as Northhouse (2010) claims, empathy is a precondition for effective leadership.

Transformational leadership, the first of the four approaches associated with empathy, is defined by Bass (1990) as the leader's capacity to generate admiration (often called the leader's idealized influence), their ability to motivate and inspire followers, the capacity to stimulate followers intellectually, and an ability to be perceived by followers as caring for their individual needs. It is in this last quality that empathy plays a key role. An empathetic leader is likely to understand the individual needs and achievements of followers.

The second, charismatic leadership, can be defined in terms of three leadership traits, one of which is empathy, as noted by Shamir, House and Arthur (1993). The other two are the leader's capacity to envision the company's direction, and an ability to empower followers. According to this theory, an empathetic bond between leaders and followers is essential for creating a common identity; a bond will contribute to effective leadership.

Authentic leadership, which is the third leadership approach associated with empathy, is defined by Walumbwa et al. (2008) in terms of strong self-awareness on the leader's part, internalized moral perspective (the leader holds strong values), relational transparency (actions correspond well with words), and balanced processing (being fair when interpreting the actions of others). It is precisely in this last element (balanced processing) that empathy emerges as an essential quality in authentic leadership, given that empathy involves a deep understanding of others' motivation and needs.

The last leadership approach associated with empathy is emotional intelligence, which can be defined using Goleman's (2004) framework, including self-awareness, self-regulation (ability to control disruptive impulses), motivation, social skills and empathy. The theory assumes that although humans are born with certain levels of emotional intelligence, it is something that can be developed. The developmental component informs the global citizen story which is designed to develop empathy.

Although the specific use of storytelling to foster empathic skills has not been widely researched, scholars and practitioners have developed some interesting studies and applications based on the use of fiction to develop empathy. In a literature review conducted by Rowe (2018) on Virginia Libraries, fiction was found to lead to significant changes in readers' worldviews. These changes were attributed to a capacity to transport the self into fictional stories and identify with a novel's characters.

In another study by Johnson, Huffman and Jasper (2014), participants read Shaila Abdullah's (2010) novel *Saffron Dreams*, which tells the story of a counter-stereotypical Muslim migrant woman in the United States of America, in the wake of her husband's death in the 2001 World Trade Center bombings. Then they were asked to determine the race of Arab-Caucasian faces. When compared to a control group, those who read the novel showed significant lower racial bias toward Arabs by giving more nuanced answers to questions. In a second experiment which was part of the same study, participants were asked to determine the race of Arab-Caucasian faces showing moderate and high levels of anger. While in the control group higher anger expressions were often associated by participants to Arabs, the bias did not appear in the group that read the novel.

Similarly, in one class for beginning-level counselling students, Gibson (2007) describes how the instructor developed an activity based on the use of the 1997 Harry Potter book (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*) to increase students' empathy toward their clients. In this application, empathy was triggered by giving students the opportunity to spend several classes analyzing and discussing how the book's different characters affected the students' views of their clients.

In addition to these passive encounters with novels, storytelling adds a further potent element to learning empathy. The ability to get into another's space and identify with their feelings is a skill honed by actors, and as Metcalf (1931) and Verducci (2000) assert, the actor-storyteller tends to possess high levels of empathy as a result. Nettle's (2006) study which looked at psychological profiles of professional actors, concluded that they have stronger empathetic skills than non-actors. These findings were confirmed by another study by Goldstein and Winner (2012) that showed that acting increases both empathy and theory of mind, which relates to understanding the states of mind of others. In line with these studies, the global citizen story, which will be described in detail in the next section, requires students to tell their stories in the first person so that they can embody their characters in ways similar to actors on stage.

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives for students completing this exercise are as follows:

1. Increase student's knowledge and awareness of similarities and differences between people from different parts of the world by conducting research of a specific culture found in a country different from the student's country.
2. Apply the newly acquired knowledge of the chosen culture by creating a fictional character from the country where the culture exists, and by imagining the character's needs, circumstances, obstacles, relationships and behaviors.
3. Develop the student's mindfulness in relation to the chosen culture by writing a story based on the fictional character's efforts to overcome difficult circumstances in the character's country.
4. Embody the fictional character by telling the story to the class in the first person and by answering the questions of the class, also in the first person.

