

# How do we build a more empathetic society? ASU students start with the classroom

## Spring Humanities Lab course produces 'The Empathy Handbook' for K–12 teachers, student-led organizations

By Scott Bordow, ASU News  
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When Dr. Seuss wrote his 1961 book “The Sneetches and Other Stories,” he never could have imagined the children’s tale would wind up in a handbook written by Arizona State University students 65 years later.

But that’s exactly what’s happened.

Seuss’ book, in which the star-bellied and plain-bellied Sneetches learn not to judge others after a con man switches their stars back and forth, served as an empathy lesson in the handbook produced and delivered to 70 pre-service students in the [Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation](#).

“The book dealt with things like discrimination and feeling left out,” said Shae Lien, a first-year chemical engineering major and member of the six-person team that wrote the handbook. “So the kids will hear the book read to them, and the teacher will then ask questions like, ‘How would you feel if you were this character?’ or ‘What was your favorite character?’

“We’re trying to get the kids to think a little bit more introspectively about their feelings since the first step of empathy is recognizing one’s own emotions.”

“The Empathy Handbook” came out of the Educating for Democracy course, part of ASU’s [Humanities Lab](#). The lab is supported by the Create the Change Initiative and the [Cultivating Civic Virtues through Action](#), or CCVA, initiative, granted by the Program for Leadership and Character at Wake Forest University and funded by the Lilly Endowment Inc.

The CCVA initiative invites ASU faculty to co-teach a Humanities Lab course with the mission of cultivating civic character among undergraduates.

“The Humanities Lab has always encouraged the development of the civic virtues, but now we’re doing it in a much more explicit way,” said Juliann Vitullo, co-director of the Humanities Lab, which is a unit in [The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences](#). “The fact that students really had time to think about the importance of these civic virtues in terms of developing a healthy democracy ... we think that really came out of this collaboration.”

The students in the course didn’t produce just one empathy handbook. A second handbook — one that focuses more on conversation rather than class activities — was delivered to student organizations at ASU with the goal of building inclusion and retention in the organizations, according to class member Brittany Rolfe, who is in the first year of her master’s program for social and cultural pedagogy.

“We’ve noticed that retention is a big issue in these clubs, but also, students may not feel as connected,” Rolfe said. “If you really feel heard and seen ... empathy is a really good virtue to help people coming back.”

The handbooks emerged from an unlikely place: an initial discussion in the Educating for Democracy course on the intersection between education and democracy.

Tara Bartlett, a clinical assistant professor in the Mary Lou Fulton College who co-teaches the class with Daniel Schugurensky, a professor in the School of Public Affairs and the School of Social Transformation, said the class looked at different ways the education system does or doesn’t prepare students to be civically engaged participants in a democracy.

Those discussions, Bartlett said, led to students examining civic virtues and practices as well as sharing their lived experiences, including how beneficial literacy has been in shaping their worldview and, through literacy, how civic virtues such as empathy can be learned.

“From there, they really looked at the root cause of the problem and talked about how, in schools, this could be bolstered,” Bartlett said. “So they decided to create a tool kit, a handbook for educators that really centered on empathy.”

The students then produced the handbooks in [Beyond the Lab](#), an extension of the Humanities Lab that centers on faculty-student team collaborations.

The handbook was split into three sections: elementary school, middle school and high school.

“We definitely tried to create activities that would work for kindergarten through 12th grade,” Lien said.

One example: In the middle school section, students are divided into small “city councils,” are told they will be in charge of a new city, and their goal is to have the most empathetic city. Each council must then present in a creative way — a play, presentation or a drawing — that explains how their city will represent compassion and equity.

“The students understood that empathy is a foundational skill and an attitude that can help create better classrooms, healthier relationships, less bullying, more cooperation, less polarization and less violent conflict,” Schugurensky said.

Upon completion of the handbook, the students connected with Nicole Hagerty, a clinical assistant professor in the Mary Lou Fulton College. Hagerty invited the Humanities Lab students to come into her classroom to work with the pre-service teachers and collect feedback on the handbook.

“Even though there were certain lessons that, say, were for high school only, you could pull certain aspects of that and do it in the elementary classroom and vice versa,” Hagerty said. “I thought it was very thought out.”

Schugurensky called the collaborative effort a “beautiful synchrony of how empathy is a useful tool.”

“I think that empathy is definitely an aspect that needs to be targeted and is kind of forgotten,” he said.

