

# Theater as an Intervention for Empathy Development

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## Abstract

This research focuses on empathy development among students. Prior research has indicated lower empathy levels in college students concurrent with a rise in demand for empathetic skills from employers. A possible tool to assist with development of empathy in young minds using theater since the theatrical arts are collaborative, interpersonal and necessitate self-reflection. Using a structural equation modeling examined empathy development with theater engagement as a mediating variable, the results of this study indicate a positive association between theater and empathy development at a rate of one-third standard deviation increase in measured empathy for each standard deviation increase of theater engagement.

## Empathic Development

Between 1979 and 2009, researchers measured a 49% drop in student empathetic concern scores with most of the change occurring within the last ten years. This could be partially attributable to cultural and technological changes, although it plays against the stereotype of college students as open-minded idealists. Higher education has a responsibility to address the growing gap in empathy through empathetic development tools such as expanded theater programs in undergraduate settings. Empathy development starts from a young age and is essential for managing social interaction, interpreting behavior, and regulating feelings in a reciprocal manner. In

later developmental stages, empathy correlates with moral reasoning skills, community involvement, cultural awareness, and acceptance of pluralistic differences. Additional research shows that business majors are generally the least likely to incorporate moral and ethical concerns into decision-making, posing a challenge for institutional leaders to overcome.

## Theater as an Intervention for Empathy Development

Research indicates four primary ways to build empathy in adult years beyond daily experiences: (1) creating art; (2) reading fiction; (3) reading fiction; and (4) writing fiction and affective role-taking. Theater incorporates elements of all four and has been described as an “empathy playground” by some experts. The better understanding of empathy displayed, the better quality of acting. These skills have come into greater demand as the world becomes more interconnected, so higher education takes on a greater significance for developing empathy and indirectly impacting global outcomes. Schools such as MIT, Stanford and the University of Virginia have begun to take the lead in prioritizing interdisciplinary activities.

*Research Question 1: To what extent does theater engagement influence empathy among college students?*

*Research Question 2: Does the proposed path model fit data collected from undergraduate students at a large public university?*

## Frames, Methods and Instruments

Existing frameworks of empathetic development generally focus on either developmental stages, vectors of change, or weighting of external and internal influences. Most also emphasize the role of self-confidence and displays of affective and communal identity. This study collected data from an unnamed public university that measured several constructs incorporated into the model. A random sample demographically mirroring the full university (that also included all students majoring in or taking classes in theater) of 661 students was conducted with a 23.6% response rate. Student responses to the 116-question survey were rated using Erwin's Identity Scale and the Scale of Intellectual Development. Questions in the instrument included self-assessment of confidence, appearance, affective identity, and communal identity, as well as questions about prior theater engagement.

## Data and Discussion

Without the removal of any outliers, the results indicated that a student's level of theater engagement had significant impact on empathy scores. For each standard deviation increase of theater engagement, a one-third standard deviation increase was noted in levels of empathy, and the implied model above fit the data well. Differences in measured empathy scores persisted between theater majors and all other degree programs, which adds quantitative weight to the logical assumption that theater intervention is helpful for empathetic development. An added bonus of expanding theater classes beyond those required to enroll for their degree would be for cultivation of a lifelong love and support for the

arts in all university students, which would seem to align with the broader goals of higher education.

## Implications and Conclusion

One implication of this research may be that theater programs are more attractive to prospective students and parents due to the practical skills of empathetic development offered. Additionally, theater programs and faculty may be able to more effectively communicate their value to teach students beyond their typical purview. Institutions may receive incentive to remove financial barriers to access theater programs, and additional opportunities for business programs and faculty to break down silos and collaborate may also result. Finally, business owners and leaders would benefit from employees with strong soft skills and who understand the value of experiential empathy development to assist in business operations. Stakeholders in various fields should embrace interdepartmental collaboration for leading empathy change done through drama-based pedagogy. Future research could focus on alternative comparison models, additional populations, or typologies of specific theater intervention. The hypothesized model is a plausible representation of the theory that theater engagement correlates with empathetic development.



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