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## Humans are Underrated: Geoff Colvin on the Importance of Empathy

Caroline Melles

*United States Naval Academy*, [cgg@usna.edu](mailto:cgg@usna.edu)

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## Humans are Underrated: Geoff Colvin on the Importance of Empathy

Caroline Melles  
United States Naval Academy

The questions Geoff Colvin discusses in his book, *Humans are Underrated*, are relevant to both how and what we teach. He asks, as computers gain the ability to act in ways that were thought of as exclusively human, what will be the most essential human skills in the future? Colvin predicts that interpersonal skills will become increasingly valuable, while the demand for cognitive skills will decrease. He stresses the importance of empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of others and respond appropriately.

Coincidentally, at about the time I began reading this book, I received the annual guidelines on excellence in teaching from the Naval Academy. I was struck by the fact that eleven of the thirteen guidelines were related in some way to empathy and interpersonal skills. Faculty members were reminded to be “encouraging, approachable, caring, ...supportive and fair,” to adapt to different student learning styles, to take into consideration other demands on students’ time, to be “self-aware of demeanor,” and to exhibit collegiality when working with other faculty members.

Colvin explains why empathy is critical in medicine, service industries, and teamwork. He gives examples to show the value already accorded interpersonal skills by the U. S. Military. A chapter is devoted to empathy lessons from combat, describing innovative training methods developed by the military. Research on teams in business, sports, and elsewhere shows that the quality of social interactions within a team and with others can determine its success or failure.

Rather than attempt to predict the future capabilities of computers, Colvin seeks to identify roles that we will always want to be filled by humans. We want to follow human leaders. We want humans to identify problems and goals for us. We want to negotiate important agreements with humans. Most importantly, we want

humans to make decisions about values and be accountable.

There are few specific recommendations for the classroom, but Colvin's research suggests that the best use of our time together with our students in person is for tasks involving social interaction. Basic content can be learned online. Students need to learn to communicate, listen, negotiate, and collaborate. We can use class time to help students formulate good problems and solve them in teams. Colvin argues that education in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics needs to include training in social interaction, collaboration, and leadership, and concludes:

“... the meaning of great performance has changed. It used to be that you had to be good at being machinelike. Now, increasingly, you have to be good at being a person.”

Undoubtedly Colvin is exaggerating for effect the past value of being machinelike. Yet his arguments for the importance of empathy highlight the vital role it plays, not only in the classroom, but in all aspects of modern life.