Vitullo said the discussion that came out of the Humanities Lab — and the creation of “The Empathy Handbook” — personifies what the CCVA grant calls “epistemic humility,” being open to other perspectives and ways of thinking.

“We in the Humanities Lab really believe that the classroom is a place where these kinds of democratic values and civic virtues can be developed,” she said. “That’s really important to us.”

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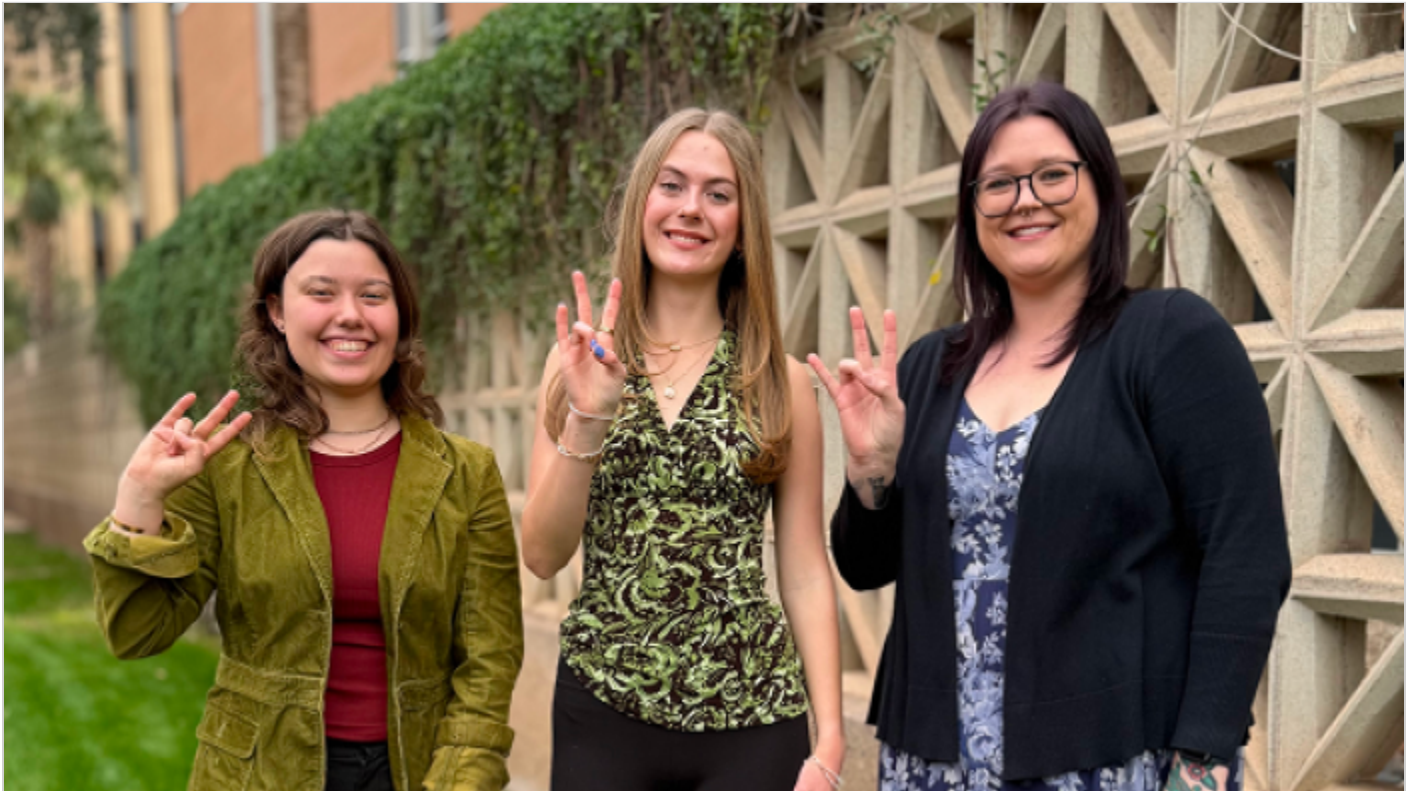
*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



Cover art for "The Empathy Handbook," an ASU student-produced publication created to help cultivate more civic-minded citizens. Courtesy image

## Text image(s)



Students from the Humanities Lab Beyond the Lab team that worked on "The Empathy Handbook" (from left): Makena Canon, a physics undergraduate student; Shae Lien, a chemical engineering undergraduate student; and Brittany Rolfe, a social and cultural pedagogy graduate student. Photo by Maureen Kobierowski/ASU