

Active Listening in Small Groups



Avoid
interrupting
the speaker.

Hold
questions.
Suspend
judgment.

Be curious.
Notice
patterns.

As our students' lives require less attentive listening with cellphone notifications and instant updates, how can we encourage this skill with our classes? We listen with our ears and our eyes, and recognize that deep listening requires both **attention** and **intention**.

As students hold small-group discussions, remind them to

Listen with openness by **suspending judgments**.
Listen with **curiosity**, a desire to learn rather than "fix."
Listen **without asking questions** that **interrupt others**.
Listen for **patterns** and for what is not being said.

Listen with **intention**: what do you intend to learn?

Active Listening: Small Group Activity

"I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully.
Most people never listen." --Ernest Hemingway

Every semester I face a group of students who arrive to class eager with good intentions to learn. Believers in their abilities to multi-task, they keep their earbuds in and their cell phones handy. They are convinced they can listen to the class discussion or lecture while simultaneously texting, tweeting, surfing the internet, and checking facebook updates, all with their choice of background music.

But listening well – actively and deeply – is a challenge. In fact, one of the results of our noisy world, says Julian Treasure in a recent TED Talk, is that we are "losing our listening." Listening is a skill, which requires both *attention* and *intention*, and most of us would agree that many students could use some reinforcement.

Deep listening is a radical act: it starts with our ears—making sense of words as well as of the speaker's tone—and it also involves our eyes, because body language can say a lot. Importantly, though, deep listening requires that we push the MUTE button on our internal commentary. And this last step is probably one of the hardest, because rather than truly *listen* to what another says, we too often merely *hear* a word or an idea that connects with something *we* want to say. The old proverb that states, "We have two ears and one mouth so we can listen twice as much as we speak," would be more accurate if it explained that the reason for two ears and one mouth is that it's twice as hard to listen as it is to talk.

I do the following activity with students several times throughout the semester when I want them to explore specific topics. Before putting them into small groups of 4 or 5, I review the following guidelines:

- Listen with **openness**: suspend your judgments and biases and listen for those things with which you agree as well as those you might challenge;
- Listen with **curiosity**: engage your desire to learn, rather than to try to "fix" anything;
- Listen **without asking questions** that interrupt the speaker: jot down your questions and save them for later;
- Listen for **patterns** and for what is **not being said**; and, finally,
- Listen with **intention**: what do you intend to learn or do with the information you'll learn?

There are only **two rules**:

1. Each person must speak once before anyone can speak a second (or third) time.
2. If someone asks a question, someone else must answer it before another comment can be made.

Step One: Identify a group leader who will make sure the rules are followed.

Step Two: One person begins by saying something about the topic; the others listen attentively and intentionally.

Step Three: Another individual asks a follow up question or comments about what s/he heard.

Repeat Steps Two and Three until everyone has spoken at least twice, or for a specific amount of time.

Step Four: The group leader, with help from the group, summarizes the conversation and identifies any patterns or insights that emerged and developed.

I follow this activity with a reflective journal entry, asking students what surprised them (often it is the difficulty of listening actively) and what new or interesting points/ideas they learned. Nadine Dolby astutely observes in The Chronicle that "There's No Learning When Nobody's Listening." which is why teaching students to listen will help them to succeed in class and also lead them to a deeper engagement with their world.

Additional Resources:

Artze-Vega, Isis. "Active Listening: Seven Ways to Help Students Listen, Not Just Hear." Faculty Focus: Higher Ed Teaching Strategies from Magna Publications. 10/1/2012.

<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/active-listening-seven-ways-to-improve-students-listening-skills/>

Mankell, Henning. "The Art of Listening." The New York Times. Opinion. 12/10/2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/opinion/sunday/in-africa-the-art-of-listening.html? r=0>

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