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# The Role of Empathy in Cultivating Equitable and Just Learning Environments

**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the role of empathy in cultivating equity and justness in the design classroom. To begin, an overview of what constitutes "empathy" and the neurological relationship between emotional affect and cognitive function are provided. Following this foundation, strategic methods for developing empathetic, inclusive classrooms are described. These methods include: the approaches to developing course content; the cultivation of relationships and community in the learning environment; and select practices to address students' needs related to belonging in the community and to alleviate stereotype threats. Then, focus is given to the practice of "Critically Reflective Teaching" by discussing its purpose and fundamental tenets, the ways it can promote empathy in educators, and its subsequent beneficial impacts on both student development and the advancement of equitable, inclusive learning environments. A well-cultivated and sustained inclusive classroom environment — a place where *all* students feel supported creatively and intellectually through mutual expressions of empathy — is fundamental to students' wellbeing. Incorporating these and additional inclusive pedagogical practices will support students' feelings of psychological safety, belonging, and inclusivity in design classrooms so they may, in turn, flourish personally, academically, and professionally.

**Keywords**

Design Education, Social Justice, Faculty Development, Pedagogy, Social Interaction

## Introduction

*Empathy is the spark of human concern for others. The glue that makes social life possible.*

– Hoffman, 2001, p. 3

An individual cannot learn, function, or achieve their full potential until they feel safe (Maslow, 1943). In the context of Education, students' optimal learning, levels of motivation, and potentials will be undermined if they feel unsafe. The presence of this emotion is largely dependent upon whether or not the student feels included in the community. Once feelings of safety are established, the student's focus shifts, "from their security and well-being to connecting with others, taking risks, exploring the unknown and unfamiliar, and consequently, their learning" (Faerm, 2023, p. 243). Thus, the teacher's responsiveness to facilitating safe learning spaces is vital for students' achieving optimal development—particularly in design classrooms. Psychological safety—including the assurance that one's fellow group members won't be humiliated, shunned, punished, or made fun of for speaking up—is the single most significant element that fosters creativity and innovation (Tavanger, 2017).

A primary method to ensure we, as educators, meet our students' levels of need for psychological safety is through the ongoing practice of actively working to cultivate empathy within ourselves. Empathy and empathetic reasoning play invaluable roles in our teaching practice—and in facilitating safe spaces—because they enable us to observe better, reflect upon, and understand a student's thoughts, feelings, and experiences. This heightened cognitive and emotional awareness, in turn, prompts action on our parts, including the making of more informed pedagogical, interpersonal, and compassionate decisions for our students' personal and academic development (Smith, 2023; McAlinden, 2014). Accordingly, the learning experience is bolstered, leading the students and the institution to flourish.

Still, despite the significant role empathy plays in fostering optimal learning environments and the accompanying student success, it has been given scant attention in both scholarly research and faculty development, particularly in design higher education. Design educators are typically hired for their design expertise, not their teaching experience, and rarely receive direct preparation to teach. During the hiring process, most design school administrations evaluate a candidates' design experience and, if hired, assign the novice teachers with little to no pedagogical support or training to teaching classrooms. Consequently, these educators must experiment with their pedagogical approaches, learning as they go, and eventually "sink or swim" at the expense of their students and institutions.

This paper examines the role of empathy in fostering equity and justice in the design classroom. To begin, an overview of what constitutes empathy and the neurological relationship between emotional affect and cognitive function is provided. Following this foundation, strategic methods for developing empathetic, inclusive classrooms are described. Then, focus is given to the practice of Critically Reflective Teaching by discussing its purpose and fundamental tenets, the ways it can promote empathy in educators, and its subsequentially beneficial impacts on both student development and the advancement of equitable, inclusive learning environments. The aim of this paper is to focus our scholarly attention on this critical subject and to begin to address the significant deficit of research literature in the area of faculty development in design higher education.

## What Constitutes "Empathy" and Empathetic Learning Environments?

*Empathy is about finding echoes of another person in yourself.*

– Mohsin Hamid, novelist (b. 1971)

Derived from *empatheia*, meaning "physical affection, passion, or partiality," empathy is commonly described as the capability to imagine how another person feels; it enables the person "to understand and share the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of others" (Smith, 2023, n.p). The practice of empathy involves adopting another's perspective, standing in others' shoes, and seeing with their eyes so that each individual can be better attuned to what the other person is feeling and, consequently, can better comprehend the other's emotional state (Smith, 2023; Pink, 2005).

