

# Assessing Forgiveness and Empathy: Building Student Capacity to Practice Restorative Justice

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## Overview of SoTL Project

- This SoTL project explored whether exposure to provocative and impactful films related to forgiveness and restorative justice increased a student's empathy and/or connection to practicing forgiveness.
- The class studied involved LSTU 268 Alternative Dispute Resolution, a lower division required course in the Legal Studies/Criminal Justice major. Seventeen (17) students completed all parts of the study.
- The project involved pre- and post- self assessments on empathy and forgiveness scales that the students completed before and after the three impactful films over a three week period of time.
- Students also wrote pre- and post- reflections in response to prompts related to forgiveness and restorative justice.
- Students received a general overview of restorative justice in a mini-lecture as well as background readings on forgiveness and empathy in the field.
- IRB Approved September 18, 2015 as #1183.

## Literature Review Summary

Forgiveness and empathy are two critical components for restorative justice work. Restorative justice provides opportunities for mutual understanding, healing, reintegration and restoration between victims, offenders and the community after harms or crimes. Practitioners of restorative justice processes need to understand empathy and forgiveness as concepts and practices to facilitate good processes for participants. (David Van Ness & Karen Strong, *Restoring Justice*, Cincinnati: Anderson Publishing Co, 1997). This study used scientifically validated scales created by the Greater Good Science Institute of UC-Berkeley on both forgiveness and empathy.

## Key Statistical Findings from Pre- and Post-Empathy and Pre- and Post-Forgiveness Tests

There were only three statistically significant pre- and post-empathy items out of the twenty-two items. They all related to the concept of understanding the other---putting oneself in another's shoes, imagining another's perspective or looking at everyone's side of a disagreement.

ITEM NUMBER	COMPARATIVE CHANGE (5 point scale)	SIGNIFICANCE
Item 11 I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decisions.	Mean: -.529 (change from 3.65 to 4.1)	.024 paired t-test result
Item 14 I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective.	Mean: -.588 (change from 3.76 to 4.35)	.013 paired t-test result
Item 19 When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to put myself in his/her shoes for a while.	Mean: -.588 (change from 2.76 to 3.35)	.096 paired t-test result (trending toward significance with low N)

There were only three statistically significant pre- and post-forgiveness items out of the twelve items. They were all related to the concepts of distance, cutting ties or not having warmth toward another.

Forgiveness Item Number	Comparative Change	Significance
Item 7: I find it hard to act warmly toward him/her.	.471 (change from 3.06 to 2.59)	.056 paired t-test trending toward significance
Item 10: I cut off the relationships with him/her.	.647 (change from 3.04 to 2.59)	.044 paired t-test
Item 2: I keep as much distance between us as possible.	.294 (change from 3.0 to 2.71)	.056 paired t-test trending toward significance

These findings indicate that provocative films can produce changes in student understandings of empathy and forgiveness. The use of more such interventions may increase student readiness for restorative justice practice.

## Content Analysis Findings from Reflection Papers

Seventy percent (12 of 17 students) reported that their perspective on forgiveness and restorative justice work had changed as a result of viewing the three provocative films. The most common reasons for the change involved:

- Being exposed to a concept that they had never thought about before (forgiveness and restorative justice work)

## Content Analysis Findings from Reflection Papers (con't)

- Realizing that forgiveness work involves more than letting go---it includes being at peace with myself moving forward into the future
- Putting myself in the other's shoes makes a difference
- Forgiveness has transformative power to make society better if practiced more
- Key quotes from students:
  - "I learned that forgiveness is for one's self to help internally."
  - I learned that forgiveness is about letting go of the anger inside me to better myself."
  - "I think that forgiveness can be learned."
  - "Our society teaches revenge and getting even; in order for the world to be a more peaceful place, it starts with forgiveness of wrongdoing to move on."
  - "Watching these people gave me hope."
  - "I can now understand other's points of view better. The films and writings gave me a new perspective."

## Future Research

Restorative Justice has become mainstream work in the justice system. The proper place and role of forgiveness by victims, offenders and the community remains a controversial subject. Future SoTL research would involve replicating this study to have a larger N size for statistical analysis (the small N was a limiting factor). In addition, testing various pedagogies to expose and build student skills at practicing both empathy and forgiveness would enhance teaching and learning. These might include victim stories, provocative readings and exploring forgiveness practices in daily life.

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