Teaching and Educational Commentary

The Empathetic Course Design Perspective

Donald A. Saucier[a], Tucker L. Jones[b], Ashley A. Schiffer[a], and Noah D. Renken[a]
[a]Kansas State University and [b]Washburn University

Abstract
Empathy, the ability and willingness to take the cognitive and emotional perspective of others, is becoming increasingly important within academia. We introduce our Empathetic Course Design Perspective that refers to the intentional infusion of empathy into a course. We discuss the overarching beliefs that underlie this perspective, such as instructors' commitment to inclusive teaching practices. In this commentary, we present practical recommendations for incorporating this perspective into your classes, in terms of course syllabi; schedules and routines; modalities; policies; and assignments and assessments. We believe this template is flexible and can be applied to any course (e.g., lower- and upper-level classes), in any modality (e.g., face-to-face, hybrid/hyflex, online), and in any academic discipline. Ultimately, we believe the Empathetic Course Design Perspective can transform our courses into learning spaces that are more positive, supportive, and engaging for us as instructors and, more importantly, for our students.

1 Introduction

There are many stressors in the world today (e.g., COVID-19, structural racism, gun violence, social/civil unrest), including within academia specifically. For instance, academia has historically struggled with inclusivity (e.g., "ivory tower"; Kapareliotis and Miliopoulou 2019; Bourabain 2021), and issues related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) have been considered a growing challenge in disciplines such as agricultural economics education in recent years (e.g., Lambert Snodgrass et al. 2018; Wiersma-Mosley 2019). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic created many challenges for teaching and learning broadly (e.g., rapid transitions to remote/online modalities; Johnson, Veletsianos, and Seaman 2020; Silva de Souza et al. 2020; Sunasee 2020) that have inspired changes to pedagogy (e.g., Sá and Serpa 2020). College classes and instructors should not add to these global and academic stressors, but should rather create a climate in which students are supported in their learning. As a result, we believe there is a growing need for more intentional and explicit demonstrations of empathy within academia, specifically in the classes we teach. Thus, we propose our Empathetic Course Design Perspective and provide practical, thoughtful recommendations for college instructors to make their classes more inclusive and equitable learning spaces based on this framework.

2 Our Empathetic Course Design Perspective

The Empathetic Course Design Perspective refers to the intentional infusion of empathy into one's course structure, goals, policies, and interactions with students.[1] Empathy is the ability and willingness to take the cognitive and emotional perspective of others (e.g., Elliott et al. 2011). Our Empathetic Course Design Perspective puts empathy at the forefront of all course decision-making, because we believe proactively and intentionally considering the cognitive and emotional perspectives of students promotes the collective experiences of both students and instructors in their classes (see also Franzese 2016). We

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[1] See the "Empathetic Course Design Perspective" *Engage the Sage* video.

believe this approach transforms courses into learning spaces that are more positive, supportive, and engaging for both instructors and students, ultimately promoting better learning for students.

1.1. Underlying Beliefs of the Empathetic Course Design Perspective

The Empathetic Course Design Perspective reflects an instructor's commitment to a set of overarching teaching beliefs and behaviors. First and foremost, the core of our Empathetic Course Design Perspective is the belief that classes begin with instructors. Consistent with this idea, we explicitly promote the concept of "trickle down engagement" (TDE; Saucier 2019b; Saucier, Miller et al. 2022).[2] According to TDE, instructors' experiences with, and engagement in, their own courses start the learning process. In other words, when instructors are more engaged in and excited about their course content, their students are consequently more engaged in and excited about learning which, in turn, helps students to more successfully learn the content (Saucier, Miller et al. 2022). Extending TDE, the personas and perspectives of the instructors provide the foundations for teaching and learning (e.g., Zagallo et al. 2019) by dictating the teaching philosophies and practices that help provide structure for the various components of a given course as well as guide students' learning (Baran, Correia, and Thompson 2013). Specifically, we recommend instructors adapt their teaching personas, philosophies, and practices to bring *Preparation*, *Expertise*, *Authenticity*, *Caring*, and *Engagement* (PEACE; Saucier 2019a; Saucier and Jones 2020) to their classes (see Table 1). Although instructor preparation (Gullason 2009) and expertise (Korte, Lavin, and Davies 2013) are important for business and economics classes and necessary for teaching excellence, they alone are not sufficient for creating a positive classroom environment. That is, to create a classroom environment that facilitates the success of *all* students, we believe instructors should be authentic (i.e., a