But empathy is not merely a feeling: it also requires that the empathetic individual externalizes this gained understanding with intention, care, and concern (Van Bommel, 2021). In short, empathy is a way to understand other humans; it is "a universal language that connects us beyond country or culture. Empathy makes us human. Empathy brings us joy. And…Empathy is an essential part of living a life of meaning" (Jahoda, 2005; Pink, 2005, p. 165). Accordingly, empathetic educators are those who exhibit deep care, compassion, and understanding for their students' life circumstances.

Empathy is more closely defined through specific concepts and types that include (but are not limited to) cognitive empathy, emotional (affective) empathy, somatic (bodily) empathy, and spiritual empathy. Among these classifications, researchers widely concur the two major components to empathy are emotional empathy (the ability to respond to another person's mental state with appropriate emotion) and cognitive empathy (the capacity to comprehend the viewpoint or mental condition of another) (e.g. Rogers et al., 2007). These two classifications are the perspective through which the topic of this paper is examined, given the dominant roles they play in an educator's ability to cultivate safe and empathetic learning environments. It must be noted that emotional and cognitive empathy are independent from one another. For example, an individual with significant emotional empathy may not have the same capacity to comprehend cognitively the viewpoint of another person (Kanske et al., 2016).

**The Benefits of Empathy**

The benefits of empathy are universal across communities, cultures, and settings. Empathy enriches our existence by narrowing the gap between the self and the other. It is a prosocial phenomenon that promotes community, altruism, cooperation, trust, support, and intimacy with others (Roberts & Strayer, 1996; Hoffman, 1991; Ringwald & Wright, 2021). Possessing empathy is essential for maintaining positive relationships, which are shown to beneficially affect our emotional and physical health. For instance, studies reveal high-scoring participants on empathy questionnaires report having more positive relationships with people, along with "greater life satisfaction, more positive affect, less negative affect, and less depressive symptoms than people who had lower empathy scores" (Grühn et al., 2008, p. 10). Studies also show strong social connections can lead to a 50% greater chance of longevity, a stronger immune system, faster recovery from disease, higher levels of self-confidence and empathy, improvement of emotional regulation skills, and lower susceptibility to depression and anxiety (e.g. Seppälä, 2020). Our collective need to teach empathy to the current and future generations of design students significant: there has been a 40% drop in empathy among undergraduates in the past twenty years (Turkle, 2015).

For faculty development and academic institutions, the benefits of empathy are equally significant and broad. For example, by adopting learner- and colleague-centered viewpoints we can:

- establish more positive relationships with our colleagues and students, thus improving positive interaction and productivity;
- reduce social distance and make more informed decisions once we understand and anticipate the behaviors of others;
- gain aesthetic enjoyment when we widen the scope of what we experience;
- deepen our levels of creativity, innovation, and problem-solving owing to our openness to other's ideas, experiences, and feelings; and
- adjust our pedagogical methods by taking into account students' cognitive and emotional states, from challenges and blockages to apathy and boredom (Smith, 2023; Breithaupt, 2019; Pink, 2005; Faerm, 2023).

Moreover, research shows employees with empathetic supervisors are more productive, engaged, efficient, agile, creative, and less likely to feel burnout and a desire to quit than those with less empathetic supervisors (e.g. Van Bommel, 2021). A teacher's empathy, as studies in the private sector suggest, is *particularly* important for students' academic and professional success: just 32% of those with less empathetic senior leaders report being engaged frequently or always, compared to 76% of those with highly empathetic senior leaders (Van Bommel, 2021). Additionally, only 13% of those with less empathetic senior leaders report being innovative at work, compared to 61% of those with highly empathetic senior leaders who describe being innovative often or always (Van Bommel, 2021). Clear parallels can be drawn from this research and applied to both the design student and design educator's

experiences. A design student's current learning experience and future career trajectory can be significantly impacted by the teacher's ability to facilitate empathetic learning environments and relationships.