Description of the Exercise

The global citizen story was developed in a graduate course in International Business, which is part of the curriculum of the College's MBA program. Since students are being trained to work in a global environment, they are expected to develop empathetic skills so that they lead effectively and responsibly when dealing with other cultures in their own locale and while on overseas assignments. The exercise can be used in any course targeting empathy as an essential leadership skill, and consists of four steps: (1) Researching; (2) Imagining; (3) Writing; (4) Storytelling.

Step 1: Researching

In the first step of the exercise, the student picks a challenging issue in a specific country where the fictitious character resides. Then the student conducts a thorough research of the issue, the country and the culture. For example, a student could pick the difficulties that Venezuelans are facing as a result of the collapse of their economy. Thus, the student will research the issue and the country, and will then create a fictious character from Venezuela who is facing severe circumstances related to the issue (for example, being in extreme poverty and unable to find a job).

The research phase can be adapted to the needs of the particular class. For example, in the context of our MBA class in International Business, the selection of the country and the issue were facilitated by regular class discussions of international news. Therefore, by the time the students had to select the country and the issue, they had built a strong foundation on several news stories from around the world.

Step 2: Imagining

In the next step, the student imagines the character. It is important to note that although the character is an imaginary person, most of the circumstances faced by the character are actual, based on the student's research about their chosen country and the cultural issues they identified. In order to guide the student in the imagination process, the following questions from Uta Hagen's (1991) acting textbook are answered from the perspective of the character, namely: Who am I? What are my circumstances? What are my relationships? What do I want? What's in my way? and, What do I do to get what I want? Hagen's approach is ideal for the global citizen story, given that the goal is for students to understand and empathize with their characters, as well as for the class to feel their characters' needs and struggles.

Step 3: Writing

After the student knows the character well, they write the story in the first person. Although the structure of the story is left to the student's creativity, in the beginning they are advised to follow Gustave Freytag's (2010) idea of building the story around a conflict with others, society, or a system. He distinguishes five parts in the story: (1) exposition (introduction of time, place, characters, and mood); (2) rising action (emergence of the conflict); (3) climax (turning point of the story; the conflict is at its peak); (4) falling action (the story starts to calm down, moving toward a satisfactory ending); (5) resolution (the conflict gets resolved; end of the story).

In courses having an international or intercultural component, it is important that the character featured in the story be from a different culture from the student's in order to target the development of the student's intercultural skills, as well as to achieve the empathy goal of the activity.

Step 4: Storytelling

The final step takes place in the classroom and consists of telling the story. Ideally the student should not read the story verbatim but tell it in the first person. This gives the storyteller the opportunity to internalize the character and the circumstances, allowing them to embody the character. After the student tells the story, the class asks questions, and the student answers in character, about their character's circumstances and needs. The activity becomes an improvisation exercise in which students put themselves in the shoes of their characters and give an accurate account within the created context.

The storytelling part of the global citizen story takes approximately 15 to 20 minutes. The activity includes a write-up of the story in no more than 2,000 words including the character's identity, their circumstances including the challenge or conflict, their intentions, their relationships with others, and the obstacles and how they plan to overcome them.

The six questions target the cognitive component of empathy: understanding the character and the character's circumstances. The performance element, which consists of telling the story in the first person and embodying the character as much as possible (especially during the Q&A part) targets the affective element of empathy.

Application of the Exercise: The MBA Case

The exercise was carried out in three different cohorts of MBA students in a liberal arts college in Northern California. All of them were required to complete the activity as part of their coursework in the International Business class. The three cohorts consisted of a total of 25 students: 8 females and 17 males. Four students were born in India, 5 were Mexican-American, 2 were African-American, 3 were Filipino-American, 1 was from Canada, and the rest were white students from the United States of America.