Table 1. Descriptions and Examples of PEACE Components

Component	Description	Examples
1. Preparation	Having a plan for what (and how) you will teach	Creating and sharing lesson plans, reviewing content prior to lecture, anticipating students' questions, mental preparation, logistical preparedness
2. Expertise	Having content knowledge and understanding on how you will convey this knowledge to students in an accessible way	Demonstrating your content mastery, providing real-life and relatable examples of course concepts, anticipating confusing topics, thinking out loud
3. Authenticity	Demonstrating a genuine representation of yourself and your personality to your students	Visiting with students before class, sharing your successes and failures with students, referencing personal experiences with content matter
4. Caring	Demonstrating your commitment to your students' academic and personal success	Empathizing with students' circumstances, thanking students, intentionally inviting students to ask questions, checking in with students who may be in distress
5. Engagement	Having complete investment (at cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels) in your course-related duties	Demonstrating your interest in the material, using verbal cues (e.g., "This is super interesting"), showing that you enjoy teaching

[2] See our "Welcome to Engage the Sage" video.

genuine representation of the instructor and their personality), demonstrate caring toward their students (i.e., showing commitment to students' academic and personal success), and display engagement with course content (i.e., complete investment in course-related duties at cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels). In creating a classroom that achieves more than merely "information sharing," students ultimately learn better. Teaching philosophies are (or should be) intentional, purposeful, and dynamic in their explicit connection to the course structure and content. However, teaching personas and practices should also be flexible and allow for adaptation to changing circumstances.

Second, instructors value and care for themselves and their students, understand that subjective experiences matter, believe that empathy is more important than rigor, agree that flexibility supports teaching and learning, and provide guidance and grace to themselves and their students when needed. Third, instructors agree to inclusively promote student learning, remove barriers to their students' educations (e.g., use plain language principles), consider the contexts in which their students learn and in which they teach, infuse their classes with consistency and predictability to reduce students' anxiety (e.g., predictable routines within the course structure), make their expectations clear and reasonable for both their students and themselves, and justify and explicitly communicate the reasons for their teaching practices. Given that women and minorities have been historically underrepresented in agricultural economics textbooks (e.g., Feiner and Morgan 1987), faculty (e.g., McCluskey 2019), and the field itself (e.g., Bayer and Rouse 2016), we believe it is especially important for instructors in these classes to infuse empathy and inclusivity into their teaching to optimize the experience of students from *all* backgrounds. Finally, they commit to seek and use feedback from their students and to provide fair and reasonable ways for their students to demonstrate their learning.

Overall, an instructor's commitment to these overarching beliefs both demonstrates and facilitates the support and success of all their students. The adoption of these beliefs will also benefit instructors, not just students, by creating more fulfilling and successful experiences in teaching and learning. While we discuss these beliefs in relation to agricultural economics and business classes, they are important for instructors of all courses to demonstrate. To aid in this process, we present practical recommendations for how to incorporate the Empathetic Course Design Perspective into your classes, in terms of course syllabi; schedules and routines; modalities; policies; and assignments and assessments. This list is not comprehensive and is limited only by the creativity and empathy of individual instructors.

