

HIGH SCHOOL

CHAPTER 5

Learning About and From One Another

Overview

With this chapter, the SEE Learning curriculum progresses from the Personal to the Social domain, with learning experiences that seek to help students turn their attention towards others. Many of the skills that were cultivated in Chapters 1-4 for the Personal domain are directly applied in Chapter 5-7. The major shift in the second half of the curriculum occurs with the orientation of the focus — from inward towards outward, from self towards others—classmates, family, and people the students encounter on a daily basis.

Changes in brain development mean that students in adolescence become increasingly oriented towards their peers, and gain much more developed capacities for perspective-taking and empathy. Far more than at any previous time in life, their identity comes to be formed relationally with peers, and not just with family members. Students at this age are ready to be taught specific skills and concepts to help them understand and navigate this tricky period of development. Adolescence is a perfect time for introducing the topics of empathy and perspective-taking, and the skill of mindful listening. Moreover, since adolescence is also a time of considerable stress for many students, exploring the ways in which they are like one another, and understanding their differences alongside shared commonalities, can help them feel less alone in their struggles. These are the topics of Chapter 5, which focuses on interpersonal awareness — becoming increasingly aware of the other people with whom one interacts.

The Science and Benefits of Interpersonal Awareness

A major assumption of SEE Learning is that human wellbeing is often achieved through prosocial attunement. Our capacity to connect and feel connected with others is the foundation of our personal happiness and sense of purpose. Helping students to understand this is a critical step in their ability to engage in decision making that promotes their wellbeing and minimizes their experiences of distress and adversity. Training in the cultivation of interpersonal awareness begins with an acknowledgement that humans are social animals. Not only do we feel good when we connect with others, our basic survival depends on our connections with others. Becoming aware of this reality is supported by the acknowledgement that our identity and the identities that others hold is shaped by many factors. Being able to meaningfully connect with others sometimes takes focus and the application of different tools. As students cultivate these tools they become more adept at fostering a sense of shared common humanity. The awareness that others are exactly like me in their desire for happiness and the desire not to experience distress enables students to cultivate empathy and an appreciation for others' needs.

Learning Experience 1, “Exploring Our Social Identity,” provides students with an opportunity to shift their attention toward others and become more aware of their social realities. It does this through two activities that explore what they know and don't yet know about each other. This leads to

reflecting on identity and the assumptions we make about one another. They also do an activity called “Who Are You?” that helps reveal the multiple aspects of our identities that can be explored, most of which are not visible upon first meeting.

Learning Experience 2, “Mindful Engagement,” introduces two practices: mindful listening and mindful dialogue. “Mindful listening” means to listen respectfully and empathically with full attention, without interrupting the other person, without being distracted, and without focusing on oneself or one’s judgments. It is a communication skill that connects with both parts of empathy: the attentive listening allows one to better understand the situation of the other and how they are feeling (cognitive empathy), while the act of respectful listening can help create a resonance with the other person and show that one cares (affective empathy). This kind of listening builds on and reinforces students’ attentional skills because it requires focusing solely on what the other person is saying, rather than on what one wants to say in response. Mindful listening also provides an opportunity for students to be listened to, without judgment, by their classmates, thereby creating safety. Students are asked to consider the ways in which mindful listening affects the speaker and the listener, as well as how these practices might impact the classroom community.

A “mindful dialogue” is a type of paired reflective practice supported by mindful listening that can be used to explore a number of issues. In it, each student poses a set of provided questions to their partner, and then listens mindfully, without comment or judgment. The mindful dialogue format allows each student to both reflect personally on what they are learning and how it applies to their own life, and share their thinking with another student. Mindful dialogues can help students achieve critical insights and deepen their understanding while learning about and from each other.

Learning Experience 3, “Appreciating Diversity and Shared Commonalities,” allows students to explore the ways in which they are different from and similar to others. Through an insight activity, students discover that although they are individually unique, being unique is also something they share in common with all other human beings.

Learning Experience 4, “Exploring Empathy,” enables students to examine the concept of empathy and practice its associated skills. Empathy has two main components: being able to take another’s perspective (cognitive empathy) and being able to feel an emotional resonance with them (affective empathy). Without perspective-taking we can misinterpret the motivations and actions of others. Through sharing the perspectives of characters in stories and listening to their peers, students can experience more deeply the complexity of one person’s perspective, and how it is itself an expression of that person’s needs, feelings, and prior experiences. Listening to and appreciating different

perspectives can lead to greater humility and willingness to learn, better problem-solving, and more positive relationships.

Student Personal Practice

Developing a deeper understanding of oneself and others is an ongoing process. Through the application of skills previously introduced and worked on, such as attention and emotional awareness, students can expand their appreciation of themselves, their classmates and other people who share our planet. Specifically, the skills of mindful listening and mindful dialogue that are introduced in this chapter can be reinforced throughout the week, especially when students have opportunities to talk with and listen to each other. This is a practice that students can apply readily in their daily life.

Teacher Personal Practice

While teaching this chapter, reflect on your own experience with mindful listening. Is this the kind of listening that you regularly engage in at work or home? If you think listening more mindfully with empathy could be beneficial, try to catch yourself in the act of less mindful listening, and see if you can adjust your behaviors. Make note of the impact on yourselves and others when you are able to listen mindfully and with empathy. If you are having difficulty listening to someone with mindfulness and empathy, see if reminding yourself of your shared common humanity helps: we all want to be happy and avoid suffering.

Additionally, see if you can find another adult willing to practice mindful dialogues with you. Use the provided questions or come up with a set of your own three questions. Make sure your partner understands the activity and is choosing to participate. Make it a safe experience by letting them know that if they do not want to answer the questions you have provided, they can answer a question they wish you had asked instead.

Chapter 5: Learning About and From One Another

Learning Experience 1: Exploring our Social Identity

Learning Experience 2: Mindful Dialogues

Learning Experience 3: Appreciating Diversity and Shared Commonalities

Learning Experience 4 Exploring Empathy