[Dev Bootcamp](#) is known for its unique Engineering Empathy curriculum, which focuses on the human side of software development. [Dev Bootcamp](#) aims to produce job-ready graduates, with both technical and interpersonal skills. But what exactly is Engineering Empathy? And why do coding bootcamp students need it? We spoke to Dev Bootcamp NYC mental health counselor and Engineering Empathy facilitator, Sarah Birdsong, about imposter syndrome, stereotype threat, allyship, and why soft skills are key to being a successful developer, technical employee and manager.

What's your background and experience as a therapist?
I'm a licensed mental health counsellor. I specialized in multicultural counseling at Columbia University. The term "multicultural counseling" is a little outdated, but the idea is that if we can understand ourselves as *biased identity* beings – as racial beings and gendered beings – and understand the assumptions and biases we hold as a result of our cultural experiences and identity experiences, we're better able to work with people from a wide range of backgrounds. If we come into a situation with no biases or assumptions, we're left with this pure curiosity, and are able to work with people from a lot of different experiences.

How did you get involved with Dev Bootcamp?
I'm drawn to Dev Bootcamp for the same reason I'm drawn to therapy: the workspace is a missed opportunity for self-processing, self-development, and self-actualization. We spend all this time at work, and if we're having interpersonal conflicts, battling difficult team dynamics, or struggling with regulating our own emotions in the workplace, we often try to ignore the effect it

is having on us internally. That's devastating to creativity, productivity, retention, and burnout, but from a personal stance it's such an opportunity for self growth. I wanted to work as a therapist and soft skills educator in a workplace, or in a startup setting, so I get both at Dev Bootcamp.

Why do coding bootcamp students need a counselor on site?
A coding bootcamp is such an intense experience. It brings a lot to the surface, which is a great opportunity for students to better understand how to regulate emotions, and communicate effectively. There is a lot of confusion when you're looking for the solutions to each coding problem, and that can be a petrie dish for self doubt, insecurity and intrapersonal conflict, all of which can distract from the goal of learning.

Also, a lot of students are used to being very good at what they do. They are either career changers coming out of a career they have mastered, or they are used to being at the top of their class. At Dev Bootcamp, they're novices again as adults, which is very, very difficult because it's hard on the ego.

Dev Bootcamp looks and feels a lot like a tech startup, and if you can learn how to regulate your emotions, work on a team, and communicate effectively while you're learning something very complicated, then you are equipped to practice that in the workplace.

Is there a stereotype of developers today as being unempathetic or hard to work with?
The stereotype of the past was a developer who was so engrossed in code that it was hard to communicate with them. So to be a developer who can regulate their emotions, work well on teams, work well in pairs, and also communicate to non technical partners, is a huge asset. They're not becoming inundated with frustration or intrapersonal problems, and they're able to hear all the ideas in the room, even if they're coming from non-technical staff.

But there are also studies that find developers are disproportionately introverted, which makes sense because technology is their opportunity to be creative without having to be as social. But as more and more companies have open layouts, emphasize pairing, and rely on collaboration, soft skills and self care for introverts are becoming more and more important.

In your experience with tons of Dev Bootcamp students, have you found that there is one specific type of person who is successful in a coding bootcamp?
I've come to understand that anyone can learn how to code. The challenge is the fight with the ego, with expectations of yourself. People have thoughts like "maybe I can't learn this, maybe I shouldn't be here," which are really devastating and exhausting. I'm starting to lose any belief in "learning styles;" it's more about self care, focus, practice, patience, communication, and asking for help. If you can do those things, coding is a skill you can master with persistence, community support, and mentorship.

What is Engineering Empathy?
Dev Bootcamp's founder, Shereef Bishay, started the company by developing a technical curriculum. Then he went to a bunch of Silicon Valley hiring managers, and asked them what they look for when hiring junior devs. Across the board they said **soft skills**. They said "we can continue to teach the tech when we hire them, that's not a problem – it's the soft skills."

Developing your soft skills can improve your metacognitive learning and it also improves your marketability as an employee, your creativity, productivity, and communication in the workplace. Realizing the benefits of soft skills training in tandem with the technical training, Shereef tapped his brother, who had a background in this, and they put together the original Engineering Empathy curriculum.

We now have this really brilliant curriculum, that each facilitator in each Dev Bootcamp campus can hone to their campus culture. I was given the freedom to make it what the New York campus needed, which I really appreciated, because I think San Francisco has a fundamentally different culture, compared with New York, Chicago, Seattle, Austin, and San Diego. The aim is for Dev Bootcamp graduates to go into their next job as skilled, confident, empathetic employees and influence those companies to become more accessible and inclusive of developers from diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

What soft skills can students expect to learn through Engineering Empathy and how are those skills useful for developers?
Number one is communication, which is a multi-faceted soft skill. It has to do with understanding your own identity, your own assumptions, biases and boundaries, because the person you're communicating with also has a different set of assumptions, biases, and boundaries. It also means understanding how the language you use can have a different impact than you intend for it to have, and to be open to that. That's incredibly helpful for coders who pair or work on teams. It can increase creativity, productivity, and decreases burnout; it makes people more resilient and more cohesive.

We also teach team dynamics – understanding your strengths and needs in a team and understanding what other people's strengths and needs might be and how to interact, and communicate around that. And, we teach leadership skills and resilience. It all speaks directly to productivity and creativity, as far as anything that's in the way of the goal because you're able to iron everything out and hear each other.

How do you teach Engineering Empathy at Dev Bootcamp?
The foundation of EE is the experience of empathy, as a way to understand yourself, understand other people, and connect in that authenticity through cultural differences, communication style differences, and professional experience differences. EE is taught through a combination of clinical lecture and experience. First, I share research, data, and psychological theory around the topics to give context. Then, I will facilitate an experiential component to increase participants' empathy.

