

An Activity to Encourage Empathy

Tommy Hureau/ Feb 9th, 2026

After reading the article by Schieble et al. (2020), I created an activity designed to use the method described as “The Believing Game”. I felt like this activity had a lot of potential to get students to think outside the bias box that they or their surroundings/culture/influences project upon them. The activity is more controversial in nature as it would ask students to most likely position themselves metaphorically within the shoes of other political, cultural, and/or social values, so it is best as an activity for students who are emotionally mature enough to do so. This activity is designed for a high school humanities unit focusing on a contentious social issue.

The activity would first start off with the students taking a stance on a controversial issue of political, cultural, and/or social issue. Then, students are switched to take the opposing viewpoint and argue in debate. Schieble et al. suggests that students be prohibited from making counter arguments for their position they now have to defend (2020). Another aspect of this activity that might help the students solidify their position and reinforce the key issues to stay on topic would be to create a list of the thoughts, feelings, emotions, arguments, and justifications/ logical thinking that a person in their shoes might argue. This is an attempt to scaffold their learning similar to the "Heads Sheet" described by Vanderheide et al. (2020). The activity ends with a reflective portion whereupon the teacher can check-in -assess for learning- on how the students feel after the debate: do they feel differently now having done that? Even if they don't feel differently in their own position, perhaps they feel more enlightened on the perceptions that the debate allowed for.

I've seen this firsthand, when I shadowed my colleague who is now a teacher. He had his grade 10 social studies class divide themselves into two separate groups, allowing students who felt strongly against the role of American culture in globalization as a form of colonizing in the 21st-century to stand together, preparing to argue their position. Just as the debate was about to begin, he flipped the activity on its head by having the groups reverse their position. The group who were the most passionate (those of who were against the American global influence) were the most upset, but had the most to learn from the activity. In some ways, it was a clever and sadistic activity that both he and I enjoyed immensely, but also enriched the learning of his students because they became more well-rounded in their arguments.

This activity enhances the empathetic response by forcing students to overcome "myside bias"—the tendency to only value evidence that confirms their own existing beliefs (Vanderheide et al., 2020). By requiring students to argue the opposing perspective, it provides insight to them as they have to “think like their rival”. The learning becomes hidden within the game: they learn to understand by focussing on winning, similar to the premise of the article that suggests switching the goal from winning to understanding (Schieble et al., 2020). Empathy is not just an emotional response, it is a critical tool that humanizes the rival position, having the them embrace the values, views, etc. of their rivals. Developing this empathy is essential for critical thinking and democratic citizenship. Wolk (2009) argues that democracy is not merely a system of government but a nurturing of the common good. True critical thinkers must be able to navigate multiple viewpoints to avoid "ideological isolation" (Vanderheide et al., 2020). By performing this activity, students develop the empathy necessary to envision a better world (Wolk, 2009). Consequently, students leave the classroom not just as sharper debaters, but as empathetic citizens capable of the listening, not just talking.

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References

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