The academic institution also benefits from possessing highly empathetic educators, since empathy is essential to building an inclusive culture and producing high-performing teams. These, in turn, strengthen the institution's financial wellbeing (Smith, 2023). For example, The Global Empathy Index revealed the top ten most empathetic companies experienced a 50% growth in earnings (defined by market capitalization) and a value gain of more than double that of the bottom ten. Researchers discovered a correlation as high as 80% between departments with higher empathy and those with high performers (Parmar, 2016). While these findings come from the private sector, it can be presumed that similar financial benefits—such as those associated with student retention—can be found in the public sector of academia that, in recent years, has adopted a more business-oriented and corporatized model of operations (deBoer, 2015). Conversely, an absence of empathy can weaken an institution and its community. As Smith (2023) observes:

> A workplace without empathy undermines morale, paralyzes teams and promotes burnout, irreparably damaging your business. Meanwhile, empathy markedly increases efficiency, creativity, innovation and job satisfaction. There's only one choice here. Prioritizing empathy at every level of your organization inoculates your business against the meanness and spitefulness seemingly lurking in every corner. How your employees treat each other, how well they work together, directly affects your bottom line. More empathy means happier people, more profits and, hopefully, far less spite (n.p.).

In the context of design education, the acquisition of these and other benefits that arise from practicing empathy in the learning environment requires educators to possess a keen awareness of how teacher-student dynamics (and the attendant presence or absence of empathy) can positively or negatively impact their students' neurological functioning—namely, the relationship between emotional affect and cognitive function.

## The Neurological Relationships Between Emotional Affect and Cognitive Function

> *When you show deep empathy toward others, their defensive energy goes down, and positive energy replaces it. That's when you can get more creative in solving problems.*
>
> – Stephen Covey, educator and author (1932–2012)

Negative environments and the attendant stressors can significantly dampen students' cognition and motivation in many ways. Within the human brain (Figure 1), chronic stress overstimulates the amygdala (the brain's emotional response center), which then overproduces the stress hormone cortisol. Excessive cortisol levels shrink and functionally impair the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for critical executive functions (e.g. organization, planning, time management, problem solving, managing emotions, and working memory). The sudden flood of cortisol draws resources away from cognition and into "fight, flight, freeze, or faun" fear responses, which subsequently hinder the aforementioned brain functions. The resultant impairment on brain size and function from this cycle can result in undue student challenges, frustrations, and subsequent underachievement.

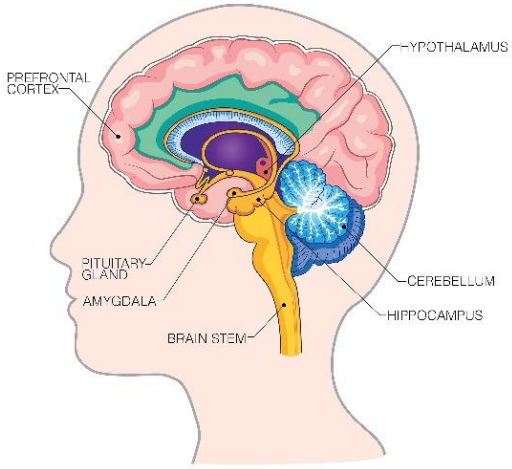


Figure 1: Diagram of the human brain showing the amygdala and the pre-frontal cortex.
Source: chaiyo12/Shutterstock.com

Consequently, rather than focusing on and retaining concepts and ideas effectively, the learner becomes distracted; they are biologically being driven to attempt to grapple with the perceived threat first in order to restore their sense of safety. These students retain less information, engage in less self-reflection, and because large parts of their attention are lost to these fear responses, these students are less able to access the full education they need. Accordingly, for optimal learning to occur, students must feel emotional safety, trust, and empathy vis-à-vis their teacher-student and student-student interactions. It is only through these feelings that students are willing to freely explore and experiment, which are fundamental to both design innovation and students' holistic development as emergent design professionals who will lead the future industries.

Yet, the vast majority of design educators enter higher education as well-seasoned design practitioners. Few—if any—have engaged in prior studies of educational pedagogy, student development, and/or student/developmental psychology. Thus, while design educators and school administrators widely concur empathetic and inclusive teaching practices enhance both the student experience and the institution itself, they are often unsure of where or how to codify best practices. The proceeding section offers strategic guidance and practical tools that all design educators can use for developing more empathic and inclusive design classrooms for resultant student success.

