TEACHING: TRUSTING TO LISTEN

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**Abstract**

The paper proposes that listening and trust are key elements for successful teaching and suggests two strategies for improving the listening skills of teachers. To facilitate a growth in understanding, which includes the transformation of information through the learners’ interpretation into knowledge, involves the teacher in a process of listening. Listening is a gift that teachers can offer to students. In the process of listening the teacher is vulnerable and enters into a relation of trust with the student. Without trust the pedagogical relation is closed off to possibilities. Four aspects of deep and intense listening are developed as internal listening, inclusive listening, critical listening and listening for silence. Internal listening is a process of perceiving one's inner world of thoughts and emotions without judgement. Listening inclusively refers to listening for the experience of the other. Listening critically involves examining statements in terms of gender, race, class, cultural and historical location on the premise that context informs all knowledge. The pedagogical relation is enriched when teachers listen deeply to students and it may then be possible for both to begin to hear ‘silence’. Listening for silence enhances the art of questioning. Genuinely posing a question is an extraordinarily powerful experience and asking a question with an attitude of receptivity towards the answer is a rare event.

**Introduction**
Listening is a key element in successful teaching. If teaching is mainly instructing, explaining, showing or advising then the teacher occupies a central position. It is an exercise in talking. But if teaching is facilitating a learning process to enhance students’ opportunities to discover, explore and inquire then a key focus for teaching is listening. Listening for what level students are currently working at, listening for what students’ learning needs are, listening for the context of students’ live, and listening for internal assumptions that may distort our hearing. Carl Rogers once remarked that, “the only learning which significantly influences behavior is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning.”(Rogers, 1980, p.7) Self–appropriated learning involves the transformation of information through the learners’ interpretation into knowledge. Listening is one way that teachers can support students’ process of self-appropriated learning. Self-appropriated learning is a movement from the known to the unknown and having some form of assistance or support in this journey from a teacher is important. This paper explores the notion that deep and intense listening by teachers can provide a safety net of trust for students on their journey of learning and, paradoxically, extending trust to students is crucial to being able to hear their voices. Further, it is suggested that expanding our capacity for listening is also one way that we can maintain our enthusiasm and enjoyment in being teachers. The circular relation between trust and listening is analysed by expounding a particular notion of trust as belief and listening as including what is not said and what might be said. Improving and developing listening skills is then linked to increasing self reflection through the art of questioning.

In promoting listening as a focus of teachers it may be argued that I am assuming certain conditions about the teaching environment which only exist in an ideal setting.
Conditions such as small classes, prepared and interested students and sufficient time (for both teachers and students) to take care and pleasure in the learning process. Whilst economic pressures have made such conditions almost disappear it is still possible to facilitate student learning in less than ideal conditions.
**Trust and listening**

There are numerous ways to define the notion of trust through the various disciplines of politics, sociology and philosophy. Pedagogically trust can be interpreted through all of these frameworks depending on whether the focus is on the educational institutional relationship, or the personal teacher – student relationship or the interaction between these two.

As a political concept trust within democratic societies, tends to be understood through an emphasis on visible and open decision making. This is a form of trust that begins with an assumption that individuals are primarily self–interested and attempts, through rules and regulations, to promote cooperation. Trust is equated with accountability within this model and the focus is on trusting institutional regulations rather than people (Johnson 1993; Hardin, 1998). A political model of trust tends to operate at an implicit level within educational institutions. The assumption is that student and teacher are radically autonomous, in-control agents whose main way of operating is to rationally appraise all factors before coming to a considered and balanced position. This model of individual selves (which is prevalent in modern Western culture) minimises issues of dependency and vulnerability. The need therefore for trust as part of the learning experience between the individual teachers and students tends to disappear. The assumption is that institutional regulations are sufficient for promoting or limiting the learning relationship between staff and students. Accountability of the teacher to the institution (rather than to the student) is deemed sufficient for making sure that trust is
not abused. It is necessary that teachers be held accountable to the institution as a way to counter balance the inequality of power between teachers and students. However, the model of trust as accountability is insufficient for tapping into the creative energy that keeps education alive and interesting as it leaves out the dimensions of receptivity, vulnerability and taking risks which is so crucial to the teacher– student relationship.

A richer sense of trust developed through a philosophical framework can be applied to the pedagogical relationship. This is to believe that people are always doing the best they can under the circumstances and within the constraints of their personal history, and to hold to that belief despite uncertainty, being unable to monitor others’ behaviour or have a complete knowledge about other’s motivations. Pedagogically this notion of trust translates into an assumption by teachers that students’ are willing to learn and are honest in undertaking the tasks set. Students’ also offer trust in their teachers by assuming that teachers’ actions and motivations are for the good of their learning experience. It is also necessary for students to trust that the sense of confusion that, almost always, accompanies the inner movement from not knowing to knowing will eventually be resolved. This notion of trust assumes that what is important is our own integrity (as teachers and as students) and that is never put at risk by offering trust to others. This is the position taken by Ghandi when he states that: ‘Nobody has ever lost anything by trusting people. Those who betray the trust put in them always lose something precious in spite of gaining millions. We lose something only if our soul is stained’ (cited in Koehn 1998, p.93).

