

Best Practices in Creating Empathy Trainings for Environmental Educators



ADVANCING CONSERVATION THROUGH
EMPATHY FOR WILDLIFE®

Lessons learned from the Empathy Champion Project - developing and facilitating an empathy training with Nature Everywhere environmental educators

1. Start with the educators, not the training

When our original audience shifted from MMSD teachers to environmental educators across the Nature Everywhere network, the question changed from “What training should we offer?” to “What would actually be useful to this audience?”

A simple design process:

1 LISTEN FIRST → 2 IDENTIFY NEEDS → 3 DESIGN → 4 TEST/ADJUST

A short needs assessment can reveal what participants already know, where they feel confident, and what they actually want from a training. It also helps you design for the range of organizations, roles, and experiences in the room.

2. Share a model - Don't prescribe a solution

When training across different environmental-education settings, it can be tempting to share your organization's approach as the way to foster empathy. Instead, make your own experience the case study.

“Here is what we've learned” gives participants permission to ask,

“What could this look like in my setting?”

LESS PRESCRIPTIVE

“Do this.”

“Use our model.”

“Your setting should...”

MORE TRANSFERABLE

““Here is what we tried.”

“This is what we learned”

“What might translate for you?”

Zoo Example	Underlying Practice	Possible Adaptation
Use Names/Pronouns	Recognize Individuals	Notice individual plants, animals or places
Narrate behavior	Perspective Taking	Invite observations before explanation
Tell an Animal's Story	Perspective Taking	Tell stories of place, seasonal change, or living things from their perspective

3. Make transfer to the real world part of the training

Understanding an empathy practice isn't the same as knowing how to use it. Build in opportunities for participants to adapt, practice, and apply ideas to their own work.

Ask Participants to:

Identify a Challenge

Plan one next step

Adapt an example

Try rewording a story

4. Practical Checklist for Designing Empathy Training

Use this as a one-page planning tool. The checklist reflects the strongest lessons from the Nature Everywhere pilot and can help you gather information you need while planning a real session.

BEFORE

- ☐ Identify your audience and their contexts
- ☐ Ask what participants hope to gain
- ☐ Find out their current confidence and experience
- ☐ Identify examples that can transfer across settings

DURING

- ☐ Define empathy clearly
- ☐ Explain why empathy matters
- ☐ Share authentic examples from your own practice
- ☐ Model empathy-supporting language and behavior
- ☐ Include practice—not only presentation
- ☐ Give participants time to reflect and adapt

AFTER

- ☐ Collect feedback on usefulness and confidence
- ☐ Provide a simple take-home resource
- ☐ Ask what participants want next
- ☐ Follow up to learn what they implemented

Final Takeaway

The most transferable empathy training is not necessarily the one with the most content. It is the one that helps educators see what empathy looks like, practice it, and imagine how they can make it their own.