Topics developed by the students in their stories were diverse, including fighting for women's rights in Saudi Arabia, human trafficking and prostitution in Thailand, suicides in Japan's corporate world, refugees' journeys from Venezuela and Syria, and child labor in Zimbabwe. In all the stories, characters were put in extreme circumstances, facing life and death challenges. The high stakes made the stories compelling while triggering empathy from the class.

In order to assess the degree to which the imagined characters were different from the students who created them, five dimensions were considered: country of origin, age, social class, ethnicity, and gender. In the cohorts in the case, all 25 students created characters whose country of origin were different from theirs. Seven characters were a different age from the students who imagined them, 13 came from a different social class, 14 were from a different ethnic group, and 3 from a different gender.

Only one character was different from his creator in all 5 dimensions: the student was a white man from the United States of America in his late 30s from a middle-class family, but his character was a poor teenage girl from Thailand. Four students were different from their characters in 4 dimensions, 7 students in 3, 10 students in 2, and 3 students in 1. The average for all 25 students was 2.6 dimensions.

The mode, or most frequent occurring number of dimensions, was 2. This number seems adequate considering that there should be common elements between the students and their characters to make it easier for them to empathize with their characters. Like actors, students have to find themselves in their characters; the existence of common dimensions facilitates this process.

It is important to note that although audiences often highlight and praise the differences between characters and those who play them, actors also need to explore the similarities that they have with their characters in order to understand them and empathize with them. In this respect, Uta Hagen talks about how trained actors develop a strong recognition of the similarities between themselves and other people, which allows them to be more empathetic:

> Of course, feelings of empathy, particularly for those in trouble or in pain, are very much part of the actor's nature. It is no accident that performers are so ready to lend support to causes that help the needy, the ill, the neglected, or those who are discriminated against (Hagen, 1991, p. 258).

Discussion of the Application of the Exercise

The global citizen story allowed students to research, create, explore and embody characters from different cultures. It resulted in 25 compelling stories about people facing challenging situations in different parts of the world. The exercise aimed at developing empathetic skills of both the student telling the story and those listening to them, who often felt as if they had met someone from the culture being featured in the story. It was like having someone from that culture and country in the classroom telling a story. Having a different student tell a well-researched and carefully-crafted story in the first person every week enriches the classroom experience, improving the empathetic skills of the class (both cognitive and affective), while exposing the class to a wide variety of cultures.

Although no formal instrument was used to measure the effectiveness of the exercise, comments in the student evaluation surveys conducted at the end of the term were used to gather their opinions on the exercise. Out of the 25 students, all of them were in favor of the exercise and 5 made specific comments. One student commented on the engaging nature of the work, writing, "It allowed me to see different cultural, social and economic issues that individuals encounter when taking a job." Another commented on its innovative dimension, saying that it was "A new way for us to learn about a culture, country, we are completely unfamiliar with…we were able to analyze how things are at a micro and at a macro level." One mentioned the creative nature of the activity, writing, "The most challenging and creative part of the course was the global citizen story. That was the highlight of the quarter." A further

two students spoke about the global citizen story as a useful learning experience: "The global citizen story was a great learning and a great assignment" and "The global citizen story helped learn about countries and cultures."

Challenges of the Exercise

One of the main challenges encountered in the global citizen story dealt with difficulties related to building trust in the classroom. Since it is an unconventional activity for the MBA setting, it took some time to gain the students' confidence. This was achieved by explaining in detail the rationale behind creating and telling the stories. Also, the creative aspects presented a challenge for many MBA students whose minds are more used to analytical tasks.

In addition, assessing the exercise for grading purposes was a challenge since I could not find an adequate way to measure affective empathy. The affective empathy component includes the student's ability to connect with the character and her/his circumstances, relationships, obstacles, goals, and actions (based on the sensibility expressed in both the writing and the storytelling). Although I did not evaluate this component (a grade was not assigned), I provided students with feedback. It is worth mentioning that most students showed strong connections to their characters and circumstances.

