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**Empathy Building in HE:
pedagogical practices to foster communication, listening skills and perspective taking**

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Abstract

This article presents an academic practice involving university students who were taking a module in which story exchanges were used as a methodology to build empathy and foster communication, listening skills and perspective taking. Following a brief literature review, the article describes the activities and the pedagogy that were followed in the undergraduate module to start building empathy and connectedness among students, as well as the research methodology employed. Data collection consisted of a questionnaire distributed among all students and the reflective essays of the volunteered story exchange participants. Mixed methods were used for the analysis, following grounded theory approach for the qualitative data. The results show how during the story exchange interactions among participants, information and emotions were exchanged, and processes regarding empathy building, development of transversal skills and connectedness took place. The experience was perceived by students as transformational and empowering. The article closes with some conclusions and recommendations to inform future pedagogical practices aiming at fostering empathy among Higher Education learners through story exchange.

Keywords: empathy, higher education, connectedness, transversal skills, active listening

Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant? (Henry David Thoreau)

When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen, you may learn something new (The Dalai Lama)

Introduction

The last decade has seen an increase in number of students that enrol in higher education (HE) programmes in Ireland¹, among them humanities programmes that have a very broad interdisciplinarity and that bring together large number of students that decide to study Arts. Large cohorts of students may not be conducive environments to foster socialisation and communication between university students that take different subjects. Students may also not have much spare time due to other responsibilities such as part-time work or family, or they may struggle trying to establish new friendships. One of the negative impacts of the pandemic on students has been the lack of socialisation skills and the ability to connect and communicate with their peers (Hamilton & Gross, 2021; Carolan, 2022), a fact that certainly influences undergraduates' connectedness. The pandemic, which has accelerated the use of technology, has made the world smaller and the importance of teaching empathy for intercultural training even greater. The importance of empathy as a soft skill in our digital world can be seen in the number of studies that have been conducted in this area (Christofi et al., 2022; Liem et al., 2020).

Equally, higher education institutions (HEIs) are intensively focused on answering the new needs of the student population, and universities are undergoing a transformation where inclusivity and diversity are at the top of their agenda. One aspect of this transformative process is the development of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policies, reflected in curriculum development and in the teaching and practices associated with them. This article deals with one of these teaching practices based on building empathy among higher education students.

While equity has a significant role in this discussion and is completely connected to empathy, the debate about how important and needed soft skills are in graduates' repertoire of attributes

¹ The Higher Education Statistics Website states that it was a 17.3% increase between 2014/15 and 2020/21, up from circa 209,000 to circa 246,000 (Higher Education Authority Statistics Website, <https://hea.ie/statistics/>)

when they join the workforce is also taking a central stage in the HE arena. Since the profound transformation that HE experienced during the pandemic, this debate has been very prolific (Edmondson et al., 2020). The years of the pandemic had a strong impact on the way students related among themselves and there is a possible lack of empathy that an isolated and non-communicative situation created. Being empathic may be considered one of the main soft skills needed in the 21st century to function and operate in a diverse and egalitarian society and global world. We argue that it is essential to include activities and practices that foster empathy building in academic programmes. As Allen Blue, Co-Founder of LinkedIn, confirms: “demand for soft skills is likely to continue to increase as automation becomes more widespread” (LinkedIn, April 2023).

In this article we present an academic practice that involved undergraduate students who were taking a module during their second year or third year, where story exchanges were used as a methodology to build empathy and foster communication, listening skills and perspective taking. After a brief literature review and a clarification of the main concepts underpinning our pedagogical practice, we describe the activities and the pedagogy that we followed in our undergraduate module to start building empathy and connectedness among our students. After describing the classroom practice, we will present the methodology for data collection and analysis, followed by showing and discussing our findings. We will end with some conclusions and recommendations to inform future pedagogical practices aimed at fostering empathy among Higher Education learners.

In summary, the study presented in this article aims to investigate undergraduate students’ development of empathy after taking part in an academic practice based on the implementation of story exchanges. The questions guiding our research are:

- To what extent can a story exchange develop empathy in a Higher Education setting?
And how?

