

# The Art of Listening

In 1985, when I first came to New England, I had been teaching English for 20 years. Within the accepted practice of the time, I had reason to believe I was a successful teacher: I built my classes around discussion, and I saw to it that those discussions were lively, that every student participated, and that most of them saw the “relevance” of all our reading and writing. In those days, I never entered a classroom without knowing my goals, without knowing what I wanted the students to understand by the end of the period. I thought carefully about the steps by which I would bring my charges from point A to point B or C or D. I thought of myself as a coach, but in fact I was a pretty good example of Teacher-as-Choreographer. The students did the dance, but I controlled the music and the steps they took. My job, from my perspective (and from the perspective of the schools in which I taught) was to bring the students into *my* relationship with the literature we studied. In that scenario, I was active and my students, though lively, were passive—“little pitchers”<sup>1</sup> into which I poured all my bright ideas.

One of the hardest things about learning to teach is learning to listen. It's also one of the most essential.

An essay by  
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A teacher-framed, teacher-centered classroom, I have come to realize, may be well intended, but it misses the point: to deliver information is not necessarily to build knowledge or understanding. Over the years, what I've learned from experience has been supplemented and supported by research going all the way back to Piaget and Dewey. My present practice is based on several fundamental insights:

Learning is a personal journey, guided by each individual's unique way of thinking, and colored by each individual's unique perspective.

When we understand something, we *own* it, and the pleasure of ownership is visceral—not merely intellectual.

The ideas that are dearest to us, that become internalized and useful, are the ones we have struggled personally to build.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

## A Student Once More

In 1985, mid-career, I came east to go to Harvard. The year was an awakening for me; it initiated a profound shift in my understanding of *what it means to be a teacher*. Working with Eleanor Duckworth, in a course titled “Teaching and Learning,” I began to redefine my role in the classroom. My practice moved from a teacher-centered pedagogy to a student-centered pedagogy.

By the time I left Harvard to resume the responsibilities of my own classroom, I still had a lot to learn, but I knew this: I had to sit down with my students and begin to *listen*. And when I did that, when I began to practice a listening pedagogy, the level of student engagement in my classes changed dramatically; my students became self-directed, active learners. And they began to feel a pride of ownership.

We came into Eleanor's class from widely varied backgrounds. We were teachers and we were administrators. Many of us were seasoned veterans, and some were in their very first year of teaching. We took the course for a variety of reasons, but we had this in common: we were interested in the link between teaching and learning. We were interested in *how* people learn, and we wanted to refine our own teaching skills, or, as administrators, we wanted to help others become more effective teachers.

We were a large class, maybe 40 people, and we all came with our own private goals and brought with us our own histories and experience. All this variety became fundamental to the collaborative work we did. Eleanor did no lecturing, but she did do a lot of role modeling. The course was structured around a series of experiences that encouraged meta-cognition. We learned to observe carefully; we learned to ask (no matter how “trivial”) the questions that emerged from our observations; and we experienced the *thrill*—I can think of no better word—of constructing our own understanding.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*

## Watching the Moon

Our most dramatic assignment required that we watch the moon for an entire semester. (I assure you that at first there were complaints about the assignment. Who ever came to Harvard to look at the moon?) Every day we recorded our sightings and shaped questions. It was astonishing to discover how pitifully little most of us knew about the moon.

At first our questions were simple: *When does the moon rise? Where does it rise? Wait, does it rise in a different place sometimes? Why was it still in the sky this morning at 8:45? How does that happen?* We drew pictures in our journals; we reflected in writing on what we saw. And then we brought our jottings to class, sharing observations, sharing information, and sharing our confusions. We worked together. Eleanor listened.

Her utterances were invariably inquisitive and open-ended and completely nonjudgmental; she was singularly focused on understanding the meaning *we* were making. Her focus seemed to be on *how* we were building our understanding rather than on *what* we understood. *I wonder if you could say more about that*, she might say. Or, *I'm curious about what you see happening here*.



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Over the course of our first semester, my classmates and I experienced a change: our observations of the moon became more subtle and our questions became very much more complicated, more sophisticated. And while our understanding of the moon deepened, so did our appreciation of how we, ourselves learned.