## Developing Empathetic and Inclusive Design Classrooms

The development of empathic and inclusive learning environments is especially critical in studio-based education. Design students are routinely asked to produce original, deeply personal projects that are presented in highly public settings for peer and faculty critique and assessment. In this regard, design students remain distinct when compared to "traditional" college students (i.e. those not engaged in studio-based education, such as liberal arts and STEM) owing to the vulnerable "place" in which they must work if they are to achieve significant creative and professional growth. Accordingly, design students in particular need faculty who are steadfast in cultivating empathy in design classrooms.

Empathy, like all skills, is not a fixed trait but one that is malleable and can grow over time through learning and sustained practice. Common strategies for developing empathy include (but are not limited to) practicing the following: mindfulness, active listening, asking questions, questioning our biases, and by spending time with individuals different from ourselves. Simply having an empathetic mindset leads to more empathetic methods and actions educationally (Smith, 2023). Strategic methods are also required for developing empathetic, inclusive design classrooms. These commonly utilize a mixture of ongoing reviews of curricula, proactively investigating new

research and knowledge around inclusive practices, and nurturing inter- and intra-personal awareness. We can begin this work by considering:

- the ways students' identities, values, experiences, and background influence their levels of engagement;
- why some students seem to learn more easily than others;
- why some students participate or disengage more frequently; and
- how course design and pedagogical approaches include or exclude students (Yale University Poorvu Center [YUPC], n.d.).

This preparatory reflection enables us to practice the following methods that aim to promote empathy in the teacher, the classroom, and the wider academic community.

**Strategize Course Content**

When developing your course's content, begin the process by asking yourself, "What do I use to teach?" and "Do my course readings, visual/audio content, and examples used in my classroom represent and respect multiple identities and communities as legitimate sources of critique or knowledge?" (Harvard University Bok Center, n.d.). If the materials are homogenous, it is vital that you assess how/where you can incorporate more inclusive material into your curriculum so that it better conveys how other peoples' perspectives and backgrounds can have a place in your course. For instance, if all your featured designers/authors are of one gender, ethnicity, and/or political orientation, then your teaching will send "a message about the voices that are valued and will be devaluing the scholarship of others who have written or created materials on the topic" (Saunders & Kardia, 1997, n.p.).

Also consider your students when selecting your course materials**.** Wherever possible, ensure that the course content meaningfully represents the diverse aesthetics, creative approaches, experiences, values, backgrounds, and viewpoints of all your students. The customization of content extends well beyond the examples mentioned above. It includes in-class activities, discussions, projects, and other learning content that can reflect the community's diversity. Doing so may help all students to imagine themselves actively participating within various learning scenarios, cultural contexts, and professional environments (YUPC, n.d.).

**Cultivate stronger, more authentic teacher-student relationships**

Hierarchies—namely, pronounced, steep imbalances in social and political power— destabilize the formation and perpetuation of close, meaningful relationships. This significant social distance between individuals, in turn, weakens empathy. Moreover, when people have more power in a social hierarchy, they "tend to lose their empathetic abilities (even if their trait empathy was high when they came into the hierarchy)" whereas those at the bottom "often need to develop hyper-empathy as a kind of counterbalance (and to keep themselves safe)" (McLaren, 2024, n.p.). Teachers must therefore reduce the intensity of entrenched teacher-student hierarchies if empathetic, inclusive classrooms are to emerge. This can be achieved through the fostering of "side-by-side" teacher-student relationships that aim to deepen students' greater sense of inclusivity, care, tolerance, and holistic support. By positioning themselves in this way, teachers acquire a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of each individual learner, one that helps them strengthen their student-centered pedagogy. Without such knowledge and understanding, the teacher may resort to stereotypes in an attempt to make sense of students' behaviors and ideas that contradict their preexisting schemas (McAlinden, 2014). This is a salient point in design education due to the exponential enrollment growth since 2000. As enrollment increases, so too does the diversity of students' learning styles, academic needs, personal values, and much more. It is therefore imperative that design educators resist outdated stereotypes of students that may undermine and marginalize particular types of learners.

