



EMPATHY & ACTIVISM



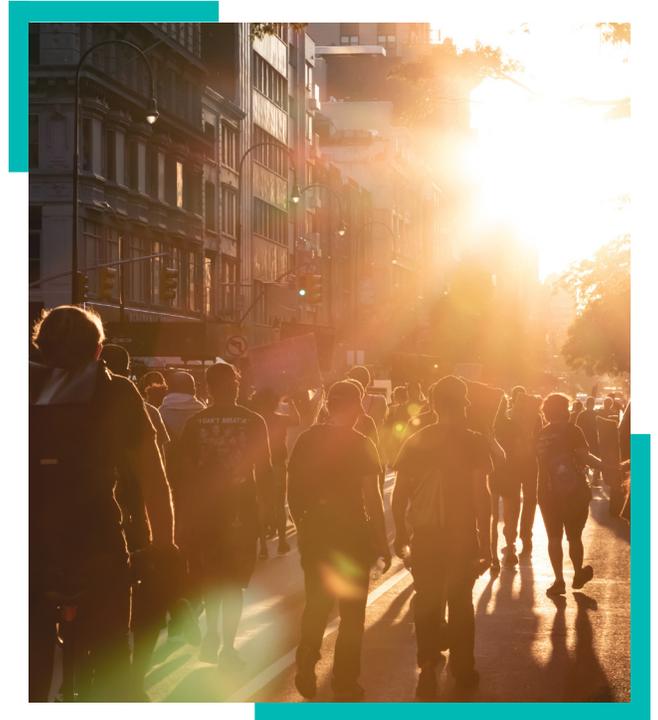


Across the globe human rights activists are tackling issues ranging from equal access to education for women and girls to advocating for free press and speech, among many others. Human rights encompass a broad spectrum of liberties, which the United Nations defines as “rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more...” and, the UN maintains, “everyone is entitled to these rights, without discrimination” (United Nations, 2020). How can we as educators foster students who care about and fight for human rights? What SEL tools are at our disposal to instill in our students a consciousness about and sense of urgency for eradicating discrimination, oppression, and human rights violations? The core of discrimination is a fear of difference and an impairment of empathy, and it is empathy rather than reason that allows us to perceive other human beings as equal (Schultz, 2013). Thus, empathy can be a driving force for activism. Empathy is a precondition for the motivation to acknowledge and respect human rights (von Harbou, 2013), suggesting that the earlier we begin explicitly fostering empathy the stronger the foundation for developing students who strive to bridge divides, celebrate differences, and fight for equal rights in our society.

Fly Five defines empathy as “The ability to recognize, appreciate, or understand another’s state of mind or emotions; to be receptive to new ideas and perspectives; and to see, appreciate, and value differences and diversity in others.” As we generate empathic abilities in our students and create a culture of inclusion in our classrooms, we can also instill in students an activist mindset rooted in empathy. This means using empathy as an active, galvanizing force. We can show students that it is not enough to appreciate differences and feel with another person, but we must all take active steps toward ameliorating discrimination and oppression. One specific way to present empathy as a means of fighting for human rights is by studying movements in history where empathy and action came together to create positive social change, such as the civil rights movement.



Take, for instance, the late Congressman John Lewis. An original member of the Freedom Riders, a group of activists who rode on interstate buses throughout the South to protest segregation and racism, Lewis became nationally known in 1965 when he played a prominent role in the Selma to Montgomery marches in Alabama. He led peaceful protestors across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, where law enforcement met Lewis and hundreds of other protestors with violence. Lewis suffered a fractured skull and the images of the violence aired on national news, with the attack from law enforcement drawing comparisons to Germany in the 1930s. In the following days, more and more Americans were on board with the movement to advance voting rights and dismantle racism (Bodroghkozy, 2020). As John Lewis and other civil rights leaders embodied the movement's demands, they humanized discrimination by giving it a face, a name, and a story. In a segregated society, igniting empathy for the protestors and more broadly the civil rights movement coaxed factions of Americans who had otherwise been able to turn a blind eye into recognizing racism and oppression and supporting efforts to eradicate it.



John Lewis and the other activists of the civil rights movement laid the groundwork for the current racial reckoning the United States is grappling with. Similar to the way that the images of violence against protestors in the 1960s urged broad segments of the American public and the government into action, our focus on building an antiracist world and classroom seeks to transform the perspectives and behaviors of privileged groups (Binkley, 2016). By cultivating understanding for and the capacity to co-experience the suffering of others, antiracism work is about building empathy in those groups least affected by racism and racist systems. Today's activists use a wide range of tools and tactics to achieve the goal of shining a light on unconscious biases and interrogating blind spots in pursuit of converting problematic assumptions in cultural sensitivity (Binkley, 2016).

Storytellers, such as filmmaker Ava DuVernay, use film and artistry to foster empathy in audiences and further the causes set forth by the civil rights movement. DuVernay directed the documentary film *13th* which explores the history of racial inequality in America and traces the lineage of the 13th amendment to the modern prison industrial complex. Highlighting the systemic discrimination and racism that plagues the American criminal justice system fosters empathy for individuals who are incarcerated. DuVernay uses history, personal narrative, and cultural comparisons to bring racial inequities center stage, which allows the audience to view these systems through a different lens.



Or consider social justice educator Jamila Lyiscott, PhD, a community-engaged scholar and Assistant Professor of Social Justice Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her education-based activism extends from the classroom to youth-based organizations that utilize hip-hop, spoken word, and media literacy as a means of advancing the human rights of marginalized youth. In her TEDTalk “3 Ways to Speak English,” Dr. Lyiscott celebrates the different ways of speaking English and asks the audience, “Who controls articulation?” In her four-and-a-half minute spoken word presentation, she highlights the subtle racism in our standards for being considered “well-spoken” and valuing one English dialect over another. “The English language is a multifaceted oration,” she says, “subject to indefinite transformation.” Dr. Lyiscott

uses her voice and platform to foster empathy by bringing unconscious bias surrounding language to the surface. As we watch her speak in her different dialects of English, proclaiming “this is a linguistic celebration,” the audience is invited to follow her lead and celebrate, rather than denigrate, different people’s ways of speaking the same language.

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Lewis, DuVernay, Lyiscott, and countless other activists, organizers, and advocates, use empathy in their work. They strive to create a “new racial contract” and “attribute humanity, subjectivity, and civility to the [groups] for whom these things have historically been denied, chiefly through the adoption of an empathic regard for the other” (Binkley, 2016). Their work allows viewers and students to see into the perspectives of people who are different from them, thereby humanizing an abstract notion of oppression and rights violations in a way that leads to social change.



More than just a feeling or state of being, empathy can act as a political intervention that allows us to transcend the borders of our own minds. We can actively practice feeling others' experiences in our hearts while simultaneously practicing radical self-examination (Lanzoni, 2019). This self-examination helps us unearth the ways in which we contribute to systems that oppress others and, though it may be difficult at times, allows us to take informed, positive action. As illustrated by the activists outlined above, and the countless others who devote themselves to fighting for equality and human rights, this action can take many forms—art, storytelling, scholarship, and community organizing, among many others. As one writer noted in *The Washington Post* upon the passing of John Lewis, “What good is empathy if one does not have the courage to act on it in the face of a mob? What good is honesty if one does not have the courage to speak honestly to the powerful? Lewis reminds us it is not enough to rage at oppressors from the comfort of our homes or bemoan election results in which we do not participate” (Rubin, 2020). As we continue our movement to create caring, joyous classrooms, we hope that you'll join us in making empathy a top priority in creating students who care for the greater good of all people and understand how to make positive change everywhere their lives may take them.





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