

Thompson: Compassion

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“I Am Your Brother”:
Exploring Compassion through Russian-language Cultural Artifacts

Part I: Executive Summary and References List

Executive summary

“The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.” Thus reads the first paragraph of the Charter for Compassion, which “calls on us to activate the Golden Rule around the world.”

How do we see compassion—or its absence—reflected in cultural artifacts produced in the late imperial Russian period and the Soviet era? How have writers and filmmakers highlighted the need for compassion in the life of given individuals? How can students through examination of such works develop within themselves an enhanced capacity for compassion?

References

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Thompson: Compassion

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Part II: Analysis

Problem the project addresses: "True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring." Martin Luther King, Jr., thus highlighted the challenge of compassion – it cannot rest on empty words or easy gestures; it calls for an active participation in the restructuring of the edifice. Most students today have surely been taught elements of compassion, but how might we encourage a deeper dive into the study and practice of compassion among university-level students?

The instructor will invite students to explore compassion through an undergraduate-level course focused on Russian-language literature of the late imperial Russian period and texts and films of the Soviet era (all in translation) that present characters in need of compassion. Which types of people do they represent? What happens to the individual, the community, or the broader society when compassion is practiced or not practiced?

Learner identities: UA undergraduates come from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, states within the US, and nations around the world. As of Fall 2022, there were 40,407 undergraduate students enrolled at UA. Of those, 52% were Arizona residents; 4.7%, international students. Furthermore, 3.3% were American Indian or Alaska Native; 9.9%, Asian; 6.9%, Black or African American; 26.9%, Hispanic or Latinx; 0.9% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; 68.1%, White. (See <https://uair.arizona.edu/content/enrollment>.) According to the UA website, nine out of 10 students receive financial aid.

What learners might already know about proposed content: Such a course would be included within our "General Education" system, and, as such, the course would be appropriate for all undergraduates.

School/institution context: The University of Arizona is a large land-grant R1 university with myriad buildings boasting multiple spaces for student-centered learning. This

Thompson: Compassion

course would probably be scheduled for up to, say, 40 students in a collaborative-learning space where students could work in small groups during discussion periods.

Proposed content: Students will look at the plights and fates of characters in texts and films who might clearly benefit from compassion. Do they receive it? If so, how so, and from whom? If not, why not? Sample artifacts follow. (Students might read only excerpts from the long novels.)

<i>Character(s)</i>	<i>Work</i>	<i>Writer/director</i>
Yevgeny	"The Bronze Horseman"	Pushkin
Akaky Akakiyevich	"The Overcoat"	Gogol
Marmeladov, Sonya, Dunya	<i>Crime and Punishment</i>	Dostoevsky
Lukeriya	"A Living Relic"	Turgenev
Lizaveta and all brothers	<i>The Brothers Karamazov</i>	Dostoevsky
Ivan Ilyich	<i>The Death of Ivan Ilyich</i>	Tolstoy
Varka	"Sleepy"	Chekhov
Iona	"Misery"	Chekhov
Prostitutes	"A Nervous Breakdown"	Chekhov
Marion Dixon, Jimmy	<i>Circus</i>	Aleksandrov
Akhmatova, her "nameless friends from those two years I spent in hell," prisoners	"Requiem"	Akhmatova
Sofya, David, Ikonnikov, Semyonov	<i>Life and Fate</i>	Grossman
Vanya and Sokolov	<i>Fate of a Man</i>	Sholokhov
Ignatich	"Matryona's Home"	Solzhenitsyn
Bim	<i>White Bim, Black Ear</i>	Troepolsky/ Rostotsky
Katya	<i>Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears</i>	Menshov

Instructional goals:

- 1/ To expose students to artifacts of a different culture while encouraging them to see the universality of human experience in said artifacts;
- 2/ To prompt students to consider how they might identify with those artifacts' characters given their own life experience;
- 3/ To encourage students to not merely empathize with those in need, but to work actively toward improving the lives of those needing compassion.

Part III: Design

Note: In crafting this course, I was inspired by the ideas presented by Dr. Benjamin Rifkin in his article “Teaching Compassion in the Russian Language and Literature Curriculum: An Essential Learning Outcome.” I have included a number of those ideas in the design below.

Performance objectives: The students will do the following over the course of the semester:

- Explore texts of the late imperial Russian period and texts/films of the Soviet era that present injustices or crises that call for empathy and compassion.
- Draw connections between their own life experiences and those of different types of characters in the artifacts they are exploring.
- Identify, through exploring current news media, people in our day whose life experiences resemble those of the characters in assigned works (e.g., the homeless; mentally ill; victims of discrimination of any sort, of disease, child abuse, exploitation, governmental repression, war, etc.).
- Discover people, organizations, and communities that have developed ways of providing compassionate care for those in need, and examine ways in which they, the students, might participate.

Learning assessments:

- For each class period, students will provide either a QOD (“quotes of the day,” i.e., excerpts from assigned material that highlight key aspects of the artifact, along with their brief analysis of same) or will present a brief reflection paper on a pre-provided prompt related to assigned material. Both items are meant to foment discussion among students during the in-class meeting.
- Each week students will respond to discussion-board prompts and provide feedback to a number of posts by other students.
- Students will write an analysis paper that links the situation of a character or characters we have studied with news reports that highlight similar problems various individuals and/or groups face today.
- Students will interview a practitioner of compassion who assists people (or, possibly, animals) with whose plight they identify.

