

# Strategy and Lesson Plans

# Humans of Your School

Grades 6 - 12

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# Overview

Inspired by the [“Humans of New York”](#) series, this strategy helps students learn about the power of portraits and the importance of expressing vulnerability when sharing about oneself and learning about others. Humans of Your School provides students with opportunities to learn interviewing skills, connect with those different from them, understand varying perspectives, and appreciate differences while finding commonalities.

## Recommended time

- 20-40 mins per lesson (Use the pacing suggestions or timestamps to adjust, depending on time available.)
- Five lessons in total, one lesson per week

## Materials and advance prep

- Anchor chart paper and markers
- Student journal
- Test technology in advance
- Lesson 1: Humans of New York portraits (printed in advance, if possible), teacher portrait (optional)
- Lesson 4: Decide when and where interviews will take place and how students will provide pictures
- Lesson 4: Supplies such as poster paper, tape, glue, and scissors
- Read through all five lessons and try to set a timeline. Lessons may require minor preparation in order to implement with fidelity and ease.

## Objectives

- Define empathy and use it to better understand others in the class and school.
- Develop interviewing skills, including asking thoughtful and pointed questions to learn more about peers and deepen relationships.
- Build classroom community, peer connection, and sense of belonging

## Why this matters

Students can develop empathy by learning to appreciate other people's stories. By engaging with peers in a structured way and shaping narratives that capture snippets of others' lives, students will develop insight into the nuances of others' lived experiences, values, and perspectives. By interviewing others, especially those who may be different from them, students will practice vulnerability and develop trust, which in turn strengthens the school community.

## Other considerations

Because this strategy rests heavily on peer discussion and interviewing, class norms are especially important. We suggest that you first review those norms. If you haven't yet set class norms, see [Appendix 1](#) for ideas on how to do so.

## Extending this strategy

- Using the [Humans of New York](#) stories, choose a story or two to read and discuss as a group each week, or have students rotate to select and present a story each week.
- Create time in class for students to continue to interview and create Humans of New York style portraits of members of their community, in and out of school. Invite school members to join during presentations or gallery walks. You may also consider pairing your class with other classrooms, subjects, grades, or neighborhood schools.
- Play one or more of the following Making Caring Common games: *Say it with an Emoji*, *Whip-Arounds*, *A Cold Wind Blows*, *Cheers*, or *Echoing a Friend*. The games are a great way to transition in or out of a strategy lesson or increase the number of positive interactions in your class.

# Lesson 1: Humans of New York and Teacher Portrait (25-35 minutes)

## Introduce the lesson (5 minutes)

Prepare students by saying something like this: “I’m excited to start a new project with you today. Over the next few weeks we are going to engage in a series of activities that will push us to connect with each other and our school community. We will get to know our community by telling stories and listening to each other, and in the process, we will grow to be more empathetic.”

Ask for a few student volunteers to share their definitions of empathy. Then provide the following definition of empathy and check for understanding:

**Empathy:** Empathy is the way we relate to others by trying to understand and feel what they are going through, especially those who are different from us.

Prompt students to reflect and share about how they use empathy in their lives in and out of school, and why empathy is important. It may be helpful to provide one minute of individual journaling time before asking students to share aloud.

***MCC Tip:** You may want to print out the definition of empathy to post on a board, include it in an easily accessible place on your class website or Learning Management System, or write it on an anchor chart, so it’s easy for students to read and refer to throughout the rest of the school year.*

## Small-Group Discussion (10-15 minutes)

Introduce the “Humans of New York” (HONY) series. Tell students the following: “With this definition in mind, we are now going to look at ‘Humans of New York.’” Ask the class if they have seen or heard of HONY, and ask what kinds of posts they remember. Tell students Humans of New York is a series of portraits that showcase regular people on the streets of New York through photos and short excerpts of their stories. Spend a few minutes exploring the Humans of New York website together so students get a sense of the combination of imagery and text involved in each narrative. (Website: <http://www.humansofnewyork.com/>).

