Volume 23 Issue 39
Originally issued as G9

Global Journal of human-social science: G
Linguistics & Education
Volume 23 Issue 9 Version 1.0 Year 2023
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

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GJHSS-G Classification: JEL: I2

INTENTIONALLISTENINGPRACTICINGAVITALINCLUSIVEBEHAVIOR

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Intentional Listening: Practicing a Vital Inclusive Behavior

Richard F. Bowman

Research interests include how students experience the classroom as a social system and how educators address the social context of the classroom.

Abstract- **In a classroom setting, intentional listening has six distinctive stages: Actively inviting classmates' thoughts and opinions, reflectively considering every aspect of what others say, thanking others for expressing their ideas and beliefs, putting what one has heard in a broader societal context, connecting peers with similar ideas and insights, and identifying the point of intersection between what you have heard and your own intuitions and experiences. In instructional environments, intentional listening takes practice.**

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I. Introduction

Individuals are fully human only in relationship (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1998; Handy, 2019).The philosopher Martin Buber (1958). argued that in the ultimate sense, relationship is what educates. In the co-creation of meaning in academic settings, teaching and learning function as a network of relationships (Fairhurst, 2011). In daily practice, teachers as instructional leaders frame here-and-now global, societal, interpersonal, and academic challenges in ways that invite learners to connect with each other through speaking and listening. In academic environments, *intentional* listening is a simple act that requires learners to be present in the moment. On the playground, three and four-year-olds exhibit that wondrous in-the-moment disposition by engaging in play "as a form of listening and learning" (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998).

II. The Purpose of This Paper

The purpose of this paper is to define and illustrate six distinctive stages of intentional listening in classroom settings: (a) actively inviting classmates' thoughts and opinions, (b) reflectively considering every aspect of what others say, (c) thanking others for expressing their ideas and beliefs, (d) putting what one has heard in a broader societal context, (e) connecting peers with similar ideas and insights, and (f) identifying the point of intersection between what you have heard and your own intuitions and experiences (Helgesen, 2021).

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Intentional Listening is an Instructional Process that Requires Practice

In *A Simpler way,* Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996) argue that "life is an experiment to discover what is possible" (p. 10). Moreover, "life is intent on finding what works, not what's 'right." The capacity to "find what works now is what keeps any organism alive" (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996, p.13). Designing lesson plans related to practicing the six stages of intentional listening involves exploring what works contextually. What works "*there* might not work *here*, because *there* and *here* are never identical; even small differences affect the outcome" (Bowman, 2015). The examples provided below for each of the six stages of intentional listening are illustrative, not prescriptive. In practice, instructional design involves unending trials and errors to discover what is possible, what works, and what surprises.

a) Actively Inviting Classmates' Thoughts and Opinions

In the lengthening shadow of death, the enduring COVID-19 pandemic has exposed deepening societal challenges, including climate change, racial inequality, income disparities, political polarization, declining trust in government, the accelerating pace of technological development, and societal fractures mirrored in violence and dehumanization (Bowman, 2022). Psychologists tell us that people want to belong and be part of a community that creates possibility and humanness in the midst of fear and turmoil (Wheatley, 2017). In preparing students to confront societal fragility in the everydayness of life, inviting and structuring classroom conversations related to daunting societal challenges provides learners "room to assert their humanity and tell us what they are going through" (Zaki, as quoted in Emmert, 2020, p.189). In communities torn apart by fear, hatred, broken health-care systems, refugee crises, and destructive politics, the essence of teaching and learning is *listening to the whispers* of students to create spaces of possibility, sanctuary, and compassion (Helgesen, 2021, p. 50).

b) Reflectively Considering Every Aspect of What Others Say

Executive storyteller Annette Simmons recounts the story of a racing greyhound named Larry who simply did not understand the concept of a leash. The dog did not realize that if he walked around one side of a telephone pole and his owner walked around the other side, they were not going anywhere. In instructional

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environments, effective stories reveal multiple perspectives. From Annette's perspective, "He's my dog, and I'm boss." From the male dog's perspective, "I just need to get to the next tree." (Kleiner, 2019)

Self-knowledge is the blood of all resonant stories. Propulsive narratives create psychological realism prompting listeners to ask, "If I were this character in these circumstances, what would I do?" In an instructional follow-up to the story of Larry and the leash, an educator might pose this question to students in an open-discussion format: "How would you resolve the impasse between the dog and his owner?"

