

## Teaching Empathy and Reflexivity in General Education Courses

Qiaoyun Zhang<sup>1,\*</sup> and Haochen Wang<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>BNU-HKBU United International College

<sup>2</sup>Chinese University of Hong Kong

### Abstract

This research article explores how empathy and reflexivity, the keystones of contemporary pedagogical philosophy, can be taught, learned and applied through general education (GE) courses with an anthropological approach. General education courses aim to offer students foundational, interdisciplinary and reflexive knowledge of human cultures and societies. Anthropological theories and methodologies provoke researchers to understand cultural differences from a holistic, comparative and relativist viewpoint. Drawing on focus group interviews with students of the GE courses at BNU-HKBU United International College, the article argues that an effective and affective way of teaching empathy and reflexivity in general education courses is to raise a sensitive understanding of peoples and cultures at the margin of society and to encourage critical analyses of the historicity and complexity of social issues.

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\*Corresponding author: Qiaoyun Zhang. E-mail: [qiaoyunzhang@uic.edu.cn](mailto:qiaoyunzhang@uic.edu.cn)

## Introduction

This article discusses how empathy and reflexivity, the cornerstones of modern pedagogical philosophy, can be taught, learned and applied in general education courses. General education (GE) is broadly defined as “education programs that are designed to develop learners’ general knowledge, skills and competencies, as well as literacy and numeracy skills” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics, 2012, p. 14) at college level. Since the 1960s, GE has gradually developed into an innovative and integral part of liberal arts education in the United States and beyond. As Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) General Education Office defines, general education “foregrounds the essential elements of Whole Person Education, such as integration of knowledge, acquisition of multiple perspectives, empathy and critical thinking, and aims to nurture our students to become responsible and responsive citizens” (Hong Kong Baptist University, 2021). At BNU-HKBU United International College (UIC) where the authors teach and study, general education courses on the theme of history and civilization taught by faculty of the General Education Office (GEO) serve the goal of offering “an

educational experience that encourages students to think beyond their academic or professional specialization, develop critical thinking skills, and be aware of human aspects of scientific and business professions” (UIC General Education Office, 2021).

As reflected in HKBU’s and UIC’s general education program philosophy, empathy and reflexivity are important pedagogical goals of such programs. Empathy refers to the compacity of understanding and feeling the experience and oftentimes sufferings of the distant other. Reflexivity, on the other hand, refers to “the process of critical self-reflection on one’s biases, theoretical predispositions, preferences, and so forth” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 224). Nevertheless, we have witnessed a great lack of empathy and reflexivity of college students across the world. A lack of understanding or tolerance of cultures or behaviors different from those of their own can be easily identified in the students’ school work, social activities and speech on the social media.

According to a meta-analysis of 72 studies of 14,000 American college students done in 2009, Konrath and colleagues (2011) find a sharp decline in empathy among the students (cf. Ma, 2021). A recent study also shows that most Chinese college students suffer from the lack of