



LESSON PLAN

Practicing Empathy



RELATED FILM

Wright's Law

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Key Idea

Traditional classrooms can mimic a factory model as schools face standardized learning, testing, and evaluations. Educators who incorporate social and emotional learning and empathy into their classrooms provide positive life skills and essential tools for students.

Background

In this film, high school physics teacher Jeffrey Wright shares the wonders of physics and the laws of the universe with his students. Wright inspires and engages his students to take an interest in the academic material in front of them. He also expresses his care and concern for his students as learners and as people. Wright's son has Joubert Syndrome, an extremely rare autosomal recessive disorder, which causes a poorly formed brainstem and affects the cerebellum, an area of the brain that controls movement, balance, and coordination. Those affected by Joubert Syndrome have bodies that will not respond; yet, they can fully function intellectually. Wright shares his family life with his students. He naturally incorporates his energetic compassion at home as well as in the classroom and in the film explains that the greatest energy in the world is love.

The field of social and emotional learning, or SEL, is an educational process leading to the development of emotional intelligence. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), five components to SEL include the following: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Thousands of schools nationwide are using the “evidence-based” programs approved by CASEL.

In this film, *Wright's Law*, teacher Jeffrey Wright is a positive role model for his students. He exemplifies that cultivating empathy as a person and as a teacher can lead to healthy relationships for individuals, families, and communities.



Film: 12 minutes

Class: 60 minutes

SUBJECT AREAS

HIGH SCHOOL

- English Language Arts
- Environmental Studies
- Modern World Studies
- Physics

COLLEGE

- Environmental Science
- Sociology
- Philosophy
- Physics

THEMES

- Power of love
- Cultivating empathy
- Positive role models
- Social and emotional learning

MATERIALS

- Online access to the film
- Equipment for showing film

PREPARATION

- None



Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 [or 11-12] topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. D2.Psy.2.9-12. Investigate human behavior from biological, cognitive, behavioral, and sociocultural perspectives.

Next Generation Science Standards. HS-LS2-8. Evaluate the evidence for the role of group behavior and individual and species' chances to survive and reproduce.

Lesson

SETTING THE STAGE

Introduce the film by telling students they will be watching a film about a high school physics teacher, Jeffrey Wright, who is beloved by his students. The film depicts the values of empathy. By definition, empathy is the ability to understand and share in the feelings of others. Empathy can also mean that the more we understand others, the better we know them. By cultivating empathy, individuals can elicit appreciation, generosity, good listening skills, love, and trust. A well-used expression to define empathy is the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Ask students: Have you ever put yourself in someone else's shoes? What happens?

ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Direct students to observe Wright's son as they watch the film. Wright shares with his students his son's story. Ask students to think about people who are different than themselves. How does your experience change when you are exposed to people who are very different than yourself?



Practicing Empathy

Ask students to get into pairs to discuss what empathy, or compassion, means to them. Is it important to them for others to understand their feelings? Why or why not? Have students complete the following sentence: “If you knew me, you would know that...” Answers can be personal or impersonal. Students can respond and share a difficult hardship they experienced or share impersonal details, such as that they like to play soccer or draw. Invite students to share their responses with the class.

Delving Deeper

Lead a discussion around the following questions:

- What can we learn from Wright? Do you think his behavior inspires kindness in others? If so, how?
- Do you think students can be affected by the environment in which they learn? Did Wright’s students in the film enjoy their environment? Why or why not?
- Do you think helping students emotionally and socially can enhance their academic learning? How does Wright help his students emotionally and socially?
- Do you think Wright’s positive relationship with himself and his family affected his students? Why or why not? How can positive relationships benefit a kinder community and society?
- What are some ways to measure the impacts of your actions or behaviors on others?
- Do you think Wright’s students experienced empathy in the classroom? What would happen if we didn’t have empathy? What is the opposite of empathy?



Reflecting and Projecting

Give students one of the following reflective writing prompts to demonstrate their understanding of the story. (Note for teachers: Just as quotes from a book or text are used to prove an analytical thought, students use the film to justify their reasoning.)

1. You have been selected as a judge to interview three finalists for the “Community Role Model of the Year Award.” The three finalists are various ages. They will be judged based on the following: good leadership skills and achievements that have enhanced the lives of others. As a judge, you will ask each applicant three questions of your choice. Based on the criteria, what would your questions be? What characteristics or achievements do you think applicants should have? Would you consider Mr. Wright as a finalist for this contest?
(C3.D2.Psy.2.9-12)
2. In the film, Wright says that there is something much greater than energy and entropy. Wright asks, “What’s the greatest thing? Love.” Entropy is a physics term, defined as the natural tendency of the universe to fall apart into disorder. From Wright’s perspective, why is love the greatest thing? How does love affect Wright’s life?
(NGSS.HS-LS2-8)
3. What was the most insightful comment you heard today? What value does it have for you? (CCSS.ELA.SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1)

Resources

Tara Parker-Pope, [“Laws of Physics Can’t Trump the Bonds of Love.”](#)
The New York Times, December 24, 2012.

Jennifer Kahn, [“Can Emotional Intelligence Be Taught?”](#) *The New York Times Magazine*, September 11, 2013.

Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (New York: Bantam Books, September 27, 2005).

[Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning](#) (CASEL).