Trust in this sense cannot be defined through prescriptions or regulations nor can
universal rules be applied for determining when to trust and when not to trust other people. But, amongst the many ways there are of behaving there is a family resemblance that allows us to recognise and group certain behaviours and actions together around the term ‘trust’. We recognise trust in particular moments and particular actions and one particular action that may promote a relation of trust between two people is listening.

**Ways of listening**

There are many ways to listen and much to listen for when teaching. But as a minimum, in facilitating learning two ways of listening deeply and intensely are set out below as inclusive and critical listening. Listening inclusively refers to listening for the experience of the other even when it is not actively spoken, whilst listening critically involves examining statements through theoretical categories such as gender, race, class, cultural and historical location on the premise that context informs all knowledge.

Martin Buber (1947) develops a concept of ‘inclusion’ as ‘experiencing from the other side’, that is, to be able to live through a common event, such as learning together, from the standpoint of others. Inclusion is not the same as empathy, which is the power of projecting oneself into (and so comprehending) another self or object. Empathy involves transposing oneself over and into the other and thereby losing the sense of difference. The characteristics of inclusion are:

… first, a relation, of no matter what kind, between two persons, second, an event experienced by them in common, in which at least one of them actively participates, and
third, the fact that this one person, without forfeiting anything of the felt reality of his
activity, at the same time lives through the common event from the standpoint of the
other (Buber 1947, p.96).

As a teacher listening inclusively I begin with a recognition that I am in a relationship
with my students. Placing the relationship as central moves teaching from assumptions
of separation to assumptions of connection. It moves knowledge from the objectivist
model to the position that all knowledge is always personal (Polanyi, 1962). Listening
inclusively focuses teaching and learning on the event of education which is
experienced in common, by two or more people. But, there is a third participant in this
process of education, the subject matter. Placing the subject, whether it is sociology or
physics, as an event experienced by those who come to learn and those who facilitate
learning helps to keep knowledge alive and active. There is always something new and
interesting that I, as a teacher, can learn from the event of physics or sociology. The
common event of learning about physics or sociology is experienced differently by the
teachers who must consider their perspective, informed by a wealth of knowledge and
experience, and include the standpoint of the student.

Inclusive listening by a teacher involves experiencing and confirming the authenticity of
the students in all their concrete and particular differences. It is to recognise that people
have different perceptions of the world but to continue always in the effort to
communicate and to understand the other’s perspective. At the same time differences are
taken seriously. Listening inclusively as a teacher is to feel the tug of students’ meaning.
It is not to agree or to disagree (both are possible) rather it means being completely open
as a teacher and present to the student and willing to communicate ones’ knowledge to
the other as fully as possible.

To confirm someone as a person by listening to them is also a twofold process of
accepting what is said at this moment and moving towards the potential of what could
or might be said, it is to listen for the unsaid. Carl Rogers’ describes this as:

… I have to ask myself, can I hear the sounds and sense, the shape, of this other
person’s inner world? Can I resonate to what he is saying, can I let it echo back and
forth in me, so deeply that I sense the meanings he is afraid of yet would like to
communicate, as well as those meanings he knows? (Rogers 1961, p.227).

Whilst Rogers (1961) is speaking from his therapeutic experience part of the role of
inclusive listening as a teacher is to try to sense students’ meaning when they are at the
stage of exploring their own inner understanding. At times this may involve the teacher
resonating to the students hesitantly expressed words and feeding back to them possible
shapes that may fit. It is also to listen for what students do not express as the potential
for what they could reach. So for example, listening inclusively is to sometimes confirm
someone’s potential for understanding even when they do not trust in themselves. As a
teacher, facilitating the learning process, I often believe more in my students’ potential
for improvement then they do, but it is their trust in my belief that empowers them to
realise their potential. It is not only my belief in their potential that makes the difference
but their willingness to trust that belief that gives them sufficient security to stay in the
learning process. Listening inclusively is to be willing to wait in a space of not–
knowing so that we may begin to resonate with other voices and to recover new meanings deep within the experience of being together.

Listening critically involves discriminating between better and worse accounts rather than holding all positions as equally plausible. It involves examining statements in terms of gender, race, class, cultural and historical location and so forth on the premise that context informs all statements. Any description needs to include both the event observed and the circumstances surrounding the observation since to change the environment is to change the outcome. Part of listening critically is to struggle to bring the context, content and a creative discernment together in an effort to determine ‘good enough reasons’. Such reasons are always context dependent and cannot therefore be generalised outside of a particular situation. Determining ‘good enough reasons’ involves questioning what constitutes a ‘good reason’ and why this is deemed a valid ground. Listening critically is to develop the art of posing questions.

