

Lesson Plan: Can Virtual Reality Make Us More Empathetic?

Featured Resources

Above the Noise: [Can Virtual Reality Make You a Better Person?](#)

The Lowdown: [Can Virtual Reality Make Us More Compassionate?](#)

EMPATHY: the ability to understand and share the feelings of others

Opening Quick-Write Prompt

Write about a time when you felt empathy for someone else--when you really understood and identified with another person's experience. What had that person experienced? Why and how could you understand how they were feeling?

Note: You may want to tell students that they do not have to identify the person they are writing about, especially if it is a sensitive subject.

A quick write allows students to write down their thoughts before discussing the opening question in order to increase participation and make the discussion more accessible to English Language Learners.

Objective

- Students will analyze the arguments about whether or not virtual reality can actually increase empathy and, ultimately, lead to behavior change.
- Students will evaluate the information presented and write a response to the issue.

Essential Question and Lesson Context

Can virtual reality make us more empathetic? How much can an experience via only technology allow us to identify with the feelings of other people?

Virtual reality (VR) is an immersive experience, with 360-degree video, sound and sometimes other sensory inputs that simulate being in another environment. While most often used for entertainment, VR is also being studied by social scientists and psychologists as a way to alter the feelings or responses of users. Because VR is a controlled environment, it can be used to replicate specific situations. It is being used for military, space and medical training, as well as a therapy for [post-traumatic stress disorder](#), anxiety and phobias. Studies are also being done

to see if it can increase our empathy by allowing us to “experience” situations that we would not otherwise be able to. Is VR so immersive that it can change our behavior?

Key Vocabulary

Pre-teach key vocabulary before students do the activity, especially if you have English Language Learners. After going over the simple definition, consider providing a visual aid or having students draw one. More ideas for how to pre-teach vocabulary can be found [here](#).

Word	Simple definition
360-degree video (n.)	A video in which a view in every direction is recorded at the same time, allowing viewers to control the direction of the video during playback <i>The 360-degree video of the coral reef allowed me to feel like I was SCUB diving.</i>
Empathy (n.)	The ability to understand, identify with and share the feelings of others <i>I felt empathy for the girl in my class when her best friend moved away.</i>
Perception (n.)	The understanding of <i>My perception of virtual reality is that it can be a powerful tool for people have anxiety.</i>
Protagonist (n.)	The leading character <i>The person participating in VR becomes the protagonist of the virtual experience.</i>
Reaction time (n.)	The length of time between an event and the response <i>His reaction time of picking up the pen after it fell from the table was two seconds.</i>
Virtual (adj.)	Simulated <i>Video games often take place in virtual locations.</i>

Investigate

- Define the word “[empathy](#)” as a class. Ask students how it is different from, or similar to, “[sympathy](#).”
- Ask a few students share their examples from their quick-write of times when they have felt empathy for someone else.
- As a class, or in small groups, have students discuss if it would be possible to be feel empathy for a person and their experience without having actually experienced a similar

situation in real life. What if they could experience a similar situation virtually, using technology? Do they think they'd be able to feel empathy then? Why or why not?

- Have students watch the [Above the Noise episode](#) as a class or in small groups.
 - Stop the video at :48 and ask: How does this definition of empathy compare with the definition you came up with as a class?
 - Stop at 1:36: Review what the Virtual Human Interaction Lab at Stanford is studying.
 - Stop at 2:42: What were the results of the VR experiment where participants look for a missing child? How did being a “superhero” change participants’ behavior in real life?
 - Stop at 4:19: How are students in Baltimore using VR to tell their stories? What do you think they are trying to accomplish?
 - Stop at 4:48: What are some health concerns about using VR?
- Have students read [The Lowdown post](#) about the power of virtual reality to engender empathy. As a class, discuss the arguments on both sides and what it means to truly be empathetic.
- Transition to the Make and Share: Tell students they will have a chance to share their response to this issue in the comments section of The Lowdown. The first time they comment, students must sign in to [Disqus](#), a free discussion app embedded in The Lowdown.
 - To sign in to [Disqus](#), click the “Comments” button at the bottom of The Lowdown.
 - Click the blue “Get Started” button in the gray “Welcome to Disqus” box.
 - Students will need to enter a username. We recommend first name, last initial.
 - After signing in for the first time, students must verify their email address before commenting. A verification email will appear in their inbox once they sign in to Disqus.

Make and Share

- Individually or in small groups, students post responses in the comments section about whether or not they think virtual reality can really make us more empathetic.
 - Responses should be supported by evidence from the Above the Noise episode, The Lowdown post, or other research on the topic. (See Source list)
 - Encourage students to reply to other comments after posting their response. Remind them to use evidence to support their claims and respectful language when replying to others.
- Students can create their own response or use the following questions as a starting point:

- **Make your case:** Can a virtual experience allow us to deeply understand and share a person’s feelings? Why or why not?
- **Dive into research:** Find and share an example (a study) of how virtual reality is being used for therapy. What have been the results?
- **Share out:** Have you ever felt empathy for someone because of a virtual experience? Share your story.
- **Get creative:** If you could immerse someone in your world using VR, what story would you tell? What would you want a user to experience?

Assessment/Reflection

- **Students reflect on what they have learned either through a class discussion or in writing:**
 - **What have you learned about empathy? How much do you think virtual experiences can affect our feelings and our behavior?**
 - **What was it like to post your responses publically and reply to other posts? What did you learn from other students? What do you hope they learned from you? What will you do the next time you post a comment in response to The Lowdown?**

***Circle chats**, small-group discussions and **think-pair-share** provide a safer space for students to practice speaking and listening, and also boost participation during whole-class discussions.*

Extension/Homework

Write/speak locally: Students turn their response to this issue into a letter, short speech or presentation, then research ways to make their voice heard in their community.

Common Core Standards and NGSS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1	Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7	Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.1	Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.
NGSS.DCI.ETS2.B	Influence of Engineering, Technology and Science on Society and the Natural World

<u>NGSS.SEP.7</u>	Engaging in argument from evidence
<u>NGSS.SEP.8</u>	Obtaining, evaluating and communicating information
<u>NGSS.CCC.2</u>	Cause and effect: Mechanism and explanation