There are numerous core techniques we can use for cultivating stronger, more authentic relationships with our students. One technique involves creating routine moments in the classroom to personally connect with each student. Simple acts, like asking students what they hope to gain from your course, how they're doing in their other courses, how they spent their weekend/free time, and what hobbies or extracurricular interests they have, will demonstrate your care and genuine concern for them. Creating moments to personally connect with each student—not merely as pupils who we see and evaluate through their academic work—demonstrates we value and respect their life situations, which is vital if students are to feel like they belong and to bring their authentic selves to your classroom

(Van Bommel, 2021). This is critical information you need to shape your teaching to be centered on inclusivity—and the importance of the individual—as opposed to exclusivity or bias.

Similarly, our body language can be used as a dynamic tool for building more positive teacher-student relationships. Researchers (e.g. Mehrabian, 1971) posit approximately 93% of all face-to-face communication is nonverbal. While verbal communication primarily stimulates cognition (learning) in the student, nonverbal communication (e.g. body language and vocal tone)—which sometimes *replaces* verbalizations—stimulate affective meanings in students (e.g. their feelings and attitudes toward the course, learning material, and the teacher) (McCroskey et al., 2006). Thus, we can build positive rapport and emotional connections with our students by mirroring their body language, speed of speech, facial expressions, and vocal styles during our interactions. The power of these practices is especially impactful in design education given design students are highly attuned to visual information and subsequent learning experiences. In doing so we convey our care and empathy that, in turn, bolster positive teacher-student relationships.

Research shows societies that promote individualism have lower capacity for empathy (e.g. Weiner & Craighead, 2010). Subsequently, we can deduce that promoting the feeling of communalism in students is vital to fostering empathetic learning environments. Throughout the course, we can encourage and support this collective mindset by providing opportunities for students to interact with each other via formal and informal activities. These can include group design projects, small discussion or work groups, new seating arrangements, mid-class seat-swaps, and "15-minute peer-tutorials," where students pair-off to share tips and tricks related to the coursework (Faerm, 2023). Activities like these strengthen students' sense of being part of a team, understanding of one another's perspectives, mutual respect, peer support and, consequently, empathy. These techniques help ensure class dynamics stay fresh, and students are afforded regular opportunities to get to know *every* classmate throughout the course's duration. Moreover, these techniques prepare design students for professional design studios, environments in which the personal and creative attributes of collaboration and teamwork are fundamental to success.

**Relieving Stereotype Threat in Students**

Stereotype threat refers to "the [learner's] fear of confirming a negative stereotype about their respective in-group, a fear that can create [a] high[-stress] cognitive load and [thus] reduce academic focus and performance" (Steele & Aronson, 1995, as cited in Greer, 2014, n.p.). Its existence is an anathema to promoting equitable and just learning environments. To reduce stereotype threat, researchers (e.g. Fournier, n.d.; Greer, 2014; Stroessner & Good, n.d.) posit the following methods.

1. Promote a "growth mindset" in students. Encourage students to view their abilities, creativity, and intelligence as expandable qualities that come from persistence rather than as "fixed" entities (e.g., "I just don't have a 'computer brain'"). This is especially relevant to design education owing to the consistent, routine practice needed to build technical skillsets, such as drawing, 3D prototyping, and other skills that are integral to design practice. To cultivate the growth mindset in students, our critiques should affirm that learning is an incremental process, and therefore *each* student has the potential to achieve mastery. Accordingly, students understand we see them, individually, as capable learners.

2. Showcase positive role models. By telling students about the personal and professional struggles faced by renowned designers—especially those who belong to marginalized groups currently or historically—we can help them see successful role models from outside the dominant paradigm and develop the mentality that, "If they can overcome what they did, I can overcome my hurdles too." As Greer (2014) notes, "[p]ositive role models, who perform well in fields that typically invoke stereotype threat, can increase otherwise poor performance for stigmatized groups" (n.p.).

3. Check for any external cause(s) for difficulty. Students' anxiety may be lessened if teachers assist them in determining the external cause(s) of their concerns. Additionally, studies note "instructors reduced [students'] poor performance by suggesting that anxiety might actually help with test taking, without connecting the anxiety to any stereotype" (Greer, 2014, n.p.).

4. Encourage and reaffirm the importance of diverse personal identities. The power of stereotype threat—and accompanying weakening of cognitive performance—can be destabilized by instilling in students the understanding that their identity is a valuable asset to themselves and to the world. (e.g. Cohen & Sherman,

2014). This can be achieved through practices such as self-affirmation. Also, respectfully drawing attention to students' diversity in the classroom (as opposed to ignoring it) can develop into a valuable teaching tool and thus underscore the significance of diversity in design practice as well as in life.