Literature Review

New initiatives and projects which develop empathy have been emerging in the last few years, and some studies and new practices are starting to add to the literature that deals with empathy building in education. A full monograph by Ward (2022) explores different perspectives and areas related to achieving equity in higher education using empathy as a guiding principle.

The monograph includes different chapters exploring empathy from different perspectives, such as how embedding empathy in classes and in teaching leadership benefits students' holistic development and strengthens diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (Wefald & Henault, 2022). Also, we find studies (Maxwell, 2017) that provide a compassionate empathy pedagogy for higher education. Other studies that focus on the development of empathy investigate the effect that educational design has on undergraduates from engineering (Alzayed et al, 2021) or including community of care practices in STEM education undergraduates to develop empathy (Fernández et al, 2021).

Understanding and conceptualising empathy

Empathy has been characterised as “a social and emotional skill that helps us feel and understand the emotions, circumstances, intentions, thoughts, and needs of others that we can offer sensitive, perceptive, and appropriate communication and support” (McLaren, 2013). It is also an emotional intelligence skill which allows individuals to distinguish and deal with others successfully (Badea & Pana, 2010). In today's globalised world, where everyone comes from different backgrounds, empathy is essential to ensure peaceful co-existence and avoid misunderstanding and conflicts. Furthermore, empathy can also reinforce social connections (O'Leary et al., 2022).

Empathy itself can be cognitive or emotional, the former being the ability to understand how someone feels and the latter being the ability to feel with someone. Thaler (2023) states that there are two theories around these two types of empathy; the first group of theories see these types of empathy as two separate entities, either cognitive or emotional, while the other groups of theories believe that empathy combines both. In recent years, a third component has been discussed and scholars have not agreed on a common term. It is a third type of empathy that makes one act, the “motivation to increase welfare” of the other (Zhou, 2022, p. 2). Regarding this third type of empathy, De Waal (2008, p. 292) confirms Batson's (1991) empathy-altruism hypothesis that emotional empathy combined with cognitive empathy can lead to “intentionally altruistic altruism”. In our study, we will focus on three types of empathy: cognitive, emotional, and altruistic as these are the three emerging in the data analysis.

It is important to discern other terms that are closely related but differ from each other. Empathy can be understood as the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and having the ability to experience, the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another. From

this point of view, empathy differs from sympathy as “intentionally reacting emotionally” (Cuff et al., 2014). Maibom’s (2009) empathy-sympathy hypothesis suggests that sympathy is the ability to “experience concern [...] in response to negative impacts on others' wellbeing” (p. 484). It is not our intention to delve into the different theories and conceptual approaches in relation to empathy and sympathy, but just to establish the conceptual boundaries that underpin our study.

Finally, there are two other aspects to be mentioned in relation to the concept of empathy: the idea of connectedness and the development of transversal skills. Connectedness with others is necessary for empathy building processes to take place (Manney, 2008; Hoffman, 2004), and there is evidence that empathy processes may occur during the use of story exchanges (Brockington et al., 2021). Equally, these processes are related to the development of soft skills. According to Raitskaya and Tikhonova (2019), these skills can be grouped into: “(1) social and communicative skills (communicative skills, interpersonal skills, teamwork and leadership, social intellect, responsibility, ethics of communication); (2) cognitive skills (critical thinking, problem-solving skills, innovative thinking, intellectual load management skills, skills of learning, information skills, time management skills); (3) skills associate to the personal attributes and emotional intellect (emotional intellect, integrity, optimism and positive thinking, flexibility, creativity, motivation, empathy)” (p.355). In the context of this study, we were interested in which aspects of the first and third groups may be developed during the story exchange practices.

Empathy and storytelling

The gathering of stories has always been part of many cultures in the form of folklore and storytelling. Ritchie (2011) remarks that “oral history is as old as the first recorded history” (p. 3). Historians use oral histories as a primary source because they produce evidence that cannot be found in other sources. Several historians have documented the importance of using this medium and explained how to gather and conduct oral histories (Thompson, 1988; Perks & Thomson, 2006). Oral stories are a rich source that can give a voice to people of all social classes and backgrounds who otherwise may not have had the opportunity to share their stories and been excluded from history. It allows individuals to share and exchange personal and interesting aspects of their life experiences “intersected with historical events” (Chowdhury, 2014). Oral history can be a powerful tool that brings a personal element to the past as participants narrate their memories and the impact certain events had on their lives.