2 Implementing the Empathetic Course Design

To help implement the Empathetic Course Design Perspective, we provide a practical, instructor-facing template to promote better educational experiences for both instructors and their students. While many of our recommendations are consistent with inclusive teaching practices (e.g., self-awareness, empathy for students, awareness of students' unique backgrounds; Makoelle 2019; Dewsbury, Murray-Johnson, and Santucci 2021), we share how we promote empathy within our courses. Throughout this commentary, we describe how we have operationalized the infusion of empathy in our teaching practices in the courses we teach and discuss the pros and cons for each idea we present, but ultimately recommend instructors adopt these practices. Again, although we present these recommendations within the context of applied and/or agricultural economics and business classes, this template may be applied to courses taught in any academic discipline, at all levels (e.g., lower- and upper-level courses) and in any modality (e.g., face-to-face, hybrid/hyflex, online). Although not every suggestion we provide may work for every course, we believe the overarching ideas can be applied to any course in ways that are consistent with and enhance the instructors' teaching practices. Further information can be found on our YouTube channel, Engage the Sage, in which we publish videos reiterating these points.

2.1 Empathetic Syllabi

One of the earliest and most salient ways empathy may be infused into courses is through the statements instructors include on their syllabi.[3] Course syllabi have the dual purpose of *informing* our students about the content, structure, and policies of our courses and *inspiring* our students by exciting them about the content and showing our engagement in, and support for, their learning (Slattery and Carlson 2005; Palmer, Wheeler, and Aneece 2016). Rather than being merely legalistic documents with mundane course information, syllabi can become empathetic contracts that create connections with our students by establishing trust and rapport. Indeed, we recommend instructors include statements on their syllabi that explicitly express their support for the core principles stated above, including their investment in the learning and success of their students. Specifically, we recommend including statements about instructors' commitment to and respect for DEIB in their explicit recognition of the value of every student, given that addressing DEIB issues has been identified as a challenge in agricultural and applied economics and businesses classes in recent years (e.g., Lambert Snodgrass et al. 2018; Wiersma-Mosley 2019). We also recommend including statements about instructors' respect for the physical and mental health and well-being of their students that both normalize challenges (e.g., mental health concerns) and provide information about campus resources (e.g., campus counseling services). Such statements communicate support to students on behalf of their instructors, which in turn can have positive effects on students' learning and well-being (e.g., Faulkner et al. 2021). We also recommend the explicit inclusion of an "empathy statement" on syllabi that invites students to reach out to instructors with any concerns they may have, or challenges they may be facing, such as the one below:

> *"Things are different now (during the COVID-19 pandemic) than they were. This is very real for all of us. The "social distancing" and transition to remote education is tough, and frankly it sucks. We are teaching differently and under different circumstances than we were, and you are learning differently and under different circumstances than you were. Please keep connected with us. If you have difficulty with the course content, assignments, deadlines, etc., please reach out and we will try to work with you as best we can. We want you to learn and succeed. We want to have a wonderful experience learning with you. We should be creating "physical distance" right now, not "social distance." We are here for you."*

While some instructors may fear students will take advantage of this empathetic approach, students have not abused it in our experience. Infusing empathy into teaching and course design should not be confused with leniency. Rather, we believe this approach provides students with the appropriate support to reach their full potential. It is also possible instructors make this statement (repeatedly) in their classes in lieu of adding such a syllabus statement. The goal is to ensure that students know they are supported throughout the entirety of the semester.

2.2 Empathetic Course Schedule and Routines

Our Empathetic Course Design Perspective can also be infused into the way courses are scheduled.[4] Instructors can provide support for their students by creating courses with explicit weekly routines (e.g., regularly scheduled emails and announcements regarding upcoming course events and assignments). This routine makes the communication and schedule of the course predictable and while some may criticize such a routine as boring or mundane, we argue it helps reduce students' stress and anxiety in the course because nothing is surprising, and there is consistent, supportive communication. Instructors can further support their students' success by having consistent, predictable due dates and times for assignments (e.g., Sunday evenings at 11:59 PM). This suggestion is particularly easy to implement with

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[3] See the "Empathetic Syllabus Statements" *Engage the Sage* video.
[4] See the "Empathetic Course Structure and Policies" *Engage the Sage* video.

regularly scheduled, lower stakes assignments (e.g., weekly reflections). Our students told us this helped alleviate some of their anxiety because they were enrolled in more than one course, with multiple due dates to attend to. The course schedule can also infuse empathy by proactively scheduling mental health days, prep days, catch-up days, and/or reading days when the course responsibilities are heavier and/or when instructors anticipate students will need a break. Further, the schedule can be designed empathetically to spread out the course work and assignments over the course of the semester evenly to avoid the buildup that often occurs in the final weeks of the semester.