Have students break into small groups to study other Humans of New York portraits online or through printed portraits. Have students discuss the following questions in small groups and be prepared to share out with the whole class:

- Is there a post that really moved you or that you can empathize with? Why or why not?
- Though each post is unique, what do the different posts have in common?
- What do you notice about the narrative captions and how they are written?
- What do you notice about the photographs?
- Why do you think these posts have become so popular?

***MCC Tip:** Based on your class and group dynamics, consider assigning group member roles such as note taker, reporter, time keeper, and process checker.*

Bring the class together for a five-minute debrief on the discussion questions above. Have each group's reporter share their main observations and notes.

***Consider this:** Incorporate a quick movement break or game before the next section to refocus and energize your class.*

## Discuss an example (5-10 minutes)

Provide students an exemplary portrait from the website you'd like them to explore together in greater detail. If you have time and prepared one in advance, you can present your own "Humans of Your School" self-portrait. In creating this self-portrait, choose an image or draw a picture of yourself. Below it, draft a brief narrative caption that shares something about your life. Use the first person ("I") as if you were responding to a question or telling a story. Use the Humans of New York posts as models.

First, introduce the exemplary image (i.e. from the website or your own). Then, introduce the accompanying narrative, and ask students to respond to this portrait as a whole. You might ask the following, prioritizing the bolded question:

- **Why do you think I chose this image with these words for us to explore more closely?**
- Are you surprised by anything in the text?
- Was there anything that you thought you knew about me that the text calls into question (for those who chose to create their own model portrait)?
- How does this post make you feel? Why?

Open the floor and encourage students to ask questions about what makes the model portrait a strong example. Guide students to identify elements of the portrait that stand out to them.

## Student self-portraits (5 minutes)

Let students know that they will be creating their own Humans of New York-style self-portraits. This project will consist of a picture of themselves (see options below) and a narrative caption, which they will write during the next lesson. Once the class completes their portraits and narrative captions, they will present their work to the class.

For the picture portion of the project, choose an option from the list below that fits your context:

- Ask students to find or take a photo of themselves outside of class time and bring it in
- Give students the option to either acquire a photo or draw a picture of themselves outside of class time and bring it in
- Allow students to work on self-portraits during non-instructional times (such as homeroom or break times)
- Give students time to draw self-portraits at the beginning of Lesson 3
- Use the beginning of Lesson 3 to let students stage and take their photos using a cell phone or camera, and print out pictures before students present their projects

**MCC Tip:** *Start thinking about how to support students who may feel anxious or uncomfortable sharing a story and image about themselves. For example, brainstorm things they can share about their lives that are authentic but feel safe. Consider providing students an opportunity to share their work through a gallery walk rather than a presentation.*

Keep in mind that the connection between the picture and the narrative caption is an important part of the Humans of New York series, so students should think carefully about how to accomplish this connection in their projects. Like the actual series, their captions should offer an authentic glimpse into their lived experience. Some are funny and surprising, while others are more serious. It might be helpful for them to think about what to write about, so we suggest giving them an opportunity to journal and brainstorm if there is time.

Wrap up by telling students when the next lesson will occur and what they need to prepare.



# Lesson 2: Humans of Your Class (30-40 minutes)

## Introduce the lesson

Begin by telling students, “Today we are going to continue with our Humans of \_\_\_\_ project! I am excited to see what you all have to share, so let’s get to it!”

## Creating self-portraits (15 minutes)

Depending on the picture option you chose, you may need to give students time at the beginning of class to draw or take photos. If students were asked to bring a picture of themselves to class, skip this step and begin the narrative writing activity. For students who were expected to bring in a picture but forgot, decide if they should be given time to create a quick sketch or present what they have.

Once students complete their portrait, instruct them to begin writing their caption. Encourage students to use the text portion of the portrait to include information about them that captures who they are, shares something they want others to know, or is something they identify with and care about. Frame this activity as an opportunity for students to share about themselves while listening to and learning about their peers.

If students are stuck on their caption, prompt them with the following:

- What makes you, you?
- What do you want people to understand about you?
- What do you care about?