Hamilton (2008) argues that an oral history interview cannot be conducted without some degree of empathy. Oral histories are memories from people's lives that create stories told by the interviewees. By listening to participants and sharing their stories from interviews, emotions are awoken that can break down barriers, develop caring emotions and increase empathy. From ancient practices to modern times, storytelling has helped to develop emotions and empathy (Brockington et al., 2021, p.1).

Empathy is a soft skill and many scholars including Manney (2008) believe that storytelling is an important tool for teaching empathy, as he explains:

I believe it is the imaginative act of the reader translating the words on the page into thoughts and feelings, enabling them to see the world through the characters' eyes and feel their feelings. It is also the recognition that humans share common needs, goals and aspirations and that these are either met or unmet in the story of every life, be it real or fictional. (p. 52).

O'Leary et al. (2022) found that empathy could be cultivated by using the "perspective-taking strategy", where participants change from their own perspective to one in a story they have just listened to. The same may occur in reading narratives as Keen (2006) contends in a study that examines both the writer's and the reader's perspectives.

Empathy building initiatives

In recent years, several initiatives have been developed and integrated in post-primary, secondary and higher education curricula with the aim to foster empathy, respectful active listening, and intercultural dialogue through story exchange or social action. These programmes include the UNESCO *Story Circles* (Deardorff, 2020), *Narrative 4* (<https://narrative4.com/research-statistics/>) and *Activating Social Empathy* (Silke et al., 2024). Common between the approaches are three identifiable principles: first, every individual has a personal experience that can be shared; second, we all can benefit and learn from each other; and last, listening for understanding is transformational.

Empathy "is a key social-emotional competency which is associated with positive health, social, and academic outcomes for young people" (Mooney, 2023, p. 217). It is also considered as an overlooked and yet fundamental skill in times of bullying, and the challenges of cultural and political divides exacerbated by online platforms (O'Brien, 2024).

The principle of storytelling advocated by UNESCO’s *Story Circles* is capitalising on century-old oral traditions such as ‘yarning’ in Australian Aboriginal culture where open dialogue is fostered by deep listening and reflection, and participants as well as facilitators share information equally (NSW Government Education, 2024). It involves two rounds of storytelling (‘get acquainted’ and ‘intercultural competencies’) followed by a debrief or discussion questions. As the main aim is to develop intercultural competence and global citizenship, participants usually emanate from diverse backgrounds, and the story exchange activity may lead to further community engagement. The *Story Circles* approach can be applied in many contexts, such as teacher education, international projects, community development, healthcare training and police training.

Similarly, *Narrative 4* involves creating social “connections through the power of storytelling” (<https://narrative4.ie>). It draws from the work and research of educators, authors and psychologists. It is more specifically designed for the education sector at secondary level but it can also be implemented in other contexts (e.g. primary and university levels, or community-centred settings such as meetings between various generations or between police and youth during restorative justice week). The programme focuses on the themes of faith, identity, immigration, violence and the environment, and follows five steps:

- **Preparing:** In the days leading up to the exchange, the facilitators identify objectives, build trust, and make arrangements to ensure safety for all participants.
- **Modelling:** Prior to the exchange, two people (trained facilitators) model the experience, setting the standard of vulnerability and respect.
- **Pairing and sharing:** The facilitators pair participants and provide them with time to share their stories.
- **Exchanging stories:** After a break, the facilitators bring everyone together in a circle to hear each participant share their partner’s story in the first person.
- **Reflecting:** The facilitators lead a discussion reflecting on the process and what it felt like to take on another’s story, and then create a sense of closure. (Adapted from *Facilitators Toolkit, Narrative 4*)

Finally, the *Activating Social Empathy* programme is a recent development in Ireland which will be integral to the Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) component targeting young people aged 12-16.

Despite these initiatives, studies about the impact of teaching empathy are very scarce. The positive impact of *Narrative 4* has been highlighted by a study carried out by the Centre of Emotional Intelligence at Yale University in the US. It found that students in schools teaching empathy through the *Narrative 4* method felt more supported (Bracket et al., 2022). In addition, the University of Chicago observed positive changes in a school in the Bronx after the *Narrative 4* method had been implemented (Frausel et al., 2022).