5. Allow for choice and autonomy. Whenever possible, provide students with opportunities for self-directed learning. Allow students to develop work that tells their own stories, on their own terms. As mentioned above, design students' engagement in work that is deeply personal (and thus emotional) frequently creates feelings of vulnerability within them, particularly during critiques and assessments. Therefore, facilitating opportunities that provide choice in how, when, and where students share information about their identities is essential to creating safe learning spaces and cultivating trust. Consider critical questions, such as, "How can small conversational groups precede large, class-wide discussions so that students can first assess their readiness to be vulnerable?" (Safir, 2016).

Empathy, as a malleable skill, is central to fostering both the personal and professional growth of design students. By incorporating these inclusive teaching strategies, educators can ensure that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, have the opportunity to thrive in an environment that promotes creativity, collaboration, and understanding. Central to this principle is that we, as design educators, engage in ongoing analysis and evolution of our teaching practice through mindful, critical reflection.

**Cultivate a "Critically Reflective Teaching Practice"**

Empathetic and inclusive learning environments must be built on a foundation of ongoing self-improvement for both individual educators and the institution itself. A key technique for building this foundation is Critically Reflective Teaching (CRT) Practice. CRT is a well-defined and crafted action that aims to make the implied explicit for evaluation and positive action (Loughran, 2002). It draws attention to areas of our teaching that may be problematic so that our pedagogical methods may be improved.

To succeed, CRT requires "[a] disposition to inquiry incorporating the process through which students and early career and experienced teachers structure or restructure actions, beliefs, knowledge and theories that inform teaching for the purpose of professional development" (Zwodiak-Myer, 2012, p. 5). Furthermore, CRT is a career-long process whereby the teacher forever seeks to understand better the effects of their teaching and connect more meaningfully with students so they can foster an ideal learning environment. During this process, the teacher must "probe beneath the veneer of a [one-dimensional] commonsense reading of experience. [Reflective teachers] investigate the hidden dimensions of their practice and become aware of the omnipresence of power" (Brookfield, 1995, p. 7).

Notably, CRT extends well beyond the scope of mere instruction and course content because it prioritizes introspection around *what* is being done, *why* it's being done, and *how well* it impacts students' knowledge acquisition (Mathew et al., 2017). These areas of reflection are vital to our teaching practice and personal development because we are, "[t]o some extent…prisoners trapped within the perceptual frameworks that determine how we view our experiences" (Brookfield, 1995, p. 28). The conscious and unconscious assumptions and biases we hold may distort, blur, or constrain our teaching, thereby undermining our professional growth, students' learning, and the value our institutions provide. The reflective process, overall, allows us to see things from different viewpoints, thus strengthening our cognitive and emotional/affective empathy. Moreover, CRT is especially important for both new and less experienced design teachers who are learning that effective teaching is a synthesis of three key areas: a deep understanding of course content, a strong and continuously evolving pedagogy, and expansive and respectful relationships with students both inside and outside of the classroom. Through CRT, the novice design educator hones pedagogical approaches that effectively address these fundamental tenets.

*Methods of Critically Reflective Teaching Practice*

The search for our own assumptions and biases that keep us from seeing our "true" selves is at the core of critical reflection. Facilitating this inward search requires us to reposition ourselves, "from the dance floor to the balcony," so that we can better assess and comprehend the full scope of a situation, its participants (such as students), and ourselves. Numerous scholars (e.g. Brookfield, 1995) prescribe four methods teachers can use to gain a more salient understanding of their identities and roles as educators (Figure 2). These perspectives serve as a starting point for

developing effective curriculum, teaching more responsively, fostering empathy, and grounding our educational processes. After all, "[w]ithout this knowledge all the pedagogic skill in the world means very little, since that skill may unwittingly be exercised in ways that confuse or intimidate learners" (Brookfield, 1995, p. 94).