**MCC Tip:** Remind students that if they are feeling stuck, they can look to the Humans of New York examples from [Lesson 2](#) for inspiration. You might also consider displaying a few exemplary Humans of New York portraits in the classroom for students’ reference and inspiration.

## Student presentations (10-20 minutes)

Once students have finished writing their narrative captions, it is time to present. There are a few ways you could do this (e.g., through a gallery walk or small groups), but to build a sense of community, have students present to the whole class, if possible.

***MCC Tip:** You may want to set class presentation norms. What does presenting look like? What does listening and asking questions look like? If any students struggle to adhere to these norms, be sure to address the behavior in the moment, so students know that this is a safe and sacred time to share.*

## Whole-group discussion (5 minutes)

Ask students what they learned from listening to their peers. Questions include the following:

- In general – not speaking about one person specifically – what struck you during this activity?
- What did you learn about your classmates from this exercise?
- What can we learn from listening to other people's stories?
- How do you think this activity relates to empathy?
- Is there anyone in your life or in our school community that you wish you could do this activity with?

## Preview the next lesson (1 minute)

Tell students that their next project will be to create a Humans of New York-style portrait of someone in the school community.

- The subject of their portrait should be someone they don't know well, or interact with much, like a student from a different class or grade, a custodian, security guard, or a faculty member.
- Students will plan their interview questions during the next lesson, so they should think about who they would like to interview and what they would like to know about them.

Wrap up by telling students when you think the next lesson might occur.

***MCC Tip:** Consider posting student portraits around the classroom, on a designated board, or in a digital space. That way, peers can spend more time observing and thinking about others. Be*

*sure to get each student's consent to share, and keep their portraits to respect student privacy. Also make sure to prepare in advance for Lesson 4! Notify other adults in the school – especially teachers – that this project is happening so they will be prepared if students approach them or their students for interviews. If others are doing the same strategy, work together to keep track of interviews.*

# Lesson 3: Planning for Humans of Your School (20 minutes)

## Introduce the lesson (2 minutes)

Tell students something like this: “Today you will plan to get to know a member of the school community and create their portrait.”

***MCC Tip:** Some teachers have found that it can be helpful to keep a spreadsheet of interviewers and interviewees – this avoids burdening certain interviewees and ensures that each student has a different person to interview.*

## Preparing for the interview (15 minutes)

Students should consider who they want to interview and write the questions they’d like to ask, perhaps beginning with surface-level questions and advancing to more thought-provoking questions. (See [Appendix 2](#) for question ideas.) Provide the instructions or guidelines below so students can follow the process.

Instructions for students should include the following (included in [Appendix 2](#)):

1. Interview someone you don’t know well. Think about voices within the community that often go unheard. It may be interesting to choose someone you interact with often but don’t really know much about or someone you don’t interact with but could learn more about.
2. Be respectful of your interviewee’s time and privacy. Ask when and where interviewees would like to be interviewed and how they would like their portrait done.
3. Ask creative and open-ended questions! Make sure your questions are in a logical sequence, and make connections between answers to tell a coherent, cohesive story about the person.
4. Listen carefully (see norms in [Appendix 1](#)) and take notes during the interview, but try your best to maintain focus on the interviewee. Scribbling key words or phrases can be helpful.
5. Make sure the final portrait and narrative – including any quotations – are approved by your interviewee before you “publish” them.

***MCC Tip:** Coming up with good questions can be challenging. The point of this lesson is to*

*practice asking questions and listening to others' answers, so feel free to provide questions to those students who are stuck on this step.*

Encourage students to record their interview questions in their journals or on a computer where they will be able to type their responses. Remind students they'll be taking notes of the responses they get during their interviews, as this will be crucial for completing their portraits in the next lesson.

For the remainder of the lesson, instruct students to organize into pairs and practice asking questions, listening and taking notes. Circle the room to observe partner interviewing and note taking and make note of any positive observations or areas of growth to share with the class.

## **Wrap Up (2 minutes)**

Bring the class back together to wrap-up the lesson. Share any observations you noticed during the partner practice including positive feedback and areas for growth.