In their article *Empathy and Education*, Norma and Seymour Feshbach discuss the importance of teaching empathy in school settings and the positive impact it can have on pupils' performance and behaviour (Feshbach & Feshbach, 2009). Aldrup et al. (2022) studied the impact empathy has on teachers and their interaction with students. But O'Leary et al. (2022) found that there is "lack of literature review studies conducted on storytelling interventions with adolescents".

In relation to HE, some studies have investigated the importance of developing empathy skills (Gibbs, 2017) but most of them do not focus on the Irish context. We can find studies as well about empathy taught in the nursing context, where storytelling from patients helps medical employees to be more empathic (Williams et al., 2010; Yaghmaei et al., 2023).

It seems that teaching empathy in higher education has been limited to certain areas and has not received enough attention. Activities that deal with teaching empathy seem crucial, especially when looking at the success stories of secondary schools introducing empathy as part of their curriculum and the fact that more and more universities are discovering the importance of soft skills.

Context of Our Study

The *Narrative 4* (N4) storytelling methodology was integrated into an elective module entitled *Communication Across Cultures* with the aim to develop important skills in intercultural communication. The 12-week course introduces the concept of intercultural learning in an engaging manner and allows students to critically evaluate the importance of language in intercultural communication. For this case study, the teachers adopted a blended learning approach comprising of online lectures addressing specific themes such as identity, culture, and intercultural dialogue, followed by interactive on-campus tutorials and sessions where the story exchanges took place. The types of communication and soft skills required and

developed during the story exchanges are consistent with the skills that an intercultural competent speaker should have in their repertoire (i.e. empathy, active listening).

The cohort was composed of 98 students from Humanities Studies (Arts, Applied Languages, Psychology and Sociology) in their second or third year of undergraduate studies, and visiting Erasmus/International students. At the beginning of the semester, students were introduced to the Narrative 4 initiative, informed about its aims and procedure, and were encouraged to discuss the concepts of empathy and active listening. In the following weeks, participants were divided into smaller groups of 8-10 students to participate in one of the story exchanges taking place weekly during face-to-face tutorial time. Each session was facilitated by two educators who had completed the N4 training beforehand – the teachers of the course and other colleagues. Participants were given the prompt of their session a week in advance. The themes of the story exchange were chosen after careful consideration with the objective of giving participants sufficient freedom to share either light or deep stories. The prompts used were:

***Tell us about a time when an experience changed you.** This could be when you knew life would never be the same, or when a relationship changed your perspective, or when travel opened your eyes, or when you began to wonder whether you might be wrong about a conviction or assumption.*

***Bring an object that is meaningful to you.** Why is this an important object for you? Which memories do you associate with it?*

A set time of 90 minutes was scheduled for each story exchange and signs were put at the entrance(s) of the room to avoid any disturbance. Each session followed the same procedure, starting with a reminder of the N4 etiquette for respect and confidentiality thus ensuring a safe space for participants. Students were made aware that they could have full control of the story that they wished to share, and agreed on community standards to follow, e.g. ‘Listen, don’t interrupt’, ‘Be respectful towards everyone’ or ‘Stories stay but lessons leave’. Then, the *Narrative 4* five steps described earlier (modelling by the facilitators, pairing of participants, etc.) took place. Finally, the session ended with a closing activity where participants express a hope for their partner: “My hope for you is that...”.

As part of the module evaluation, students were asked to submit a personal critical reflection about the story exchange. For research purposes, they were also asked to complete a questionnaire.

Methodology

For this study we followed a mixed methods approach where we combined data collected through online surveys and qualitative data elicited from reflective pieces written by the participants. This approach “attempts to consider multiple viewpoints, perspective, positions, and standpoints (always including the standpoints of qualitative and quantitative research” (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 113).

Following the guidelines of ethics approval by the faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences committee at our University, the survey was distributed through a gatekeeper. The students received an information letter via email and were informed that survey participation was completely voluntary. The survey questionnaire included a final question where the students were asked about participation in a follow-up study based on the analysis of personal reflections submitted as part of their coursework. Responses were via the gatekeeper to preserve anonymity. Therefore, the total number of written critical reflections analysed (n=4) corresponds to the number of students agreeing to participate in this phase.