In practice, the dog analogy serves to invite students to develop an *implicit theory* regarding how to resolve disagreements in daily life (Kleiner, 2019). Characteristically, individuals are committed to maintaining their point of view until other people simply give in. In Annette's impasse, she might have chosen to just keep forging ahead to eventually drag Larry to the other side of the pole. Or she might have said: "You know what? Until I back off, he's not going to back off either. If we both back off, then we can go around the pole."

The object lesson for students in developing an implicit theory related to solving seemingly insurmountable disagreements in life might well be: "My goal is no longer one of making you think the way that I do. My goal is to create a psychologically-safe space in which we can speak and listen intentionally to create a more inclusive point of view."

c) *Thanking Others for Expressing Their Ideas and Beliefs*

Storytelling is as old as humanity itself. In the everydayness of life, "stories express how and why life changes" (McKee, 2003, p. 52). In academic settings, "stories are how we remember; we tend to forget lists and bullet points" (McKee). The very heart of being an educator "is a desire to tell a story by making sensory, emotional connections" with students in an empathetic, realistic way (Schultz, 2011, p. 7). Stories have always been about ethics: The philosophical practice of testing and retesting the consequences of one's actions and their effect on others (Kleiner, 2019). Powerful stories like fables and myths tend to take small circles of concern and make them larger circles of moral concern for a wider range of people. In the story of LaShyra Nolen recounted below, her enlarged circle of moral concern mirrored a transcendent question: "Who matters?"

LaShyra Nolen was a second-year medical student at the Harvard Medical School in 2021 when she served as student council president of her class---the first Black woman to hold this leadership position. LaShyra led an advocacy effort to rename one of the five academic societies at Harvard named "Holmes." Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. was a supporter of eugenics and the genocide of Native Americans and also the past medical school dean who expelled the first Black student admitted to the school. Despite his unsettling legacy, the Holmes' name "lingered in the spaces where students learned to become healers and struggled to build community." (Nolen, 2021, p. 13)

In *The Emotional Intelligence of Leaders,* Daniel Goleman (1998) argues that what establishes individuals as natural leaders in a group is to "sense the unstated feelings of everyone in a group and to articulate them for the first time" (p. 24). As a young Black woman, LaShyra "felt uncomfortable with the celebration of Holmes in our learning spaces" (Nolen, 2021, p. 13.) As student council president, LaShyra Nolen's efforts to rename the Holmes' Society at Harvard galvanized appreciative support and deep *gratitude* in the form of over 1000 signatures from students, alumni, faculty, and staff.

d) *Putting What One Has Heard in a Broader Societal Context*

A story is a form of reflection going back centuries to gain deeper, more inclusive perspectives. Storytelling speaks to what makes us human (Bowman, 2018). In the classroom, "everybody has a story, and everybody wants to tell their story in order to connect" (Wheatley, 2005, pp. 218-219). In storytelling, emotion-eliciting input alters learners' brain functioning after only 12 milliseconds—far before students' become consciously aware of it (Reisyan, 2016). Whatever the story, intentional listening requires a demonstrated willingness to listen for differences, to be disturbed, to rethink one's perspective, and to discover what is possible. Stories such those involving the intermittent homeless, for example, have a compelling force in gaining a deeper, more inclusive, more useful point of view (Kleiner, 2019). Crises in students' personal lives including loneliness, depression, and suicidal thoughts highlight the relevance and role of intentional listening in promoting students' emotional and academic well-being (Zaki, 2019). In contrast, not listening creates fragmentation, disconnection, and fear of others (Wheatley). What is disquieting in a humane instructional environment is *silence* regarding life's most profound questions: "Who am I? Who are we? What am I a part of? What connects me to the rest of the world? What relationships matter to me?" (Bressler & Grantham, 2000, p. 161)

e) *Connecting Peers with Similar Ideas and Insights*

Neuroscience research suggests that students are drawn to stories that they think will be emotionally relevant to others in their social group. When students decide that a personal story is worth retelling to classmates or sharing on social media, their attention intensifies and both learning and memory increase (Fabritius & Hagemann, 2017; Bowman, 2018). Intentionally listening to peers' personal stories for

