
Teaching Empathy Through Virtual Reality

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In Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* the U.N. secretary proclaims, "[m]ankind needs more empathy" (1968). The poignancy of Dick's novel is its accurate expression of the social challenge of diminishing human empathy. The author offers empathy as the defining characteristic of humanity. As is often the case, science fiction foreshadows our future: longitudinal studies show decreasing rates of empathy in college students over the last three decades. If we believe that empathy is indeed a vital quality, then humanists are uniquely qualified to address this decline: extensive research suggests that empathy can be taught, specifically by reading fiction. Furthermore, preliminary trials indicate that virtual reality (VR) effectively evokes feelings of empathy in viewers. In both cases, the medium can provide the audience with access to situations outside of their everyday experience, offering a perspective into the lives of people unfamiliar to the reader/viewer. Take, for example, the work of documentary filmmaker Chris Milk that immerses the viewer in war torn villages in order to impact immigration policy (see "How virtual reality can create the ultimate empathy machine," 2016) or the content of the *New York Times* VR application which addresses a wide variety of social justice issues from all over the world. However, as critics such as Janet Murray rightfully argue, the impact of VR is dependent on the execution, which is still in development stages: "[t]he technical adventurism and grubby glamour of working in emerging technologies can make it hard to figure out what is good or bad from what is just new" ("Not a Film and Not an Empathy Machine," 2016). As the digital humanities have encountered with other emerging technologies - most notably data visualization techniques - these new forms need to be critiqued as they evolve (Drucker, 2012). Inviting students and educators to collaborate with industry professionals in the process of consuming, critiquing, and creating open access VR content creates the opportunity to

design thoughtful immersive experiences that may address the decline in empathy in college age students. This presentation will explicate a study-in-progress devised to measure the pedagogical impact of VR content in combination with design thinking assignments used to combat desensitization and evoke empathy across the disciplines.

This research is supported with a case study of students in a series of linked courses at a small liberal arts college in Baltimore, MD. Students were exposed to VR content intended to increase their feelings of empathy for people who represent the "Other" in various ways, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. This study was created through a cross-campus collaboration between faculty from the humanities, social sciences, and school of design alongside the theater director and librarians. Using empathy as the central question, each course integrated VR content and related readings into the curriculum. In each case, VR provided access to experiences not possible within the classroom space, for example an immersion into a refugee camp, a simulation of the human brain, and a documentary depicting gender bias across cultural contexts. The VR was scaffolded into each course in discipline-specific ways. For instance, the literature courses focused on readings that depict representations of virtual bodies in tandem with theory on posthumanism, particularly the work of Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway. At the same time, the theater program produced *The Nether* by Jennifer Haley, which raises questions about the laws governing virtual spaces through depictions of pederasty and the murder of young children. Simultaneously, courses in psychology and human services integrated VR to discuss the impact of immersive content on social justice reform, and nursing courses looked at the application of VR for patient care and education. To varying degrees, this work was supplemented with readings on feminism, race theory, and disability studies in order to support discussions of "othering" with students. After analyzing the VR content in conjunction with the course materials, students were asked to design a VR experience intended to evoke empathy in the context of a discipline-specific audience. Additionally, members of a local VR company contributed as guest speakers and offered internships for interested students. Surveys were distributed at the beginning and end of the semester that prompted students to define, discuss, and debate empathy. At the end of each course students were interviewed to identify which methods of engagement increased their empathy

toward people (in some cases characters) they felt were unlike themselves in significant ways.

As a part of this submission the syllabi and assignments will be shared. Ideally, the speaker will bring a VR headset and gaming laptop so participants can experience and consider how this emerging technology can evoke empathy by providing access to geographical, cultural, political, and biological content unfamiliar to the viewer. The goal is to receive audience feedback on the first stage of this study in order to improve and refine the methods before executing the plan on a larger scale. This study is IRB approved and student consent will be obtained for any student work that is presented.