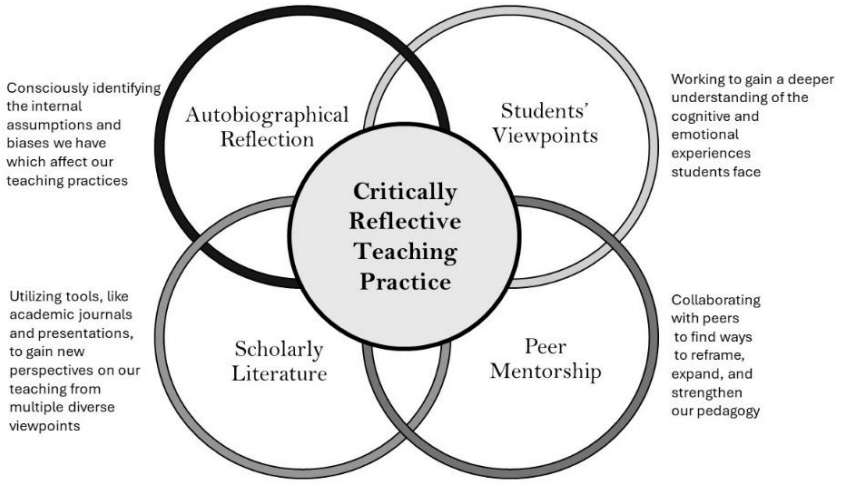


Figure 2: Methods of Critically Reflective Teaching Practice.

1. **Performing Autobiographical Reflection**
   By reflecting on our own autobiographies as teachers and learners, we can become conscious of the internal assumptions and instinctive reasonings that inform our teaching practices (Miller, 2010). We consider the positive and negative formative experiences we had as students and how they influenced our pedagogical styles. For example, past positive experiences may guide what we seek to emulate while negative ones are those we want to avoid exhibiting. Examining teaching journals, peer and student feedback, personal goals and outcomes, and/or role model profiles are all part of this reflective process that deepens our empathy.

2. **Considering Our Students' Viewpoints**
   When we consider our students' experiences, concerns, difficulties, blockages, and views of our pedagogy, we can gain a deeper understanding of the cognitive and emotional challenges that they face during the learning process. By placing ourselves in their shoes, we can better understand students' needs and wants from *their* points of view, not our own. This makes it quite evident how empathy (giving people what they need) and generosity (giving what you assume they might appreciate) differ from one another (McLaren, 2024). This process—which has been shown to offer the greatest long-term effect in evolving an educator's pedagogy—is especially beneficial to those who have been teaching and/or in professional practice for so long that over time they forget their own experiences as students (Brookfield, 1995).

3. **Engaging in Peer Mentorship**
   Obtaining guidance and feedback through mentorship allows us to reexamine our teaching methods via other perspectives that, in in turn, can help us reframe, expand, and strengthen our pedagogy. The practice of mentorship can involve informal conversations, teaching observations, reviews of materials (e.g. syllabi or teaching philosophies), workshops, and similar opportunities that enable us to identify more clearly and examine more effectively past actions and events. Moreover, mentorship provides emotional support, a sense of connectedness, and the feeling that we are not alone in our challenges.

4. **Reviewing Scholarly Literature**
   Research on higher education offers multiple, diverse viewpoints on specific topics. These resources can challenge our preconceptions and predispositions, provide fresh perspectives on familiar situations, help us

"name" our experiences and practices, and make situational contexts clearer (Brookfield, 1995). Akin to peer mentorship, these external sources could reveal that problems we may think are personal shortcomings or difficulties are actually caused by other variables, such the structural or cultural conditions of the institution. This increased understanding, in turn, reduces the tendency to blame oneself, preserves emotional energy, and ultimately boosts our assurance and efficacy as educators (Brookfield, 1995).

CRT, driven by a deeper understanding of our biases and assumptions, is essential for effective teaching. By employing the methods suggested, design educators can gain insight into their roles, cultivate empathy, and create more responsive and impactful learning environments. Without this self-awareness, even the best pedagogical skills may fall short in truly connecting with students.

*Select Benefits of Critically Reflective Teaching*

Critically Reflective Teaching delivers extensive benefits. Over time, as we become more aware and understanding of ourselves and our students—as we strengthen our empathy—the new information accumulates and is integrated into our prior knowledge. This arsenal of data can then be leveraged to achieve greater effectiveness in our roles as design educators. The use of CRT heightens feelings of confidence, autonomy, and motivation within us and thus improves the quality of our design pedagogy, students' learning, the academic community, and the design school's value.