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emergent threads of meaning calls one to the "truth of self and the humanity of others" (Bowman, 2018, p. 5). Tragic accounts related to a catastrophic illness of a friend, a car accident involving classmates, or the suicide of a peer put a human face on stories that evoke both a high level of compassion and a self-creating social coherence. During the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in South Africa, "many of those who testified to the atrocities they had endured under apartheid would speak of being healed by their own testimony" (Wheatley, 2005, p. 218). In that sacred setting, intentional listening permitted participants to receive someone else's pain and learn from it.

f) Identifying the point of intersection between what you have heard and your own intuitions and experiences

Intentional listening is a *retrospective* act that helps learners come to terms with their own experience (Palmer, 2018). Imagine a social studies class studying five distinctive categories of the concept of justice:

- Distributive—determining who gets what
- Procedural—determining how fairly people are treated.
- Retributive—determining how people are treated for wrongdoing.
- Contributive—asserting that everyone has the right to contribute to how society functions.
- Restorative—repairing what is broken and compensating victims for past harm (Winters, 2023).

Imagine that instructor beginning a class period by briefly referencing the five categories of justice noted above. Against the backdrop of those five categories, imagine that the teacher begins the class period by positing: "Systemic racism is a set of systems and structures that advantage the dominant (e.g., white people) and disadvantage other groups" (Winters, 2023, p. 9.) Additionally, the social studies teacher argues that "systemic racism involves one group having the power to enact institutional policies and practices that harm BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color)" (p. 9).

Finally, imagine that the teacher contends that *intentional listening* involving the five categories of justice requires a demonstrated willingness to listen for differences, to be disturbed, to rethink one's perspective, and to discover what is possible. Relatedly, the teacher confronts students with a question likely considered controversial by some in the class: "Should we as individuals and as a society be willing to address past harm as a justice solution by enacting *reparations* for the descendants of former slaves?"

Winters (2023) observes that students' comments, observations, reactions, and insights regarding the issue of reparations might well include:

- "We have to find the courage to learn about our racist history to address past harm. In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis (1942) observed that "courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point" (p. 161).
- "I have to admit I don't know much about our nation's alleged history of racism, and I don't want to offend anyone and be punished for saying the wrong thing."
- "Are discussions about reparations really about alleged white supremacy?
- "Why are we still talking about slavery? That happened a long time ago."
- "This has nothing to do with me. I am not responsible for what my ancestors did. My ancestors were Irish immigrants and they experienced racism, but we don't keep dwelling on it."
- "In another of our classes, we are studying Adam Smith's concept of *mutual advantage* as the foundation of capitalism and a free and fair market system. Is there a mutual advantage for everyone in enacting a legislative policy that financially atones for past transactions against its Black population? Who is harmed or who benefits from reparations?"

III. Conclusion

In instructional environments, an intentional-listening culture is grounded in *human connection* (Bowman, 2014). In practice, intentional listening supports a shift in self-perception that allows learners to see themselves in relation to others. In a psychologically-safe setting, class discussions related to issues such as poverty, intermittent homelessness, climate change, and community-police relations compel students to calibrate their inner moral compass: What do I believe in? What do I stand for? What matters? Who matters? What is decency? What are the core values that guide my daily life? What do we owe one another? (Handy, 2019).A body of research suggests that in influential institutions educators create an intentional-listening culture that evokes a sense of common purpose, belonging, emotional engagement, and a shared vision in which learners' best ideas and insights surface spontaneously (Bowman, 2020; Mehta & Fine, 2019; Edmondson, (2018).

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