2.3 Empathetic Course Modalities

The course structure itself, in terms of the modality in which the course is taught, allows instructors to infuse empathy. Despite the physical closings of college campuses around the world due to COVID-19, institutions were still able to serve their students through technologically mediated forms of teaching (e.g., remote/hybrid models; Adedoyin and Soykan 2020), which may become the "new normal" beyond the pandemic in higher education (see Benito et al. 2021). Thus, instructors may design their courses to teach students "where" they are (literally and figuratively). Teaching classes using hyflex teaching modalities (i.e., students may attend in-person, online synchronously, or watch posted videos of class later asynchronously) may be an empathetic option that addresses issues when students are unable to attend class in person (e.g., when students contract COVID-19 and must isolate) or in real time (e.g., family emergencies). In our experience, students appreciate having the option to view class recordings, even if they did not miss class but wish to revisit content on their own time. There is admittedly a greater degree of technological fluency and proactive output of work in setting up hyflex classes, and this may not work for all classes (e.g., labs that require "hands on" interactions). It is also possible that instructors experience lower engagement from students when teaching in a hyflex modality; however, there are practical things that instructors can do to mitigate such challenges (e.g., well-structured courses, clear communication; see Heilporn, Lakhal, and Bélisle 2021). Thus, when possible and appropriate, this modality may alleviate many issues and needs for individual communication as the semester progresses.

If instructors employ online teaching methods, we recommend they have some synchronous contact with their students to allow for real-time connections and support (e.g., to check in on their learning and well-being; see also Woodcock, Sisco, and Eady 2015; Guo 2020).[5] When teaching online synchronously, we recommend inviting students to keep their videos on when possible and explaining to students why this is preferred. The statement below is a sample statement instructors may share with their students:

> *"For classes that you attend synchronously over Zoom, we expect you will attend with your video on. This will make it easier for us to connect to you and gauge your understanding while we teach. This will also make it easier for you to pay attention and be less distracted by other things. In short, if you attend with your video on, you will engage more in the class, learn more, and help us teach you better. We understand that you may be unable to attend with your video on for a given class for whatever reason—just please let us know."*

2.4 Empathetic Course Policies

Instructors may infuse empathy into their course policies by reframing existing policies and/or adopting new ones.[6] Instructors may adopt empathetic attendance policies that allow students to attend classes via different modalities (see above) or to miss a certain number of classes without penalty. Another opportunity for empathetic policies is with students' late and missing work. We recommend being flexible with assignment deadlines either by not punishing late work generally (e.g., Hansen 2021) or by

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[5] See the "Empathetic Zoom Approach" *Engage the Sage* video.
[6] See the "Empathetic Course Structure and Policies" *Engage the Sage* video.

allowing a one-time free pass (e.g., Crocker 2021). Perhaps these policies recommend students preemptively request an extension in order to avoid a small penalty. Moreover, we have found that the quality of students' late work is usually not sacrificed by taking the extra time to turn in a better assignment. Another possibility is offering several possible deadlines for assignments because it allows students to spread out their work and instructors to spread out their grading. Not only can deadline flexibility help accommodate students with extenuating circumstances (e.g., illness, family emergencies), but it can also alleviate stress on behalf of the instructor. With respect to missing work, Cross, Frary, and Weber (1993) recommend excluding missing exams (i.e., zeros) from final grades, even if the student's absence was unexcused. Our later recommendation about offering exams online for a certain period of time (see section 2.5) may also help avoid the issue of physically missing an exam entirely. Finally, whatever instructors choose to do, we agree that instructors should be transparent about their late and missing work policies (e.g., Cross et al. 1993).

