Multiple Media and Empathy
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Introduction

Telling stories is not just a means of entertainment, but is also a means of connecting to other people and their different experiences. The very act of experiencing a story, regardless if it is true or not, requires imaginative effort in order to understand the content. The truly remarkable thing about stories, however, is that we do not always realize exactly how much effort we are putting in, since the experience is often very enjoyable.

Empathy similarly requires effort to learn, and stories are a medium that allows people, particularly teens and children who may not have as much experience with empathy, a chance to practice the skill. Bloom notes that, "being willing to listen to the stories of others … is the first step in building empathy" (as cited in Woolfolk, 2010, p. 460). Stories allow people a chance to listen, and the variety of mediums for presenting these stories provide a level of enjoyment that creates a willingness to listen.

The variety of mediums available results in a large body of stories for people to engage with, and further allows people to choose the medium that makes them most wish to listen. The different mediums of novels, film, and graphic novels are three popular media that are all highly accessible to teens and have distinct advantages when it comes to promoting empathy.

Novels

Often one of the first media thought of when considering stories are novels, and there are certainly many ways for teens to gain empathy by reading novels. Matthijs Bal and Veltkamp (2013) found that teens who read fictional narratives can be affected by the fictional character within the context of the story. When a teen connects with the characters, it can lead to the teen practicing empathy with the novel. Mar, Oatley, and Peterson (2009) have also found that people who read fiction performed better on empathy tests. There are a variety of ways for a story to be told – first person, third person, multiple perspectives – which provides different avenues for readers to gain empathy. Additionally, there are diverse assortments of characters for teens to read about and empathize with, due to the large body of published novels. An added benefit to reading a novel is that the reader can take their time with the story, thus building their empathy for characters as the story progresses.

Adolescence can be a very difficult transition period for many teens. There are many factors involved in this difficulty, such as physical changes in their bodies, emotional changes, and relationship changes, to name only a few. Novels are ideally suited to help young adults deal with these issues. For example, a teen reading *Dear Bully: 70 Authors Tell Their Stories* by Megan Kelley Hall and Carrie Jones may begin to understand not only how bullied teens feel, but also the real-life dangers that bullying introduces into the lives of bullied teens.

Graphic Novels

Graphic novels share many similarities with traditional novels, but they exist on the boundary of two media; they are both images and text. It is this duality that makes them both enjoyable and useful for teenagers developing empathy. The term graphic novel has a complicated past involving several definitions but can be said, for the purpose of this article, to include both Western comics and Japanese manga. The history of popular and current graphic novels as being a blend of influences and cultures is significant when considered with the ability of the medium to quite literally show the reader a story from a culture or situation with which they may not be as familiar.

The images of graphic novels come in a variety of styles, some unique to the form of graphic novels, others unique to the illustrator, but all provide a gateway into the story. Williams (2008) describes it as "impossible for readers not to feel some sense of empathy with the main characters" since the "art allows viewers to step into the eyes of another and consider a different point of view" (p. 15) This ability to step into the characters' eyes helps create emotional empathy, since readers get to see the story unfold, including the facial expressions and reactions of the characters. They also get to take their time with the images, as other forms of moving images are not able to do. This allows readers a chance to truly get to know a character and understand their emotions and reactions, which is an important step in empathizing with the character.

The images are thus a tool for helping the reader take on the perspective of the reader, or develop cognitive empathy, as the reader can consciously see and understand both the words of the character and their actions. A perfect example of this is when a story has many characters, as graphic novels, particularly manga, allow for easy expansion into additional side characters. Many authors include backstories that are gradually revealed that offer readers the chance to understand why these characters, even antagonists, act and speak the way they do.

The images and the text work together in graphic novels to create a story that readers

can enjoy at their own pace, and in so doing create a story where the characters may be relatable, but are almost certainly understandable.

Movies

Movies are a blend of storytelling and images, much like graphic novels, but they go beyond text and images on a piece of paper since viewers are transported by watching a motion picture. The visuals, audio, and storytelling are all used to draw viewers into the plot of the movie. As mentioned in Mar, Oatley, and Peterson (2009), people tend to become absorbed by movies, and when viewers start to imagine themselves in the place of the characters, they are practicing empathy.

Young adults may find themselves connecting on a personal level to characters in a movie. Calvert, et al. (2006) examined the role of empathy in young adults' selections of role models in a movie, and found that teenagers felt empathy for specific characters, which lead to further feeling and understanding of the characters' actions.

It can be easy for a novelist to tell readers what to feel, but with movies, it is possible for viewers to feel different emotions than what the director intended. What may be meant to make a viewer laugh may make the viewer feel sad or angry. Unlike a novel or a graphic novel, a movie has a set start and end time. Viewers cannot enjoy a movie at the same pace as they would a novel or graphic novel, which means that the empathy will be elicited in a shorter period. This lends an unpredictable element to the empathy fostered by movies, and means that the empathic take away from the same story may be more obviously different between individuals.

Conclusion

Different media tell different stories, simply by the merit that they appeal to people differently. There are many instances, just think of any fairytale, of the same story being told across different media. Theses multiple options for interacting with the story mean that a larger number of people will experience the story through their personally preferred method. This is great news for teens regarding empathy, because it means that they have so many options regarding how they learn and practice the skill. Whether they prefer identifying with characters through novels, visually seeing flashbacks in graphic novels, or connecting with the lives of people through movies, they are still potentially experiencing empathy, and enjoying it!

This is not to say that all media provide completely different experiences, anymore than it is a claim that all of these options will always increase empathy. Rather, the

interaction of these media contributes to a grander story-telling culture, one that relies on providing the consumer with information about people's lives and making sure that the consumer enjoys the process. What better opportunity could there be for teens to learn empathy than while doing something they were already going to do? Stories, in all formats and media, are thus a space for intersection, both of content, and of enjoyment and empathy.

References

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