The survey was distributed at the end of the semester and contained 9 questions regarding the story exchanges: satisfaction, parts of the story exchange that students preferred or enjoyed the most, their understanding of empathy after the practice, challenges encountered and any learning that occurred. Most of the questions were Likert scale (five-point) with some multiple-choice questions and open questions for further comment. In total, 11 students answered the survey, which represents a small number of the total participants in the story exchange. Despite the small percentage in the survey participation (a response rate slightly over 10%), it has been deemed to be sufficient when originating from homogeneous groupings (Leslie, 1972).

The other source of data was the written reflections students submitted at the end of semester. Four students consented to the use of their reflections for research purposes. However, the recurrence of topics and ideas in these reflections may validate their contribution to this study. The reflection was based on the story exchange experience and had some prompts to guide the students: How did you feel after the story exchange?; What was it like to hear your story told by another?; How did it feel to tell your partner’s story?; Did any emotions arise when you were in the story exchange session?; What came up for you as you listened to the stories?;

What would you have liked to know more about after the exchange?; Were you comfortable with the group dynamics?; Do you have a different understanding of empathy after the story exchange? Why? How? How can you carry the connection and understanding that you experienced forward? It was deemed necessary to provide prompts for the students undertaking the reflection as this was part of their assessment. However, as the module was assessed on a pass/fail basis, the content of the reflections was not graded.

The main aim for analysing the reflections was to evaluate the impact that the use of story exchange methodology has on the students' perception of empathy and their experiences of it. The analytical methods used were drawn from Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This data analysis technique enables the classification of the data content into different categories through constant comparison. Initially, all the data is gathered, and an inductive approach is used to generate substantive codes. These are then used and refined into distinctive categories. After reading the reflections and coding the data, common topics and recurrent ideas were identified by the researchers. Then, all the codes established by each of the four researchers were put in common themes following the guidance of Charmaz: "[t]he initial codes are provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data. They are provisional because the researcher aims to remain open to other analytical possibilities and create codes that best fit the data that they have" (2006, p. 48). Then, we focused the coding, using the most significant and/or frequent codes to sift through all data. The focused coding then led us to connect codes with the different domains established for this study: empathy, development of transversal skills and connectedness. These domains were not pre-established and emerged from the data, along with other ideas. The use of a grounded theory approach for analysing the data in our study was motivated by the aim of our research: to explore the presence of empathy building processes that are grounded in the data collected from the reflections of participants in the story exchange.

Findings

Students' perceptions of the story exchange: quantitative data

The participants shared and recounted their personal life experiences within the group, and the stories exchanged were theme-based. All the stories were drawn from the prompts provided by the facilitators. At the end of each session, students were asked for their feedback where they discussed areas such as their expectations for the story exchange practice; their

engagement or lack of engagement with the process; the feelings they experienced when recounting and narrating each other's story, and how this experience affected them. At the end of the semester, when the classes were finished and all students had completed their story exchange, the questionnaire was distributed.

Overall, the students who participated in the story exchanges and completed the survey showed a high satisfaction with the experience. Most of them agreed that the story exchange added value to the module and would recommend it to a friend or classmate (Figure 1).

