Can you do the experiment? Try to do one nice, positive thing for someone else using social media every day.

**Background Info**

- Since the 1980s, psychology researchers have been testing people’s empathy using a system of measurement called the Interpersonal Reactivity Index. Researchers ask people questions and get them to use their imagination to see how well they can understand the perspectives of others, understand and sympathize the feelings of others, how they react to pain and distress in others, and imagine themselves in someone else’s situation.
- Using these tests, researchers at the University of Michigan found that people in their upper middle-age — between 50 and 60 — show the greatest empathy, while young adults in their low 20s have the least empathy.
- The researchers also looked at all the empathy tests that have been done on people in their early 20s since the 1980s and found that over the last three decades, the empathy scores of young adults has decreased by 40 per cent.
- The researchers think one cause for this decrease might be because of new ways of communicating — social media. With social media more people are connected to each other, but the way they interact is superficial — much less sharing of deeper feelings and perspectives.
- The researchers are now conducting an experiment where they send a text message to a group of young adults every day asking them to do things like performing a nice act for someone else, or trying to imagine someone else’s feelings. When the experiment is done, they will test those people again to see if their empathy scores have increased.

**Key terms**

- **Empathy** — The ability to understand and share feelings and thoughts of others.
- **Sympathy** — Feelings of pity and sorrow for someone else’s misfortune.
- **Apathy** — A lack of interest, enthusiasm or concern.
- **Social media** — Applications that use the internet to let people interact socially, e.g. Twitter and Facebook.
- **Narcissism** — Extreme selfishness and self-interest, and obsession with your own appearance; an exaggerated opinion of yourself.
- **Peer-reviewed journal** — When scientists and medical researchers make a discovery they usually write a report and present it at conference or publish it in a special magazine that is read by other similar researchers so they can discuss and debate it, and spot if mistakes were made in the research. This process helps share information and ensures the quality of scientific research.
Global Voices Elementary Resources

Note to Educators:

The following activities are designed to stimulate a current events discussion. Generative in nature, these questions can be a launching point for additional assignments or research projects. Teachers are encouraged to adapt these activities to meet the contextual needs of their classroom.

In some cases, reading the article with students may be appropriate, coupled with reviewing the information sheet to further explore the concepts and contexts being discussed. From here, teachers can select from the questions provided below. Activities are structured to introduce students to the issues, then allow them to explore and apply their learnings. Extension and conclusion activities are included to challenge students and finally, encourage them to reflect on the issues at hand.

Since these activities are designed as discussions rather than formal lessons, assessment strategies are not included.

Themes and Course Connections
- Themes: social media, empathy, acts of kindness, communication
- Course Connections: Language, Science and Technology, Social Studies

Materials
- Global Voices column
- Paper and writing utensil

Specific Expectations and Learning Goals
Students will:
- Develop and express responses to issues and problems.
- Reassess their responses to issues on the basis of new information.
- Participate in active group work and class discussions.
- Communicate effectively in written and spoken language or other forms of expression.
- Demonstrate the ability to think critically.
- Develop, express, and defend a position on an issue and explain how to put the ideas into action.

Knowledge and Understanding

1. Guided Reading: The Global Voices Column (estimated time: 20 minutes)
   a. Have students sit in a circle and distribute one copy of the Global Voices column to each student.
   b. Pre-reading steps:
      i. Make predictions: ask students to read the title of the column. After doing so, ask them to make predictions as to what the column is going to be about.
      ii. Introduce vocabulary from the column.
      iii. Assess prior knowledge: ask students to discuss what they already know about these topics.
   c. Reading steps:
      i. Go around the circle and have each student read a section of the column to the class, so that everyone gets a turn to read.
      ii. As students are reading, offer guidance and coaching by providing prompts, asking questions, and encouraging attempts at reading strategy application.
   d. Post reading steps:
i. Encourage students to provide a summary of the column in order to ensure they have understood the series of events.

ii. Ask questions about the text to judge comprehension

2. Discussing the Global Voices Column (estimated time: 10 minutes)
   a. Ask students the following suggested questions about the column, encourage them to use evidence from the Global Voices column to support their answers:
      i. What is the message in this column?
      ii. What perspectives are presented in this column? Which ones are left out?
      iii. What problem is presented in this column?

3. Media Literacy (estimated time: 15 minutes)
   a. On a piece of paper ask each student to write the title of the column at the top of the page. Underneath the heading, have them create a chart with two columns across and five rows down.
   b. In the first column, have them write the following questions:
      i. What is the title of this column?
      ii. Who is the author?
      iii. What is the purpose of the column?
      iv. What statistics or facts are listed in the column?
      v. Are there biases or obvious points of view?
   c. Have the students revisit the Global Voices column and fill in the chart answering the above questions.
   d. Discuss the students’ charts as a class. Address the reasons why it is important to understand the source and potential bias of a website or print resource offering news information. Explain that just because a source has a bias doesn’t mean it has no value. One of the traditional purposes of publications is to express opinions and attempt to convince readers of their validity. Explain that this is why it’s important for each of them to form their own opinion while reading publications instead of agreeing with everything.

Thinking

1. Empathy and Social Media (estimated time: 10 minutes)
   a. This week’s Global Voices article examines a study looking at the ability to empathize amongst different generations and it questions how the role of social media relates. Use the following questions to engage students in discussion.
      i. What is empathy?
      ii. How is empathy different from sympathy?
      iii. What is apathy?
      iv. What were the findings of the Konrath’s research?
      v. What is the experiment she and her colleagues hope will encourage empathy?
      vi. Is being kind the same as being empathetic?
      vii. How is kindness linked to empathy?
      viii. What is a passive bystander?
      ix. Are today’s youth considered passive bystanders? Why or why not?

Communication

1. Empathy in my life (estimated time: 15 minutes)
   a. Empathy is an abstract concept so it is often difficult for younger students to understand what empathy is, how to recognize empathetic acts and how to be empathetic. Help students grasp the concept of empathy.
   b. Have students write a paragraph or journal entry describing the role of empathy in their lives. Students may consider the definition of empathy, how they are currently empathetic and how they can be more empathetic in the future with specific examples.
Application

1. Taking back social media (estimated time: 40 minutes)
   a. As the Global Voices column discusses, social media encourages superficial communication, narcissism and even bullying. However, many believe, including Sara Konrath, Craig and Marc Kielburger, social media can be used to encourage empathy and spread kindness. Encourage students to design their own social media kindness campaign. Reference the examples in the article (Texting experiment, #26Acts, The Shorty Awards, THINK) for ideas.
      i. Using the following formula that encourages the principles of empathy, have students create a social media kindness campaign:
         1. Connect—with someone you know
         2. Identify—a problem, a trouble or a concern
         3. Relate—put yourself in their shoes
         4. Act—make their day through an action that signifies you understand and you care about them
      ii. Ask for students to share a few examples of how social media can be used to encourage empathy and spread kindness.
      iii. Tell students about a student initiated kindness project at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. A few students created a facebook persona called “Queens U Compliments.” This persona asks students at Queen’s University to submit anonymous compliments. Once submitted, these compliments are posted on the page by the students who created it. The compliments are tagged to let the recipient know they are appreciated. The initiative is widely successful with hundreds of submissions being made each day.

Additional Resources

In addition to the above lesson plans, share these resources with your students

Free The Children www.freethechildren.com

Weday.com www.weday.com


Sara Konrath’s website on the study of empathy and altruism www.sarakonrath.com

The Shorty Awards www.shortyawards.com

THINK resource http://www.technologyrocksseriously.com/2012/01/before-you-facebook-txt-tweet-or-blog.html