Other, more nuance benefits emerge from CRT. They include (but are not limited to):

- We view teaching as an ongoing process of development and improvement. Many educators believe they must be the "perfect" teacher. However, CRT reminds us that our professional development is not finite; it is a never-ending process that can be likened to a Möbius strip. When we honestly and openly reflect on ourselves, this can lead us to fostering a work environment where we respect—and appreciate—one another's capacity for transformation (Brookfield, 1995). Our students also gain exponential benefits because through this practice, we become better at communication, course content delivery, and teacher-student relationships.

- We feel greater intention and groundedness in our teaching practice. Rather than fate, serendipity, or even luck shaping our educational processes, CRT reveals and affirms the personal agency—and the responsibilities—we have as teachers (Bartlett, 1990). By acting with intention, discovering deeper meaning in our work, and having purpose in all that we do, we can achieve greater fulfillment as more self-directed and empowered educators (Brookfield, 1995). Furthermore, our capacity to articulate our pedagogical approaches and ultimate goals to students builds our credibility, which in turn fosters a culture of higher trust, understanding, and empathy in teacher-student relationships.

- We strengthen the institution and its community. A vital outcome of the reflective process is the illumination of hegemonic assumptions that are commonly embedded in schools' culture to the point of remaining unnoticed and accepted as "The Way Things Are Done." The purpose of reflective practice is to challenge these presumptions to discover alternate, improved methods that better address the goals, needs, and ambitions of our evolving design students as well as ourselves and our academic communities.

Yet, despite these and numerous other benefits, many teachers will feel reluctant to undertake the practice of Critically Reflective Teaching. After all, the process aims to disrupt the status quo, both internally as teachers and externally at an institutional level. In particular, it fundamentally asks us to deconstruct our ways of knowing and being in the world. Consequently, this process can produce tumultuous feelings of loss, confusion, and general ambiguity about the worth and value of our teaching and of *ourselves*. However, by adopting the methods and systems of CRT, we may reap many remarkable benefits with our teaching practices and on a larger scale for the community, including the development of a deeper body of knowledge into the epistemology of teaching practice—potentially through academic textbooks, scientific papers, and academic journals—that will serve to strengthen future design educators, institutions, and industries.

## Conclusion

*All advocacy is, at its core, an exercise in empathy.*

– Samantha Power, government official and journalist (b. 1970)

If we want equitable and just design classrooms, the process must start with empathy. The establishment of inclusive learning environments—places where *all* students feel supported creatively and intellectually through mutual expressions of empathy—is fundamental to students' wellbeing and to ensuring every student is given equal opportunities to succeed. To accomplish this objective, the ways in which we embody our roles and, indeed, the very manner in how we practice our pedagogy, must evolve. Design pedagogy must be conceptualized as an *emotional practice* (not one that is merely content based) whereby educators, through empathy, are better equipped to challenge their biases and what they "know" of their students. Ultimately, it is only by establishing common ground and close, meaningful relationships with students that we can truly grasp the contexts and complexities of each student's circumstances. This understanding, in turn, helps us more effectively position and focus our teaching methods.

This significant enhancement to our roles will positively transform the diverse communities that extend well beyond our campus boundaries: as educators, we model behaviors, habits, and actions for our formative students, young adults who will graduate and embody the values and traits we instilled in them during their education as they succeed in the global design industries. By gaining the skill of empathy (that was modelled by their faculty), design students strengthen their observational and problem-solving skills, create more inclusive design, acquire better communication skills, form dynamic design collaborations, and make stronger emotional connections—all of which promote more meaningful, impactful, and user-centered designs. Empathy also stimulates ethical considerations: by understanding the consequences of their work, students/professionals can design in ways that positively impact society and avoid harm.

A more equitable and just design Academy is remarkably dependent upon the ongoing development of empathy within us—namely, by gaining a fuller awareness of empathetic practices, the impact of emotional affect on cognition, the techniques for developing empathetic and inclusive learning environments, the practicing of Critically Reflective Teaching, and the other select strategies described in this article. Incorporating these and additional pedagogical methods in design education will help educators develop practices that actively support students' feelings of psychological safety, belonging, and inclusivity in design classrooms so they may, in turn, flourish personally, academically, and professionally.

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