To more broadly infuse empathy into course policies, instructors may phrase their policies consistent with what we call "Choice to Learn," in which we frame the course as having no "requirements."[7] Instead, instructors inform students that they have earned no points yet at the start of the semester but will have "opportunities" to accumulate points over the course of the semester. These opportunities will manifest in the form of assignments, exams, papers, etc., and students may opt to complete these at their discretion. If they choose not to pursue an opportunity, they forfeit the chance to earn the points associated with that opportunity. This framing emphasizes that students earn, not lose, points throughout the semester as a function of their decisions and performances. Instructors facilitate the earning of those points by offering opportunities and making recommendations, rather than making mandates. We believe this framing empowers students to take responsibility for their own grades (or focus more on the learning itself, as in ungraded classes; Ferguson 2013) and increases students' intrinsic motivation (see Ryan and Deci 2020) in completing their coursework, both of which are consistent with mastery learning approaches (e.g., Block and Burns 1976). Moreover, this framing situates instructors in the role of supporters who guide students, rather than gatekeepers who present obstacles to students receiving the grades they want.

2.5 Empathetic Assignments and Assessments

Perhaps the most impactful way instructors may infuse our Empathetic Course Design Perspective into their courses is through their assignments and assessments.[8] Instructors should remember that everything they assign will eventually come back to them for grading. Accordingly, we recommend creating assignments and assessments that students will *want* to complete, and instructors will *want* to grade. Student-centered assignments and assessments can help students demonstrate their learning successfully (e.g., Wright 2011), enhancing the experience of both students and instructors in the course (e.g., Saucier 2019b; Saucier, Schiffer, and Jones 2022).

One overarching way to make your assignments more empathetic is by making them challenging but not unnecessarily difficult. Given that there are a lot of negative consequences with high stakes assignments and assessments (e.g., decreased student motivation, higher dropout rates; Amrein and Berliner 2003), we recommend replacing such assignments and assessments with more frequent, smaller lower stakes assignments. For example, we often offer weekly reflection assignments for students to complete for points throughout the semester. While these assignments are not difficult, they allow students to meaningfully reflect on important content from that week in class, while also providing instructors with valuable information regarding what students are taking away from class. In our experience, students appreciate the opportunity to have more autonomy in their assignments and learning. These assignments are also more enjoyable to grade given that every student's reflection is

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[7] See our "Emphasizing the Choice to Learn" *Engage the Sage* video.
[8] See the "Empathetic Assignments and Assessments" *Engage the Sage* video.

individualized regarding their understanding of the content, as well as how their personal experiences relate to that content. Another option is setting maximums (e.g., numbers of words or pages) that help students streamline their work, so their work is both higher quality and easier to grade. Ultimately, these changes made students' work more personalized and streamlined, which improved our grading experiences.

We also offer students choices in what they do and when they do it. Specifically, we have offered students autonomy for assignments, namely in what we call "missions" (see Saucier, Schneider et al. 2022). Specifically, students are given social objectives to achieve for each mission (we typically assign one mission per week in each semester), where they consider and apply course content in individualized ways (e.g., identifying social bias online and using course knowledge to challenge it; Saucier, Schneider et al. 2022). This type of social mission likely builds ties between undergraduate students, the university, and the community, which is especially important for economics students (Pereira and Costa 2019). The majority of students' time spent on these missions is spent promoting social change and justice, rather than writing the mission report. Mission reports are streamlined and, therefore, easy to grade. Overall, we have had success with these missions; our students complete these missions at high rates, perform well on them, and report they are valuable (Saucier, Schneider et al. 2022).