Let students know when you think the next lesson will take place.

**MCC Tip:** *Decide if it makes more sense for students to complete their interviews outside of class or during the next lesson. If technology allows, or if necessary, students could conduct their interviews via Skype, phone, or email. Students must also obtain a picture of their interviewees, so if they are interviewing outside of class time be sure to remind them to either take or hand-draw a picture of their interviewee. If they are not meeting their interviewee in person, they may want to ask the person to send them a picture. If students complete their interviews outside of class, they should bring their notes from the interview to the next class.*

# Lesson 4: Interviewing and/or Preparing Humans of Your School Portraits (30-40 minutes)

## Introduce the lesson (1 minute)

Tell students: “During the next lesson we will present our portraits of people in our school community. We will spend today getting ready for those presentations.”

## In-class interviews (15 minutes)

If you decided to allot class time to conducting interviews, that will most likely take up the majority of your time. Students should come prepared with the questions they wrote in the previous lesson. Circulate to ensure students are taking detailed notes on their interviewee’s responses as these will be key in the caption-writing activity that follows.

**MCC Tip:** *If this lesson feels too jam-packed, or if time allows, consider breaking it up into two lessons. Alternatively, ask students to write their caption and assemble their final projects for homework.*

If you are conducting interviews in class but some students’ partners are not present, they may pair up with another student and practice their interview questions. If they have already completed their interview outside of class, they may move on to the caption writing activity.

## Reviewing interview notes (5 minutes)

After interviewing is complete, give students time to silently and independently review their notes. Encourage them to keep an eye out for anything surprising, thought-provoking, or especially poignant. If it would be beneficial, they may have a minute or so to talk with a partner about the caption they would like to include in their portrait.

## Putting it all together (10-20 minutes)

Finally, students should put together their picture with their caption to create their Humans of New York-style portrait. Gather the necessary supplies such as poster paper, tape, glue, and scissors for students in advance.

Ensure there is a process for partners to review the narrative caption their interviewer writes before the portrait is published.

## Wrap up (1 minute)

Let students know when the final lesson and project presentations will take place.

**MCC Tip:** Consider the following when organizing this activity: Notify other adults in the school that this project is happening, so they will be prepared if students approach them for interviews; create a spreadsheet or list for yourself to track pairs of interviewers/interviewees; assign students someone to interview if they don't have anyone; remind students that the portrait must be approved by their partner; allow students to compile their notes and create their interviewee portrait in class.

# Lesson 5: Sharing Humans of Your School Portraits (25-40 minutes)

## Introduce the lesson and present portraits (20-30 minutes)

Tell students: “Today we are going to present the portraits you created from your interviews. I’m excited to listen and learn more about members of our school community.”

If necessary, give students a few minutes to finalize their portraits and prepare to present.

### Things to consider:

- Make it optional for students to present or call on students to present at random.
- Set up a projector so students have the option to display their interviewee’s portrait.
- Consider a process for inviting students to provide shout-outs, or compliments, to each other after they present. This is a great way to build trust among peers.

When students present their portraits to the class, ask each student to reflect silently.

- What kind of story did the image and caption or narrative tell together?
- What did you learn from or about this person?

## Debrief (5-10 minutes)

Once all students have presented, take 5-10 minutes to debrief the entire Humans of Your School exercise.

- What was easy about this exercise? What was hard about it?
- What did you learn about your classmates and our school community from this exercise?
- What can we learn from listening to other people’s stories?
- Why is it important for us to consider other perspectives?
- How do we get in the habit of thinking beyond appearances and first judgments?



Praise students for their work and vulnerability. Consider our suggestions in the Extension Ideas (see below) for encouraging students to learn about others, be moved by their stories, and appreciate different perspectives.