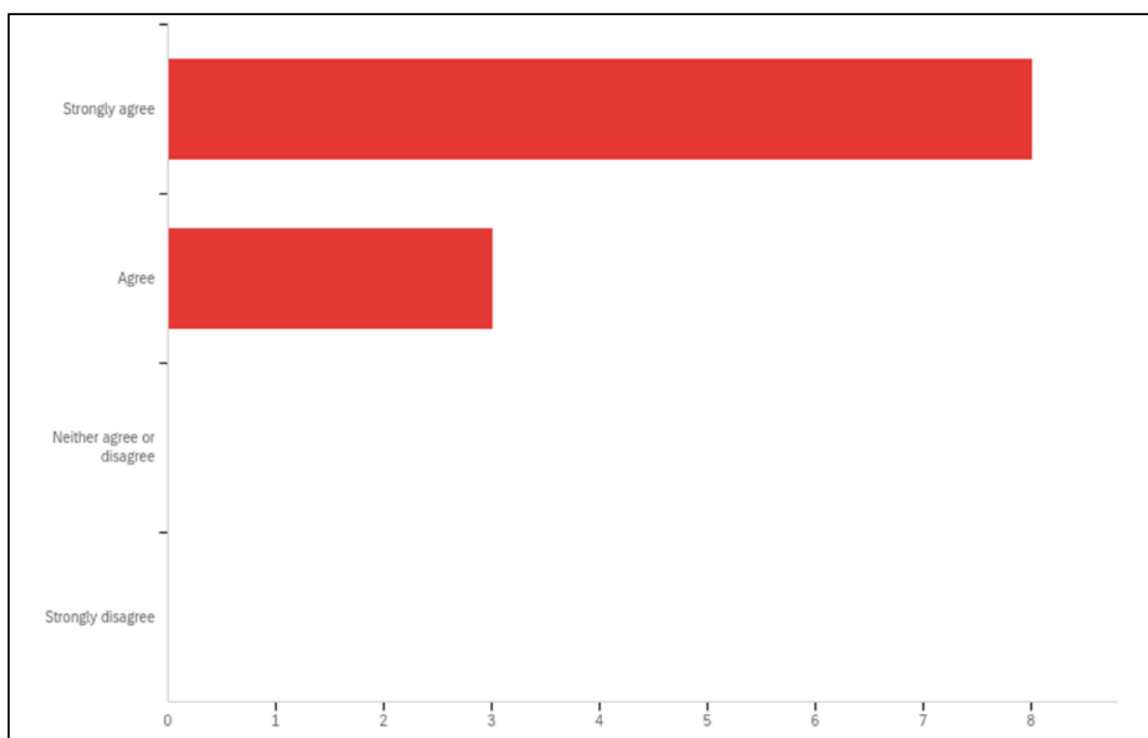


Figure 1: Students’ perceptions of the value of the Story Exchange as an element of their module

When students explained why they would recommend the story exchange they made comments such as:

very empowering experience, hearing your story being told by someone else

it gives you a new experience, to step outside of your comfort zone

it’s a good way for students to start communicating

That’s simple. It helps people develop an understanding that it’s ok not to be ok and that it’s ok to speak out

The reasons given in these comments are diverse and show how the individuality and difference of each student allows them to take something different from the experience. From feeling empowered, moving from one's comfort zone, expanding intercommunication skills or just becoming aware that one can speak out and share how one is feeling.

The different parts of the experience had different types of impact on the students, but the survey gives evidence that the most enjoyable parts of the story exchange were “Sharing the stories with their peers and listening to their stories” and “Listening to your story” (Figure 2).