Strategies, activities, methods:

- Student reflections will ensure that students remain up to date on assignments and allow them to participate fully in the class.

Thompson: Compassion

- Online discussions will enable students to reflect on their own experiences and share them with others.
- In their analysis paper, students can make a connection between artifacts of a culture and time profoundly different than their own that nevertheless resonate in our day.
- Preparing for and conducting an interview will allow students to synthesize assigned material and craft probing questions. Their class presentation will allow them to exercise their creativity and practice public speaking.

Alignment:

<i>Performance objectives</i>	<i>Assessments</i>	<i>Strategies/activities/methods</i>
Explore texts of the late imperial Russian period and texts/ films of the Soviet era that present inequities that call for empathy and compassion.	Daily QODs (quotes of the day) or reflection papers on a pre-provided prompt	Written reflections that demonstrate familiarity with material and allow participation in informed discussions with others in class
Draw connections between their own life experiences and those of different types of characters in the artifacts they are exploring.	Posts on discussion boards and responses to other students' posts	Online discussions with peers on how they identify with assigned material
Identify, through exploring current media, people in our day whose life experiences resemble those of the characters in assigned works.	Analysis paper (revisable) linking a character or characters from assigned material to individuals today encountering similar crises and challenges.	Writing that connects the dots between fictional characters from another time and place and people in today's world
Discover people, organizations, and communities that have developed ways of providing compassionate care for those in need, and examine ways in which they might participate.	Interview with a practitioner of compassion; class presentation of findings	For interview, insightful questions crafted for interviewee; thoughtful presentation of interviewee's responses For presentation, a PowerPoint or short film that shares findings with the class

Grading:

- QODs, reflective papers, and discussion-board posts will be graded using a 5-point scale. (35% of semester grade)
- The analysis paper (which may be revised) will be evaluated according to a rubric that assigns points for various elements of the paper including the following: content, logic, depth, organization/clarity/style/focus, mechanics, formal tone. (25%)
- The interview will be graded on the appropriateness and insight of questions that students have crafted for the interview and their thoughtful write-up of that interview. (20%)
- The class presentation will be graded for creativity and the student's ability to engage the class, to lead the discussion, and to link findings to assigned course materials. (10%)
- Finally, students will have the opportunity to earn participation points for each class period. (10%)

Part IV: Development

Resources, materials, technologies for students: See table in **Part II: Analysis** for types of artifacts that students will explore. These will be made available on the UA D2L platform, and every effort will be made to ensure that students do not have to expend additional funds to access assigned texts or films.

Resources, materials, technologies for instructor: As noted above, an inspiration for me in developing this course was Benjamin Rifkin's article (see *References* in Part I), in which he writes that Akaky Akakiyevich's "plaintive cry – 'I am your brother!' – is perhaps the clarion call of compassion in Russian literary culture." Another key resource for me as the instructor will be Karen Armstrong's book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. The chapter headings in this volume point to key elements that students will explore, to wit: "Wish for a Better World"; "Look at Your Own World"; "Compassion for Yourself"; "Empathy"; "Mindfulness"; "Action"; "Concern for Everybody"; "Love Your Enemies."

Support of administration/supervisor re sensitive topics: My administration and supervisor are supportive of my teaching efforts, including courses such as "World War II: the Soviet Cultural Experience" and "Contemporary Russia," both of which include myriad sensitive topics.

Possibly controversial content: I tell students that to study literature, film, and history – to explore the human experience – is to be exposed to much that is offensive and controversial. But to study something is not to condone it, embrace it, or approve it. A paragraph on controversial content is included in all of my syllabi.

Part V: Implementation

Policies and procedures and How policies reflect CDIPS program: The University of Arizona has various policies on inclusivity that we incorporate into all of our syllabi. Furthermore, I include the Golden Rule in my syllabi, encouraging an atmosphere of mutual respect among all students. Students are encouraged to see all other humans as equally worthy of consideration and compassion.

Logistical considerations: I will plan to invite to our class various practitioners of compassion from the Tucson community (e.g., representatives from the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona, Salvation Army, Jewish Family and Children's Service, Gospel Rescue Mission, Interfaith Community Services, Youth on Their Own, Brewster Center Domestic Violence Services, Southern Arizona AIDS Foundation, Integrative Touch, Vets4Vets, etc.). This will entail my contacting said individuals well beforehand and putting together a schedule of visits that works for all. Furthermore, a field trip might be arranged (if funds are available) to allow students to observe practitioners in action.

Part VI: Evaluation

Feedback from students: In class, I will regularly elicit feedback in terms of the students' understanding of the material. Class sessions will begin with a question period, for students to clarify what they have not understood from the artifacts assigned. Students may always email me for clarification on content or come to my office hours (in person or via Zoom) for assistance or to further discuss material. At the end of the semester, all UA students have the opportunity to complete a Student Course Survey (SCS) about their experiences in a given course.

Evaluation process: See section "Grading" under **Part III: Design**.

Instructor's reflective practice: I routinely consider student comments throughout the semester and, after the conclusion of the semester, pore over results of my courses' SCSs, all with a view to understanding how a given semester went and how to improve the course in the future. I frequently use students' constructive criticisms and positive suggestions to tweak my courses to further hone my student-centered approach.