How often do you have EE sessions and how long are they?
There is an EE session every week for the first 5 weeks on site, then one more in Phase 3 in anticipation of the students' final project. That last one is an EE session about team dynamics.

What do you discuss in Engineering Empathy sessions?
We discuss experiencing empathy, communicating needs, style, objectives in a pair situation, how to give and receive feedback, the best way to have difficult conversations, how to express your feelings when it could be a conflict, how to communicate non violently, and team dynamics.

We also talk about leadership, workplace boundaries, and personal boundaries and resilience in the context of the power of vulnerability. And we have a very important session about allyship and inclusion.

What is "allyship" all about and why is it important?
One of the goals of the allyship part of EE is to get students to understand that their experience isn't necessarily a shared experience. Each individual's experience is very much informed by their unique identity, and we all have a responsibility to work a little bit harder to have our spaces be more inclusive so diverse voices are heard and supported. Students have graduated with that lens, and have gone on to their places of work, where their managers notice them as being an ally, and now we're teaching EE at those companies.

In general, how do students respond to Engineering Empathy sessions? Are they resistant to it or open to it?
It really depends. A lot students come to Dev Bootcamp *for* the Engineering Empathy. They say "I don't think I could have got through this program without it," or "I knew I needed this, I knew I wanted to develop these skills," or "I wanted to be in a community that valued a holistic self care approach." The students who are hungry for it take advantage of counselling sessions with me; they're reading all the material and really gain an enormous amount from it.

But some folks are only here for the technical training – for them EE is just another thing that happens at Dev Bootcamp. I'll invite them to counselling to have those conversations, to process their hesitation, which can often be fruitful. Many times, the students who had the most hesitation about it coming in leave fully committed to the idea; I've seen so many students leave Dev Bootcamp having grown enormously because of EE. Overall, at any coding bootcamp you're really asking students to challenge themselves to be courageous and vulnerable, which is very new for some folks, but I think subsequently can be incredibly healing and productive for them.

The bootcamp metaphor extends beyond the name of the company. We call this type of educational model a bootcamp because of the rigorous, immersive learning approach that requires complete commitment from the students, and they rely on each other for emotional and technical support. I see them come into the program with a competitive mentality, but they're able to bond with classmates so that it doesn't feel competitive at all anymore.

Imposter Syndrome is such a buzzword right now- what is Imposter Syndrome?
Imposter syndrome was coined following a study of phD students at Harvard, which found that once you get to a very high level of expertise, you realize how much more there is to learn. It's an insecurity that sneaks up on you and can be really overwhelming. It happens in tech all the time because there is so much more to learn. For example, you'll have to inevitably learn a new language for your job. You're constantly learning, and never really feel like a master.

How do you see Imposter Syndrome manifest at Dev Bootcamp?
For Dev Bootcamp students, I can see them feeling like a fraud for calling themselves junior developers because they have never been paid to be one; they haven't been validated doing that work, and so it feels very unfamiliar. For folks who don't feel like they fit the stereotype of a

developer, it's hard to say "I'm a web developer," especially if you aren't a cisgendered white or Asian male.

Imposter Syndrome may be more common in a bootcamp setting because it's a new model of education. The traditional college education model prescribes so many years and so much money to call yourself a professional in your chosen field of study. During the 19 weeks at Dev Bootcamp (a fraction of the time of a traditional four-year university), it is our job to combat any feelings of inadequacy and instill the confidence in our students to take their rightful places as developers out in the workforce..

How do you help students navigate through Imposter Syndrome?
A number of ways. First, I remind them that it's not *their* job to hire them; it's an employer's job to decide if they're a developer or not. We get them to practice telling each other they are developers, and encourage students go to meetups and introduce themselves not as Dev Bootcamp students but as developers.

We also do some reality checking, on the viability of the idea they are a fraud. What's the evidence that you're not a developer? You haven't had a job yet, but you have built a portfolio full of products, and you've gotten through this very rigorous program, which is absolutely more rigorous than almost anything you'll do in the workplace.

Students need the ability to hold that self doubt, to acknowledge the fact that that self doubt is really preventing you from doing work in a field where a lot of people are used to being masters. You have developed things. You've built things, on your own and in teams. You are a developer.

Tell me about the Corporate Engineering Empathy programs you are running?
Dev Bootcamp students graduate with that allyship lens, and go on to their next workplace where managers notice them as being an ally. So those companies who hired our grads contact us to ask "what did that person learn, because all of our staff could really benefit from learning that too." So we designed a corporate allyship EE program. Lateesha Thomas, Dev Bootcamp's Director of Diversity, and I teach it. So far we've taught it at tech companies in NYC and SF. It includes education around precise language, and concepts like oppression, privilege, stereotype threat, microaggressions, small group activities, and really contextualizing it to each organization. And we've been getting great feedback.

How do you think learning about Engineering Empathy distinguishes Dev Bootcamp grads from people who go to other coding bootcamps which don't have that focus?
We know that hiring managers are looking for strong technical and interpersonal skills and the ability to learn quickly. We've also found that the second two skills are marketable, effective, and traditionally lacking. People are becoming more interested in them and valuing them because they are seeing what it does for the bottom line.

Students can demonstrate those skills in job interviews. You can talk about the EE curriculum and give examples of how you reacted when faced with a challenge and became overwhelmed with frustration. Realizing that these skills are necessary for every challenge that a developer has, and seeing the ways in which students grow by practicing those challenges here, is pretty easy to communicate to hiring managers. And the benefits are productivity and creativity.

We teach to the whole person. You're going through this really intense thing and we want you to come out in the end completely whole – greater, bigger, stronger, and with an ability to learn quickly. I think hiring managers can see these qualities.

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