

Teachable Moments: Attentive, Deliberate Listening

Too often we hear but do not truly listen. Listening could be the most important habit that learners can develop through practice.



Imagine a classroom where teachers and students acknowledge diverse perspectives, firstly by calmly listening to each other and then by paraphrasing an alternate point of view, where respect is shown to a person speaking as well as to what he/she is trying to say. Sound attractive? Too good to be true? While the above scenario may be uncommon, it is nevertheless true that attentive, deliberate listening can be consciously modeled and taught in the classroom.

Listening is such a fundamental skill for learning although it is seldom directly taught. Being able to listen attentively and understand another person's perspective is one of the highest forms of intelligent behavior as well as a prerequisite for developing empathy toward others. It is arguably one of the most important components of learning.

Attentive listening has been termed by Piaget as "overcoming egocentrism" (Costa & Kallick, 2008). It involves suspending our own values, opinions, judgments, and prejudices to devote our mental energy to someone else, to become invested in their ideas, so we can truly learn from one another. Disagreements will still occur but with more accurate information and a deeper understanding.

Obstacles to Effective Listening

Guiding students into this skill could begin by countering the many unproductive, common thought patterns that block our ability to listen! A few of the unproductive thought patterns enumerated by Costa & Kallick (2009, pp. 42-43) are:

- Rehearsing what WE are going to say instead of truly listening to OTHERS.
- Only paying attention to the ideas with which we agree, filtering out the rest.
- Judging or holding negative labels about others or their ideas, causing our listening to be biased.
- Arguing, countering, disagreeing, and debating with speakers to a point we leave them feeling unheard.

We can help our students recognize and check these patterns and turn their minds to refocus on a speaker's words. They can be guided to monitor what's going on in their own thoughts as they listen (metacognition is further developed in another section of this course). Teachers might lead by asking, "How did you monitor or modify your listening as your partner was speaking? Were you distracted? How did you stay focused?"

Helpful Steps to Effective Listening

On the positive side, Diane Schilling (Forbes Women (Nov. 12, 2012)) lays out ten helpful steps toward effective listening. One of these critical steps is to practice not interrupting others. Schilling points out that children used to be taught that it was rude to interrupt. Unfortunately, in modern society, the opposite is frequently modeled. Loud, aggressive, in-your-face behavior is often condoned, if not encouraged. Educators, however, are in a strategic position to model and guide students to listen patiently without interruption, coaching the quicker thinkers and talkers among them to relax their pace to accommodate slower or more thoughtful communicators.