For empathetic assessments, we recommend exams that would traditionally be held in person instead be offered online at times students choose for themselves (and cancel class so students still have "class time" to complete it; see Saucier, Schiffer, and Renken 2022). Some may argue that academic dishonesty is a bigger challenge for exams administered online versus in person (e.g., King, Guyette, and Piotrowski 2009). However, the data collected from online exams actually makes it easier to identify academic dishonesty with timestamped submissions and information on students' patterns of responding (e.g., order of question completion). Nonetheless, we allow students to use their resources (e.g., class notes) while completing exams to avoid issues like test anxiety that are common with traditional in-class exams (e.g., Zeidner 2010). In this case, the design of our exams becomes more application-based (rather than vocabulary memorization), which requires higher levels of critical thinking and is ultimately better for learning (e.g., Snyder and Snyder 2008). We also advocate for limiting the use of comprehensive assessments to only when classes build comprehensive skills over the course of the semester.

Another option for empathetic assessments is implementing what we call, "Exams by You" (see Saucier, Schiffer, and Jones 2022) in which students create and complete their own exam questions for a specific academic unit. Importantly, "Exams by You" can be scaled as needed. For instance, in our more advanced courses, exams are exclusively "Exam by You" questions, with students generating ten questions and responding to them in paragraph form. In our introductory courses, exams employ a combination of a more traditional format (e.g., multiple choice) with perhaps two "Exam by You" questions that students write and answer. We use "Exams by You" differently based on class size (e.g., 30 students vs. 200 students), the level of the course (e.g., advanced vs. introductory), our expectations of students' critical thinking abilities (e.g., first-year students vs. majors in the area), and students' ability to both apply content and formulate reasonable exam questions. Admittedly, this exam approach was, initially, more difficult to grade due to the idiosyncrasies of each student's exam. However, this also makes academic dishonesty more easily identifiable. More importantly, student-written exams allow for student creativity and personalization (Corrigan and Craciun 2013), which enhanced our personal grading experiences.

3 Call to Action

Above, we have detailed several minor changes that can make your courses more flexible and empathetic. We acknowledge there are several reasons why instructors may have not yet adopted these perspectives. Instructors may be hesitant to implement these strategies out of fear of being perceived as lenient, fear of students abusing their "benefit of the doubt," and/or the fear of straying away from long-standing,

traditional teaching practices. However, we believe the benefits of the Empathetic Course Design Perspective far outweigh the (minimal) costs of its implementation. In addition, empathy is more important than arbitrary rigor.[9] Upon implementing our Empathetic Course Design Perspective, in our experience, we have seen benefits for both instructors and students. Benefits for instructors include having a more supportive structure for our teaching practices, allowing us to teach better and subsequently enjoy the experience more. Through TDE (Saucier, Miller et al. 2022), benefits for students include having a more inclusive and safe learning environment, ultimately helping them learn more and demonstrate their learning better. In short, the Empathetic Course Design Perspective creates a more positive, successful, and fulfilling experience in the course for both instructors and students. Beyond instructors taking it upon themselves, we also encourage teaching and learning centers to advocate for our Empathetic Course Design Perspective by including it in the professional development of instructors (Saucier et al. 2021).

4 Conclusion

We explained the need for more empathy within our courses, identified our solution as the Empathetic Course Design Perspective, and provided practical ways instructors can infuse this perspective into their courses. Recall, we argue that the process of infusing empathy (and engagement) begins with the instructor (i.e., TDE; Saucier 2019b; Saucier, Miller et al. 2022), who should be deliberate in the development of their teaching persona (e.g., PEACE; Saucier 2019a; Saucier and Jones 2020) and practices (e.g., empathetic course design). These infusions should be discussed explicitly with our students to explain and normalize these empathetic teaching practices. We believe the infusion of these principles into one's agricultural and/or applied economics and business courses will create a more positive and inclusive classroom environment. By intentionally infusing empathy throughout our courses, we have the potential to promote more successful and fulfilling teaching and learning experiences, thereby maximizing the engagement and experiences of both students and instructors.

[9] See our "The Problem with Academic Rigor" *Engage the Sage* video.

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