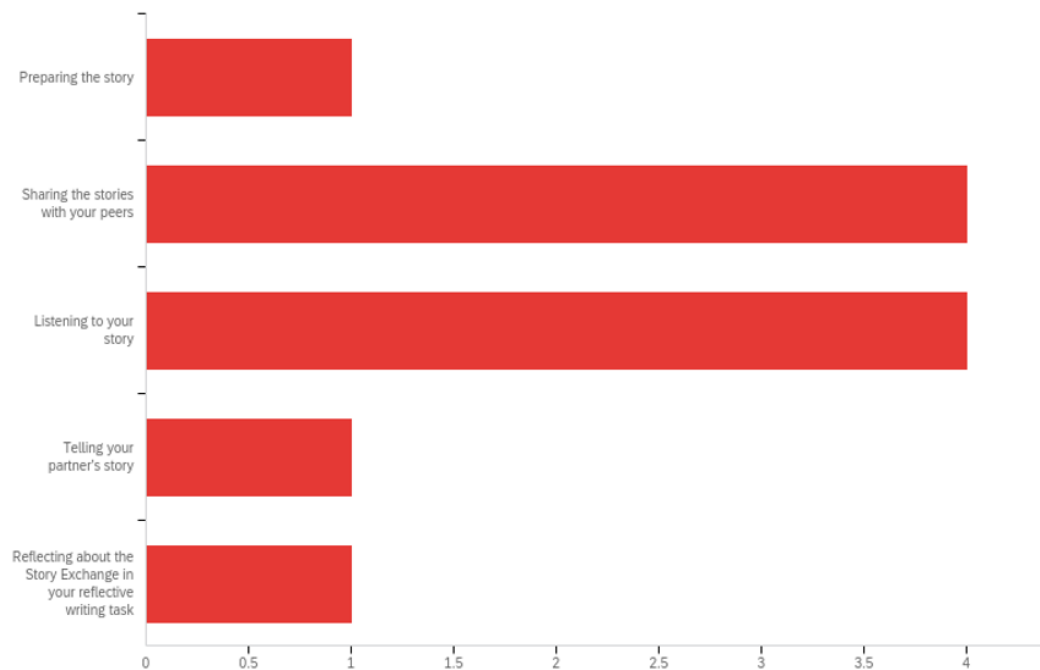


Figure 2: Students' preferences for the different parts of the Story Exchange

The respondents to the questionnaire stated that they learnt different things from the story exchange. Some remarked on the fact that everybody has a different story to tell, and *everybody has things going on in their life*. Two other aspects mentioned were: the realisation that opening to others could be a positive experience and it has not always to be subject to judgement; and the learning experience of listening to others, specifically, active listening. Besides the learning experience, the students were asked about the challenges they encountered challenges, which could be summarised as: being honest and open with strangers/willingness to open up and share; and trying to do justice to the partners story when telling it to the group.

Discussion

The interwoven links between empathy, transversal skills and empowerment will be explored in this section. The three domains investigated in this study are discussed drawing from the qualitative data results.

Building empathy

After the story exchange, most of participants stated that their understanding of empathy had changed, and in some cases, they expressed how they felt and how they experienced empathy during the story exchange (Table 1).

Participants in the story exchange developed their understanding of empathy, and it is clearly identifiable that perspective-taking (cognitive empathy) occurred as well as emotional empathy. Participants had a session where emotions and feelings dominated their state of mind. This is echoed in the focus code which appeared most commonly, the word 'Feel'.

The participants in some cases showed signs of empowerment and agency, when they expressed how powerful the experience was for them, and how participating in the story exchange had them feel stronger and empowered after going through different emotional states of fear and vulnerability. This process led to deep and important realisations such as: the connection with others, the lack of judgment when one opens up and tells their story. Sharing stories with their peers during the story exchange practice had a transformative effect on the participants and built and developed further empathy for them. Participants conveyed and developed compassion and empathy as they told or listened to the stories within the group. Hoffman (2004) presents similar results in a study in which storytelling is explored and developed in response to the need for connection expressed in the culture-at-large and to create opportunities for transformation. The findings highlight the transformative power of using stories to promote empowerment through connectedness.

| |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Did the story exchange give you a new understanding about empathy? |
| Understanding how to really connect with other people’s feelings |
| It is not limited to close friends and family |
| As I have a Neurodivergence learning condition, the story exchange helped to understand empathy and feeling something when talking |
| I believe it is one of the most important things in the world, the stories that we all share, even though the events are different, the feelings will always be there to connect us, rather than divide us |
| I think after this exchange my perception of empathy has changed to be more aware of the smaller things in life and how much trivial things mean to different individuals and to respect that minor things for some people have a much greater affect [sic] and greater importance for others |
| While listening to everyone else’s story I felt an immense closeness to the group and really felt like I was being let in to these people’s lives and hearing such personal facts about their inner experiences. Hearing my own story was something else, it was almost like an out of body experience listening to my own life being told by a stranger |

Table 1: data from the questionnaire and reflective essays

Developing transversal skills

One of the most mentioned skills that the students claim to have developed during the story exchange is the ability to listen. They refer to the action of active listening. The stories were shared by participants, many of whom did not previously know each other. Through the process of each exchange, the human connections and listening skills ignited slowly around the room and grew stronger during the course of each of the sessions as they relaxed into the process.

