

From Isolation to Empathy

By Jeremy Grifski

As an educator, I understand the importance of learning theory and pedagogy. However, I think the most important skill every educator should develop is empathy. In this piece, I'll share a few life experiences that shaped the way I think about empathy. In particular, I'll focus on the issue of isolation and how it relates to issues in diversity and inclusion.

ISOLATION

When I was growing up, I spent most of my time in a small town in northwestern Pennsylvania. Because the town was so small, the residents shared a uniform identity that excluded outsiders. For example, 99% of my peers were white, and almost all their parents and grandparents grew up in the same town. In fact, most of my family still lives there, so they haven't had a lot of opportunities for change.

Growing up in that kind of environment can be hard because there is no diversity in opinion. In other words, everyone agrees with everyone else, and any differences in opinion can create isolation. For example, I had to go to Sunday school every week until I was almost 18 because that was what the community expected of me—despite having some doubts about religion. Likewise, I was often ousted for having a diverse set of interests like sports, video games, anime, music, and martial arts.

Of course, as I grew older, **that diverse set of interests helped me connect more with my peers**. In fact, by high school, I was no longer an outsider. In a weird way, I was friends with almost all 150 of my classmates. In other words, there were no cliques.

Eventually, I decided to head off to college. At that point, I made the conscious decision to get out of town. All it took was a trip 90 minutes west to Cleveland, and I was free. For the first time in my life, I was able to experience something new.

To no surprise, the first bit of shock I experienced was the difference between urban and rural life. In the city, life moves fast. As a result, city life can feel more isolating since people don't really acknowledge each other. Instead, they race from one place to the next while ignoring everyone in between.

That said, one perk of living in a city is that they tend to be more diverse than small towns. As a result, I had to get used to interacting with people that didn't look or speak like me. Of course, that was an aspect of leaving my hometown that I absolutely loved. Finally, **I felt safe having thoughts and opinions that were different from the bubble I called home**.

In my second year of college, a friend coerced me into studying abroad in England with them. Within a couple months, I went from never once considering the idea to hopping on a plane to Europe for six months. During that time, I felt completely isolated. Obviously, I wasn't going to be able to stay connected with my friends and family back home, but I never anticipated my inability to make a connection with the locals.

After six hard months, **I vowed to never let an international student feel the way I did**. As soon as I got back, I joined the Residence Hall Association (RHA) to help build community in the residence halls. Eventually, I found myself on the executive board where I was able to attend conferences to learn different ways to foster community.

Near the end of my undergraduate education, I scored an internship at a company in my hometown. At the time, I couldn't have been more excited, but that quickly deflated. Within a few weeks of my internship, I started to feel isolated again. For nearly 40 hours a week, I simply followed orders, so I could collect a paycheck. At no point did I ever feel a connection with any of my coworkers. Instead, I felt like a cog in a machine.

When I graduated, I returned to that company on a leadership program. Over the next 21 months, I struggled to find my place. Sure, I had a few friends, but they came and went. Again, I felt isolated—unable to feel any sense of belonging.

Ultimately, I decided to go back into academia where I felt at home. Honestly, I thought that surrounding myself with other students would help me feel better. Unfortunately, I was still wrong. As it turns out, the problems I continued to face with isolation were systemic.

At each turn, I found myself in a place where some facet of the culture pushed me to the fringe. For instance, my hometown excluded me by forcing me to conform. Meanwhile, England excluded me by encouraging a set of social situations that I didn't support. Finally, industry and academia excluded me by prioritizing competition, output, and performance.

EMPATHY

In no way do I consider myself marginalized. In fact, **I am enormously privileged**. After all, I'm a college educated white male with industry experience. In my lifetime, I haven't had to worry about money—although my parents did enough of that for me. That said, they are happily married, and so am I. On top of that, I have two wonderful cats and a roof over my head.

Overall, I would say I'm very fortunate. Despite that, I've still had enough isolating experiences to have empathy for marginalized groups like women, people of color, and immigrants. As a result, I'm able to carry that empathy with me into the classroom.

Every semester, **I like to get to know my students as individuals**. For instance, I typically like to learn my students' names by working with them one-on-one in the lab. However, this semester, I tried taking that a step further by having each student share three things they wanted me to know about them. In the future, I plan to also include student pictures, so I can map faces to names more quickly.

Beyond learning names, **I always make sure that students have an anonymous outlet to ask questions**. For example, at the start of each lecture, I use an online tool to anonymously crowdsource questions from the class. When class begins, I run through each question—often letting the students share their thoughts.

Recently, **I adopted several peer instruction techniques to help students feel more included**. Specifically, I like to use an online tool to ask a question and poll the class for answers. Afterward, I share the results and ask my students to discuss their thoughts in groups. Eventually, I hold a revote. If all goes well, the results should converge on the right answer. If not, I take some time to address misconceptions. Of course, it's possible the question was poorly phrased, so I often use this opportunity for feedback.

In general, I find that my model of teaching does well in addressing isolation. That said, I do occasionally reach out to students to make sure that they're doing alright. If more instructors did the same, we could probably cut attrition rates in half. In my experience, all it takes is someone looking out for you to feel included and therefore motivated.

FUTURE

Up to this point, my relationship with diversity and inclusion has largely been through the lens of isolation. That said, I know diversity and inclusion encompasses much more than that. That's why I put together a few future goals for myself.

One of my goals is to start a study abroad program. After all, I'm not against study abroad at all. In fact, I went back to Europe just two years after my bad experience to visit Poland. Since then, I've only had the chance to visit Mexico. That said, I love to travel. In fact, I even completed a 200-hour Teaching English as a Foreign Language certificate, so I could one day teach English abroad.

In terms of logistics, I'm mainly looking to create a program that's appealing to engineers. In my experience, studying abroad as an engineer is difficult because courses don't always transfer. In fact, I took almost exclusively electives while I was abroad because I couldn't find equivalent courses. In my program, engineers wouldn't have to make difficult course choices; that work would already be done for them.

In addition, I'd like to create a program which has a social element built in. That way, students don't have to go through culture shock alone. Ultimately, I think this will lead to a more fruitful experience. After all, studying abroad is about experiencing the people—not the ancient buildings and the fancy food.

Another one of my goals is to research ways to address toxic tech culture through introductory Computer Science. In my experience as an academic, a developer, and even as a blogger, tech has some serious issues to address. For example, the current culture promotes issues like gatekeeping, elitism, and isolation. All these issues affect marginalized groups even worse than it has affected me, and I can't stand around and watch it anymore.

As a result, I plan to make the move into education-related research, so I can find a way to start addressing some of these cultural issues. Specifically, I want to look at quantitative issues like attrition rates and how they compare between different groups. For example, just how many students are completing their degrees? Is that rate the same for all groups? For the students earning degrees, how many of them are staying in the field?

In addition, I am interested in exploring the issue of isolation. How many students feel isolated in Computer Science compared to other fields? Do students feel connected with their peers? What do those friend groups look like? How do we address this issue of isolation? In what ways can we change the curriculum or classroom structure to foster community?

Overall, I think my experience with isolation puts me in an excellent position to help future students. Eventually, I hope to one day end up in a position in which I can explore issues in tech culture, build up a study abroad program, and teach introductory Computer Science.