Genuinely posing a question is extraordinarily powerful. Asking a question because one really wants to know, with an attitude of receptivity towards what is being asked, is a rare event. To be able to ask questions is to know something about the boundaries of the question but it is also to say that I do not know. Asking questions can make us pay attention to the everyday through an attitude of wonder. It is to see anew. “Inevitably ‘seeing’ entails a form of inter-subjectivity, an act of imagination, a way of looking that is necessarily in part determined by some private perspective” (Keller 1983, p.150). An example of ‘seeing anew’ from my experience is that of working with international students who have to resubmit essays lacking in any form of critical analysis. Rather
than teaching these students how to structure an argument within a university essay, I put their previous work to one side and begin to explore the subject matter with them. I show my interest in the subject and ask them to explain some of the ideas and what they think about them and how it relates to their lives. The conversations that ensue are genuinely pleasurable for both of us as I listen to their attempts to integrate the knowledge into their own frameworks. After a lengthy conversation we return to the question of how to express some of these issues in the written form of the essay.

Questions direct our attention to the other. Questions allow us to acknowledge the differences of others and to reach out across those differences. Questioning opens up that private perspective and moves it to the level of public examination. Asking questions is risky and it is even more risky to commit to being questioned by others. Paying attention to the quality of the question calls forth greater potential for connection with the other. Listening critically does not engage in questioning that is endless thus constantly deferring commitment and action.

**Two strategies for improving our listening skills as teachers**

Learning to listen for the internal monologue that so often obscures our critical and inclusive listening is one strategy for improving our capacity as teachers to facilitate students’ learning. In some ways this internal listening is similar to the notion of meditation. Bohm (1996) describes a meditative state as being able to “… look at yourself without a ‘looker’ or listen to yourself, or other people, without a ‘listener’” (p. 73). Listening internally amplifies this notion of meditation as a process of perceiving one’s inner world of thoughts and emotions without judgement. Kornfield (1994)
describes this process of being totally present without being identified or caught up in the content of the thought as ‘training the puppy’. 

In this way meditation is very much like training a puppy. You put the puppy down and say, ‘Stay.’ Does the puppy listen? It gets up and it runs away. You sit the puppy back down again. ‘Stay.’ And the puppy runs away over and over again. Sometimes the puppy jumps up and runs over and pees in the corner or makes some other mess. Our minds are much the same as the puppy, only they create even bigger messes. In training the mind or the puppy we have to start over and over again (Kornfield 1994, p59). 

As Kornfield (1994) points out, puppies and minds tend not to stay and listen unless they are trained. I would also add that puppies and minds need others to help them with their training. It is a remarkable puppy that can train itself! The act of watching, without judgement, is an opportunity to be totally present in the moment. It is an opportunity to observe without dividing off from the observation. It is the act of judgment that is the naming, for example, of an emotion as appropriate or inappropriate that divides the self into an observer and the observed. This act of watching without judgement can be assisted by posing for ourselves questions about our teaching. Perhaps the first question to ask is, why do I teach? Further questions to consider are: who are my students, how can I find out more about them, what are their needs, how am I asking them to learn, how does my assessment practices assist or hinder their learning? And, in genuinely posing these questions to myself I watch and listen for my inner replies without judgement.
Listening internally, it may also be that I begin to hear the presence of silence. Silence as a presence, is more than an absence of sound; it is the opening of space within the teacher and between teacher and student that allows insight to flow for both. Silence opens the space of possibilities, of questions, of knowing that one does not and sometimes cannot know. In this silence, time and space begin to slow and expand. There is no longer a rush of words between teacher and students or between student and student. There is time and space for slow and careful consideration of others’ words and time to take care and concern over choosing the right word to speak. Speaking with others in the presence of silence makes words resonate with richness. In this slowing down of words, silence enhances the capacity to focus on questioning rather than making statements. For silence expands the moment when attention is stretched between words that give form to meaning.

Such a sense of silence is rare because we live in a world where noise is everywhere and continuous. Noise can give a false impression of security by filling the mind with busyness, thus avoiding the open space of questions. The open quality of silence leaves us with nothing to hang on to and threatens the certainty of our knowledge. For many people silence can be a terrifying experience. To be able to welcome silence into our teaching we must be comfortable with it and this takes practice.

In my experience silence gives a suffusion of strength and joy that wells up from within when listening internally, that reaches out to embrace me when listening inclusively; and that restrains me from absolute certainties when listening critically. Welcoming silence into class discussions and actively acknowledging its presence allows space for
students to actively explore their own learning.

**Conclusion**

Teaching as a process of listening involves students and teachers in a relation of trust that goes beyond being accountable to the institution. It makes explicit that to be involved (as teacher or student) in the activity of education is to trust that those we are in partnership with are doing the best that they can, under the circumstances and within the constraints of their individual histories. Holding this attitude of trust toward students is part of the process of listening to them, inclusively and critically. Holding this attitude of trust towards ourselves, as teachers, helps us to listen internally when we ask questions like, why do I teach? And welcoming and listening for the presence of silence when we teach may sustain our capacity to ask those questions that make us see anew.

**References**


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