Words such as ‘communicate’, ‘listen’, ‘interact’, and ‘connect’ appear as focus codes when analysing the reflective essays of the students. Interaction and communication with their peers were well-received by participants in the exchanges, as well as the intention and action of listening actively. The quotations below are clear examples of this:

During the session I ensured that I continuously listened effectively, and I remained respectful and engaged by not interrupting and I also switched off my mobile phone to avoid the distraction

A positive I can take from the Story Exchange is that when somebody is telling a story, stop and listen to what they are saying and connect with each word

The realisation that active listening requires attention and does not leave space for anything else, clearly was a learning point. Moreover, the communication skills mentioned in the data align with Raitskaya and Tikhonova's (2019) soft skills classification: communicative skills, interpersonal skills and the ethics of communication.

Connectedness and the way forward

As discussed earlier, after the pandemic students felt quite disconnected and isolated from their fellow students. This fact is very visible when analysing our data as students go through the process of realising how isolated they feel and how difficult it is to talk about emotions or personal stories with others. The story exchange offered students the opportunity to understand themselves and others better. Students stated that when they listened to their stories narrated by another person, they felt compassion for themselves. Similarly to what the literature on this topic shows, these lived experiences helped participants to bond with others (Gheorghiu & Antonita, 2021) and with themselves, in some cases.

This transformative experience sometimes was translated into actions, or at least, in the intention to bring their learning forward to share with other people the benefits of the experience. Timid examples of altruistic empathy can be identified in the students' reflections, as in this critical reflective essay:

After the exchange (...) With a group of friends, I brought this idea forward of creating a safe and trustworthy place where we can talk about anything. I spoke to them about this experience I had in class and how beneficial it was for me (...) We know that nowadays its [sic] so hard to open up because of what society imposes on young people and it is hard for us to speak about how we feel and what makes us suffer, so with this group of friends we built a trustworthy circle where we can speak freely and know that this is actually making us much stronger.

The power of transformation of the story exchanges has been evident from different perspectives. A better understanding of empathy and then a great development of this empathy is clearly one of the main aspects to reflect on. Examples of cognitive, emotional and altruistic empathy (de Waal, 2008) emerged from our data, giving evidence of the impact that the methodology of the story exchanges had on our students. Most of the participants in the story exchange were able to shift their perspective into the other participants' perspectives (cognitive empathy). Expressions of emotion and feeling were clearly declared by most of the participants (emotional empathy). Comparably, Slivic et al. (2021) conducted research with

older adults and the use of digital storytelling to find out that attitudinal change occurred when the digital stories challenged their generalisations about older adults, and when they felt empathy toward the storyteller.

Interestingly, the principles of the Story Circles proclaimed by Deardorf (2020), and picked up by other initiatives, were also identified in the feedback and the reflections that the students provided: *Every person has personal experience that can be shared; We all have something to learn from each other; Listening for understanding is transformational*. Several transversal skills were part of the gains that the students acknowledged, from active listening to communication skills. In addition, this transformation, in some cases, has materialised in decision making, and action taking. Most participants felt more empowered after participating in the story exchange.

Conclusions

The implementation of story exchanges in HE has been a very interesting and worthwhile experience for both the facilitating team and the students involved. During the story exchange interactions among participants, information and emotions were exchanged, and processes regarding empathy building, development of transversal skills and connectedness took place.

On the practical side, participants expressed the need to extend sessions and make them longer to allow more time for debriefing, to discuss how they felt after the exchange and to talk with peers and other participants.

When conducting story exchanges in the university setting, it could be important to remind students that the emotional impact of the story exchange could have some impact on them, and the counselling services of the universities should be recommended.

Most of the facilitators were volunteering, and they all found the story exchanges a rewarding and transformative experience too, especially because they had the opportunity to establish deeper connections with their colleagues. However, pedagogical practices that are based on voluntary participation – in this case, that of the facilitators – do not guarantee sustainability for the future. We would recommend offering the story exchanges to students as an initiative from the EDI division, ensuring that the facilitators are rewarded for their time and skills.

The main aim of our practice was developing empathy, and this was demonstrated in the findings of the study. Furthermore, the story exchange had a positive impact on the well-being of the participants, especially after the pandemic, which represented a period of disconnection and lack of socialisation for our students. In addition, and having a much broader perspective, the final aim of including story exchanges in our university practices is to highlight the common ground that we share and the path to a compassionate, tolerant and inclusive community of students and society.

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