## Extension ideas

- Consider having students turn their Humans of Your School portraits into a podcast series. Students can record their stories and publish them online as a way to share this information in a new medium.
- Using the [Humans of New York](#) stories, choose a story or two to read and discuss as a group each week, or have students rotate to select and present a story each week.
- Create time in class for students to continue to interview and create Humans of New York style portraits of members of their community in and out of school. Invite school members to join during presentations or gallery walks. You may also consider pairing your class with other classrooms, subjects, grades, or neighborhood schools.
- Ask students to continue their focus on listening and empathizing with others. Some options include the following:
  - Have students commit to specific ways they will continue this work. For instance, students can pledge to try and get to know a different student every week, or to be kinder to students and school staff they don't know.
  - Implement a regular “Humans of Your School” sharing session. Students can share about moments when they learned something new about a member of the school community without identifying others’ names or other personal information.

# Appendix 1: Recommended Classroom Norms and Moral Principles

Before you dive into meaningful class discussions, it is important to generate or reaffirm your class norms. When we establish norms together we create buy-in and trust. Doing this also provides explicit, shared codes of conduct that remind students how to engage in constructive discussions. Norms are also a great strategy for diffusing heated conversations and prompting students to return to agreed-upon norms when things get too uncomfortable within the group.

1. Challenge ideas rather than people.
2. Assume good intentions and “listen generously.”
3. Take responsibility for your impact on others in the classroom.
4. Expect and accept non-closure. If you leave class with questions, it’s ok and it’s likely.
5. Stay engaged.
6. Try to avoid sweeping generalizations and stereotypes. Remember that there are wide variations within and between races, ethnicities, economic classes.
7. Consider the diversity of the people in the room and imagine how others in the room might experience your comments.
8. Consider what responsibilities you are asking other students to bear. It is not ok, for example, to ask a person to speak on behalf of all members of the community or the group to which they belong.
9. Remember that students in this class have varying levels of familiarity with different topics.
10. Remember that mistakes are normal and are useful learning opportunities in meaningful discussions.
11. Keep mistakes and conflicts among us and seek to work out mistakes and conflicts within the class.

12. Maintain confidentiality of classroom discussions, especially on sensitive topics; take and share lessons from class, not people's stories.

13. Treat diverse opinions as an opportunity. Challenge yourself to try out new ideas you hear in class and see how they apply in your life.

14. Seek to constructively engage with views you may disagree with. Ask caring questions, and listen deeply to the perspectives of others, especially those you may disagree with.

Because shame can prohibit learning, rather than “calling out” or letting others know publicly they made hurtful or oppressive comments in a way that may cause them shame, try to “call-in” others by expressing your views and experience with the intention to help them understand your point of view or speaking with them privately about the impact of their hurtful or oppressive comments. ”

15. Aspire in classroom conversations to create an ethical community - a community that expects and supports honesty, candor, appreciation, forgiveness, fairness and deep engagement with challenging questions.

# Appendix 2: Interviewing Instructions and Suggested Questions

## Interviewing Instructions:

1. Interview someone you don't know well. Think about voices within the community that often go unheard. It may be interesting to choose someone you interact with often but don't really know much about, or someone you don't interact with but could learn more about.
2. Be respectful of your interviewee's time and privacy. Ask when and where interviewees would like to be interviewed and how they would like their portrait done.
3. Ask creative and open-ended questions! Make sure your questions are in a logical sequence, and make connections between answers to tell a coherent, cohesive story about the person.
4. Listen carefully (see Appendix 1) and take notes during the interview, but try your best to maintain focus on the interviewee. Writing down key words or phrases can be helpful.
5. Make sure the final portrait and narrative caption – including any quotes – are approved by your interviewee before being “published.”

## Possible Interview Questions:

### Surface level

- What kinds of things do you like and dislike?
- What is/was a subject in school you enjoy?
- What are some of your hobbies?
- What is your favorite movie/music/book, and why?
- What is your favorite food, and why?

### Deeper level

- What's an important memory or story from your life, and what makes it important to you?
- What are you afraid of, and why?
- What/who do you care about?
- What is your best memory?
- What do you want to improve on?
- What do you do outside of school?

- What are you passionate about?
- What has been your most difficult challenge?
- If you could offer advice to someone younger than you, older than you, or your age, what would it be?
- What might people not know about you?