

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

Volume 10, Number 6, 1998-99

A publication of The Professional & Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org).

Listening in the Classroom: A Two-Way Street

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The Story

Several weeks ago on my way home from teaching an evening class, I decided to stop in for ice cream from the local 7/11. The small convenience store was bustling with activity. As I checked out next to a bin of long-stemmed roses, a little girl came skipping in with her father. She wore a pink party dress that twirled and swirled as she bounced with five-year-old energy.

"Mommy would love some flowers, wouldn't she Daddy?" She tugged at her father's sleeve and pointed to the roses.

"Wouldn't she, Daddy?" But the young father was captivated by a newspaper he'd just picked up off the stand.

"Uh- huh," came his supremely distracted reply.

"Don't you think Mommy would love some flowers?" the little girl asked again. But this time her voice trailed off into that void children go to when they know no one is listening.

I left the store, then stood and watched the father through the plate glass windows. Something in the sports section had riveted him: some big game, some team's victory-or loss. But the most tragic loss was happening that very moment as his daughter learned that what

she had to say wasn't important.

I took my ice cream and went home. Yet, over and over again I've imagined what I wish I'd done:

I push open the heavy glass door and walk back into the store. I watch the man for a moment. He's short and slightly chubby, with kind, intense eyes. "Excuse me, sir?" I venture timidly.

He looks up from his newspaper, surprised.

"She was talking to you." I gesture toward his daughter.

Now he's even more surprised, but he's listening.

"She was saying something to you. *Listen* to her. It's the most important thing you'll ever do."

He folds the newspaper and crouches down to better comprehend at five-year-old height.

"Yes, I think you're right," he says, looking straight into his daughter's eyes and touching her shoulder gently. "Mommy would love some flowers."

The Importance of Listening

Pure, undistracted listening is one of the greatest gifts we can give each other as human beings. And refusing to listen can be one of the most damaging. During Victorian times, children who disobeyed were sometimes "put into Coventry." For a prescribed period no one was allowed to listen to them. In interviews with these individuals after they had become adults, many of them said they would rather have endured a physical beating (Dexter & Jordan, 1988). In some primitive societies, if a member of the group seriously violates tribal law, he or she is declared a non-person. All listening is withheld. As a result, the individual ceases to exist in his or her own mind and wanders off to die. The withholding of listening is, in this circumstance, a form of capital punishment (Dexter & Jordan, 1988).

Listening in the Teaching and Learning Setting

In our classrooms and offices the absence of listening is not, perhaps, as emotionally damaging as in the previous examples. However, it still has at its roots the same insidious invalidation. It is disheartening, alienating, and a colossal waste of everyone's time. How can we improve listening in the classroom? How can we encourage students to use good listening skills? How can we listen to our students better? And why should we listen to them?

No one can be *forced* to listen, but listening can be taught. It can be demonstrated through example, and it can be encouraged through the creation of a supportive environment. And listening to our students can be part of revitalizing our own teaching.

I always do a bit of listening instruction at the beginning of each semester. For example, I use the following exercise to demonstrate to students how good attending behavior creates good listening: I ask for two pairs of volunteers. In each pair one student will tell a story and the other will listen. One of the listeners will exhibit good attending behavior, and the other will not.

As the class watches, the first student tells her story. The listener gives good eye contact, faces the speaker and leans slightly toward her, says "oh" or "I see" at appropriate times, and does not become distracted with other activities. Then the second pair of students takes the stage. As the second student tells his story, the listener fidgets, checks her watch, looks around the room, turns away from the speaker, interrupts with unrelated comments, and may even start glancing over her notes. As onlookers, the class members always find that they are much more able to concentrate on the first story than the second one. The first listener can recall the story he listened to, and the second listener cannot. Attending behavior creates good listening.

I make sure to practice good attending behavior when listening to my students as well. I give plenty of eye contact, nod and say "uh-huh," and resist any urges to glance at my watch. This communicates to each student that he or she is being listened to and creates a supportive environment.

Thought speed is estimated to be about 500 words per minute while speech speed is only about 125 words per minute. This means, roughly speaking, that we have about 400 words of extra thinking time during each listening minute (Nichols, 1987). The differential between thought speed and speech speed leaves a lot of time for the mind to wander, and once the mind has wandered it may be difficult to get back to listening. I encourage my students to counteract this by using the extra thought time to mentally summarize the lecture material. In one-on-one communication situations with, for example, one student during office hours, I put this summarizing into practice. I use not only mental summaries, but also verbal paraphrases: "What I hear you saying is..." or "It sounds like you're..." It lets the student know I'm paying attention and avoids potential misunderstandings.

Listening, and processing what has been heard, takes time. Another way to encourage students to be good listeners is to allow them time to think about and process what they have just heard and to become curious about what is coming next. For example, even in large classes, the use of the one-minute paper can be an excellent thinking and processing break (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Carbone, 1998; Harwood, 1996). Ask a couple of simple questions such as the following. 1) What is one main point presented in today's lecture? And 2) What is one question you have about this topic? Students take a moment to write their answers and hand them in. It takes under five minutes and gives students a chance to mull over the material and become clearer about what they are hearing. Formulating a question about the material helps them to anticipate what may be coming next and to become curious about further exploration of the topic.

Listening to our students has benefits for us, too. It can help keep us motivated and inspired and can enliven our teaching. I recently sat in on a lecture in the business department in which the professor used many examples from current student culture -everything from rock bands to clothing trends. It was a class of about 500 students, and I was amazed at both the high level of attendance and the high level of attention. The students were tuned-in to the lecture because the professor had taken the time to listen to them and find out what kinds of examples would be relevant to their lives and interests. In an interview with the professor later, I learned that he has been teaching

for many years and feels he needs to continually listen to his students. The examples and stories he uses in his lectures change as the student culture changes over the years. This helps keep the material alive for him, and for them.

Conclusion

Listening to our students creates a supportive environment in which students feel respected. If students feel respected and valued, they will be less afraid to ask questions, express opinions, and share insights; and they will be more likely to listen to each other during discussions. This is an environment conducive to the enhancement of learning.

It is well worth taking the time to teach students how to improve their listening habits. Let them know about the differential between thought speed and speech speed. Encourage them to do mental summaries of your lecture while you're speaking. Have them act out the storytelling demonstration described above with good and bad attending behavior. Show them how good attending behavior will improve their listening comprehension. Through exercises that teach listening skills and through setting a positive example by practicing good listening ourselves, we can increase listening effectiveness in our classrooms and thereby increase learning.

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