



Asheigh Aulet, This Isn't Me, 2018.

ADVOCACY TO ACTION

Joe Fusaro

As my colleagues Dana Helwick and Danielle McDonald point out in their own articles in this issue of *SchoolArts*, teaching about empathy starts with an awareness of what empathy is and how it involves vulnerability. I want to add to this by proposing that teaching about empathy at the high-school level must move from

advocacy to action. Sympathy is not empathy, as Brené Brown has pointed out in her TED Talks, and often the assignments we share as educators stop short of empathy by asking students to feel sorry or advocate for a group of people as they create a poster of some sort.

I propose that students build on vulnerability by making work that comes from a more personal place than simply scanning the news for important issues. Students can create work that starts with direct experience, a volunteer experience, or through the act of face-to-face interviews, and thus develop the ability to understand and share the feelings of others.

Direct Experience

Too many students have experience with bullying. Some have had to step in and provide protection for another individual. It seems natural to ask students to think back on their own experiences in and out of school. Who can they empathize with as a result of their own personal biographies? Have there been instances when they have had to stand up for someone? This kind of experience can allow students to create work that builds on the empathy they have for that person or persons.

To this end, challenge students to create a sixty-second public service announcement or billboard design that not only highlights the issue at hand, but also provides information indicating that, to the artist, it's personal. Many students can shoot and edit films with their own phones and billboard designs can be designed in a variety of ways—from works that originate in a sketchbook to computer graphics that can be shared through a variety of platforms.

Volunteer Experiences

If a teacher wants to take this idea of direct experience even further, suggest that students volunteer with a group they sympathize with. Ask them to identify a group of people they want to help in some way, then ask them to research local nonprofit



Production still from the Art21: Art in the Twenty-First Century season nine episode, "Johannesburg."
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organizations that serve these people in different ways. Over the course of a week or a month, students can volunteer at these organizations and keep a visual journal to share at the end of the unit.

Visual journals can include images and writing that anticipates what the experience will be like before starting, what the experience is like on a day-to-day basis, and the kinds of changes in thinking the experience inspired in them. How can students build on their volunteer experience and development of empathy to make the experience a more consistent part of their lives?

Interviewing

Finally, interviewing someone in person about their experiences can lead to empathy in a way that reading an article or watching a video can't. Students can interview their family, friends, community members, or even local officials about specific times when they went from sympathy to empathy.

Students can conduct the interview with a recording device. After concluding the interview, students could create an installation featuring the element of sound for viewers to experience the words firsthand from those most affected by it. Students can also pair up, and one student can act as the interviewer and the other can act as a sound engineer.

Artists and Resources

Three artists featured in Season 9 of *Art21: Art in the Twenty-First Century* can help us with teaching about empathy through direct experience, volunteering with organizations, and interviewing:

Zanele Muholi, a photographer and visual activist, creates self-portraits and photographs of black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people living in South Africa. As a member of the LGBTI community in South Africa, Muholi creates work that starts with firsthand experience.

Katy Grannan, a San Francisco Bay area photographer, utilizes conversation and the building of

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relationships to develop empathy as she photographs her collaborators over time. Grannan doesn't formally interview her subjects and uses conversation as a way to learn about those she photographs.

Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, California, serves adult artists with developmental, mental, and physical disabilities, providing studio space and materials for artistic development, gallery exhibition, and representation. After viewing the Creative Growth segment on art21.



Left and right: Jenna Hart, Luci Lobo, and Charlotte Weiss, *There's No One Type of Beautiful*, 2019.

org, students can think about where they might like to volunteer locally.

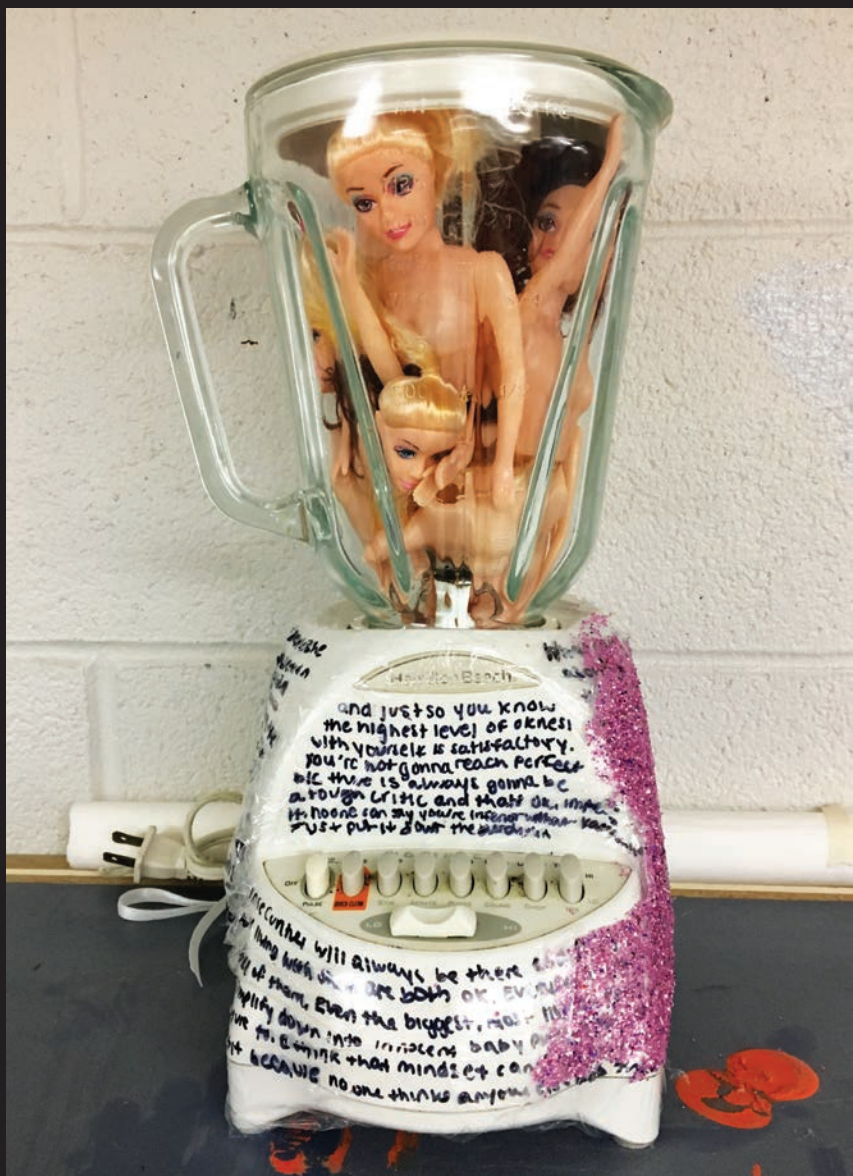
Summary

Let's face it, students who make art-work about gun violence, bullying, or even something like the hazards of vaping, are often only scratching the surface and not necessarily experiencing empathy for the people most affected by these issues. Incorporating a thoughtful approach that draws on direct experience, volunteering, and/or the act of interviewing someone, students can think about their own lives and learn about the lives of others firsthand to create works of art that explore empathy more authentically. 🌀

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WEB LINK

Art21: www.art21.org



Hayden DeCamp, *untitled*, 2018. This sculpture is about not reaching for perfection, but instead being comfortable with who you are, how you look, and how you feel.