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April Tallant
Western Carolina University, atallant@wcu.edu

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Recommended Citation
Tallant, April, "Put Yourself in My Shoes: Active Learning and Perspective-Taking in a First Year Honors Transition course" (2023). SoTL Commons Conference. 84.
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Put Yourself in My Shoes: Active Learning and Perspective-taking in a First Year Honors Transition Course
April C. Tallant, PhD, RDN, LDN
atallant@wcu.edu
Coulter Faculty Commons
Western Carolina University, Cullowhee NC, USA

Abstract
The purpose of this active learning exercise, “Put Yourself in My Shoes”, was to provide an opportunity for perspective-taking for first year undergraduate Honors students at a predominantly white public institution and engage students in active learning related to the university’s common read, The Other Side of The River: A Story of Two Towns, a Death, and America’s Dilemma by Alex Kotlowitz. Research has shown that undergraduate educational interventions using scripts and interviews can result in increased empathy and positive attitude change toward stigmatized populations. Point-of-view simulations have also been found to increase empathy among undergraduates. The “Put Yourself in My Shoes” active learning exercise provided an opportunity to emphasize the value of diversity and inclusion in taking perspectives of non-fiction characters in the common read that vary in a different age, race, and background against the real-world backdrop of a politically divided United States of America. In Fall 2021, Students were enrolled in two sections of US101 Honors Forum, a transition course for Honors students. The instructor purchased three pairs of shoes from thrift stores to represent three main characters in the book: Sneakers to represent the African American teenage boy who was found dead in the river; “mom shoes” that represent the African American mother of the deceased teen. Students were divided into small groups and each group was given a shoe box containing one shoe and book excerpts related to the character that each shoe represented. Students were asked to read the excerpts and work together to answer questions on a handout. Students were told that they may want to bring a shoe box to class, 2 students wrote the shoe activity as an exercise to keep. Students did not try on the shoes. That could be a consequence of COVID. The whole class shared it out.

Introduction
During the last few years, with so much political polarization and racial tensions, it has become increasingly more important for educators to foster critical thinking and civic discourse. Gallup polls show dissatisfaction of race relations was 77% in 2021. Synergies are created to support our teaching efforts in this climate with university curricula (specifically transition course curricula) and campus programming including common reading programs. In Fall 2021, Western Carolina University’s OneBook committee selected The Other Side of The River: A Story of Two Towns, a Death, and America’s Dilemma by Alex Kotlowitz. Building on the foundation of the diversity and inclusion modules within the transition course and the required OneBook reading, I created an active-learning group exercise called “Put Yourself in My Shoes” that was based on an activity found online (see references). Empathy and perspective-taking were two dominant themes from the OneBook outline in the WCU library research guide. While empathy is important and has many concepts and phenomena, finding undergraduates who felt empathy improved positive feelings towards stigmatized groups. Levett-Jones, Carre & Lapkin, 2019 found that educational interventions can improve nursing student empathy. Contemporary literature has been used as a pedagogical tool in various disciplines including psychology, sociology, medical education, and social work education. Vigilanti, Charlesworth, Hutchinson & Fair, (2008) state “analyzing a text build critical thinking skills, understanding a story and identifying with characters enhance empathy communication processes,” (p. 61) and recommend using class activities and assignments to engage students in discussion.

Materials
• “Put Yourself in My Shoes” Group Activity Handout
Example (1 of 3)
• Excerpts from book focused on each character
• Shoes in a shoe box
• Students were told that they may want to bring a pair of shoes to class
• Students were told that they may want to bring a pair of shoes to class
• OneBook Canvas Module
• Diversity & Inclusion Canvas Module
• OneBook Library Research Guide

Methodology
• Class size = approximately 24 students (2 sections)
• Students self-selected groups: 3–5 students per group
• Each group was given a shoe box containing one shoe and excerpts from The Other Side of the River pertaining to the character (see Figures 1, 2, & 3).
• Students were asked to read the excerpts and work together to answer questions on a handout (see Figures 1, 2).
• Students were timed and then shoe boxes were rotated to the next group.
• The whole class shared it out.

Figure 3. Students working on activity and holding sneakers similar to the ones Eric McGinnis wore.

Figure 2. Students working on activity and holding ‘police-like shoes’ representing Lt. Jim Reeves.

Results
Did you have any more empathy after the Put Yourself in My Shoes activity?

• Most groups reported having more empathy after the activity for both Eric and Ruth.
• Most students did not try on the shoes.
• Students did not handle the shoes very much.*
• On end of course evaluations administered by the university, one student made a comment about not liking kid activities.
• On an end of course survey administered to all US101 students, when asked what 3 things should be kept in the class, 2 students wrote the shoe activity as an exercise to keep.

*This activity was done during a semester when there was a male mandate in classrooms because of the COVID19 pandemic. Students completed the questions, but few tried on the shoes. That could be a consequence of COVID19.

Conclusion
Activities like “Put Yourself in My Shoes” may be a way to actively engage students in various forms of literature and media. It may provide the opportunity for critical thinking and empathizing with characters. Similar activities can serve as a springboard to discuss diverse perspectives.

Recommendations
• This activity could be used in conjunction with additional follow-up activities, perhaps using role-play and alternate ending scenarios.
• It is recommended to ask students to reflect individually and indicating their own empathy before getting into groups to discuss with others.
• It would allow students to find ways to determine how students interact with the OneBook and diversity & inclusion course modules and the library research guide as part of the course (and possibly other courses) to see how it informs this activity.
• The activity could possibly be more impactful by making better use of the additional resources (research guide during class. Empathy and perspective-taking could be used throughout the semester in multiple class meetings prior to this activity.

Figure 4. Handout questions completed by students in small groups during class (example 1 of 3).

References

Put yourself in the shoes of Ms. Ruth McGinnis (handout also for Eric McGinnis and Lt. Jim Reeves)
• Try on the shoes (if possible). Hold the shoes. Think about the person who wears the shoes. Discuss the following with your group. All group members will come up with their own answers after discussion. Choose one scribe to write all group answers.
• Describe how you think Ruth might feel in this passage?
• How would you feel if you were Ruth McGinnis in this situation?
• Do you have any more empathy for Ruth having completed this activity? Why or why not?

Figure 1. Students working on activity and holding ‘mom shoe’ representing Ruth McGinnis.

Figure 5. Handout questions completed by students in small groups during class (example 1 of 3).

Acknowledgements and thanks to the WCU OneBook committee for their book selection work and Hunter Library for creating the OneBook Research Guide.