The actual assessment of the exercise for grading purposes was based on two elements: (a) cognitive empathy (75% of the grade) which included understanding the character and their circumstances, relationships, obstacles, goals, and actions (based on both research and imagination), and (b) presentation (25%) which included clarity, quality of writing and quality of the oral delivery.

Another challenge had to do with the presentation element of the activity. Although students were familiar with presenting on a regular basis as part of their graduate studies, the activity generated anxiety in some of them, similar to stage fright. This was overcome by allowing the students who were experiencing anxiety to read the stories verbatim, as opposed to just telling them to the class. Unfortunately, when the story was read, the student was unable to connect with the character in the same way as those students who didn't read. However, embodiment happened after the reading, during the Q&A section.

Ethical Considerations

Since students write and tell stories as characters from cultures different from their own, the global citizen story has the potential of being mistaken by cultural appropriation. This of course is not the case, for cultural appropriation means "the adoption or exploitation of another culture by a more dominant culture" (Oluo, 2018, p. 146). In the global citizen story, cultures are neither adopted nor exploited. Instead, the exercise allows students to explore another culture in order to understand it better. Rather than cultural appropriation, this activity is an example of cultural *appreciation* given that the main goal of the exercise is to empathize with people from the culture being explored.

In addition, it is important to note that the global citizen story is about understanding the needs and challenges of the characters as human beings. This differs from cultural appropriation, which implies the superficial use of cultural elements (costumes, traditional headdresses, and hairstyles) from one culture by someone from another culture (Eboch, 2019). In the global citizen story, students do not dress like the characters, they do not imitate their accents, nor adopt any other superficial markers.

Finally, cultural appropriation involves the exploitation of another culture by a more dominant group (Oluo, 2018). The construct involves one group who is being oppressed by another group in a given society (Matthes, 2019). In the global citizen story, the relationship that exits between the students' cultures and the ones they study is not one of oppression. These are cultures from different societies in different parts of the world. Students approach the exercise as an exploration of a culture that is as important and valuable as their own culture. As mentioned earlier, the goal of the exercise is to understand and empathize with people from other cultures.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The global citizen story is an exercise designed to develop empathy in leaders or aspiring leaders in cross-cultural settings. Through research, imagining, writing and storytelling, the exercise allows students to empathize with both a person in another country who is facing a serious challenge, and with the person's circumstances.

Although the global citizen story presented some challenges in its execution such as building trust, assessing affective empathy for grading purposes, and overcoming stage fright, the exercise proved to be an interesting and enjoyable way to develop empathy. For the task to work, students have to avoid reading the stories when they tell them to the class, because telling the stories in the first person gives them the opportunity to embody their characters, and to be present in the moment. Further, the stories should always be followed by a Q&A session because during this interchange, embodiment becomes palpable. At this point, the exercise becomes an improvisation in which students put themselves in the shoes of their characters as they answer their classmates' questions.

In future implementations of the global citizen story, the students' levels of empathy could be measured before and after the exercise. This would contribute to confirm or help qualify the effectiveness of the activity. The Empathy Quotient (EQ) test, which consists of 60 questions, could be a suitable instrument to measure levels of empathy before and after the implementation of the activity. In the test, answers are measured in a 4-point Likert-type scale (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). Although the test was originally designed to measure level of social impairment, it could easily be used to measure empathy among students.

In conclusion, within a world where poverty, forced migration and homelessness abound, where social and racial tensions have become commonplace, empathy from those who wield power seems more important than ever. Current global problems, exacerbated by the recent coronavirus pandemic, need to be tackled by empathetic leaders able to inspire, reassure and comfort people. The global citizen story exercise aims to help awaken empathetic skills. Empathy matters in leadership; and we all have the capacity to develop it. Through this exercise, we discovered and learned how to empathize, and found the courage to display it, as Maya Angelou stated in her quote.

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