One night, late into our second term, I came into class with a question about the rotations of the moon as it revolves around the Earth. Eleanor brought me—and my question—to the front of the room. She let me explain the problem. I drew pictures on the board, thinking out loud. She and the class listened hard; I could feel them listening. I can't tell you how affirming such listening is. And then, when I seemed to hit a wall, a dead-end in my process, Eleanor asked, *Would it help if you used this flashlight and this orange*, and before long, I was the sun and a classmate was the Earth, and another classmate rotated the orange as he revolved around the "Earth." I was directing the action out of my own body of understanding, and I could feel myself moving toward a solution.

It took time. It felt like a few minutes to me, but it must have been much longer because Eleanor, sensing that I was on the brink and knowing that learning is a series of "flights and perchings,"<sup>2</sup> put her hand on my shoulder and asked me if I'd like to let it rest a little.

I went back to my desk in the far rear of the darkened room and pulled out a notebook in which I began to draw, still noodling the problem. I could feel that my solution was imminent; I could *feel* it. One of my classmates, sitting in the dark on the floor next to me, whispered urgently that he knew

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<sup>2</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Chapter 9: "The Stream of Thought".

the answer to my question. He could tell me. And he began to explain. He wanted to be helpful, but resentment and self-protection rushed up inside me: here was a robber entering my house. He would steal from me an understanding that in a minute or two, by my own efforts, would be mine. I was desperate. I leaned down and hissed into his face: “Shut up!” And he did.

I began then, for the first time in my life, to solve a problem by laying out an algebraic formula (I don’t know where that impulse came from), and as I constructed the formula, the pieces fell, breathtakingly, into place. It was an “aha” moment. I knew, perhaps, for the first time, the euphoria of *discovery*.

I walked home that night with the knowledge that there would be a fundamental change in my teaching.

## A Teacher’s Task

I joined the faculty at Phillips Exeter Academy immediately following my year with Eleanor. I found at Exeter a school culture that valued student-centered, discussion-based teaching. Let me say here that all discussion-based classes are *not* student-centered; witness my own early teaching—students talked a lot, but I saw to it that they talked in the “right” directions. And people teach out of who they are, so there was—and still is—much variation in how the discussion-based classroom is conducted at Exeter. But what was going on in the English department when I joined the faculty seemed a particularly good fit with what I wanted my teaching to become.

The Harkness table is the first thing a visitor notices, and I can’t overstate its importance to the tone and conduct of the class. The students and their teacher sit down as equals. The table itself reminds us that this is collegial work, and its great smooth plane physically connects us; we look directly into each other’s faces, engaged in mutual investigation. The physical fact of the table seems to encourage and facilitate collaboration. I am at eye level, not above them, not apart from them. I am face to face, and I am listening. I try to do nothing that will take the attention off the students and their investigations. I do not even stand to use the board (though sometimes *they* use the board). A visitor to my class might get (and sometimes *does* get) the impression that I am doing nothing. But appearances are deceiving.

My students and I may sit as equals, but our jobs are not the same. My job is to present the students with a challenge that will suitably engage them and push them toward their own “horizons of understanding.”<sup>3</sup> In English that means assigning readings, for instance, that are not merely age appropriate but will also pique the students’ curiosity and give them something with which to wrestle intellectually and emotionally: *Julius Caesar*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Hamlet*, a poem by Auden or Plath or Simic or Komunyakaa. In a listening pedagogy, the teacher thinks carefully about each challenge he offers his students. It is a delicate decision, based on a close (and fallible) reading of the evolving skills and interests and needs of each group of students. And it is a crucial decision because the essential dynamic in the classroom is centered there, in each student’s engagement with the text.

The teacher’s task, then, is to listen to that dynamic, to be an informed and open-minded witness to her student’s explorations—and to be genuinely interested. In English, as in every other discipline, each student comes to the assigned problem with his own store of knowledge and experience. Ninth graders will read *Julius Caesar* with a very different perspective than seniors do. So we let the students lead the way. They make the observations; they raise the questions. When the teacher is focused on *how* the student is making meaning, the student is empowered to explore those issues that capture her imagination. The students can feel the teacher’s respect for their ideas; their learning environment is nurturing and safe, and the emphasis is on their own thinking process: an “answer” is merely one solution to a problem, one result of a thoughtful process.

The students come into class having prepared individually, but once seated at the table, they work collectively. Last winter, for instance, my ninth graders prepared Faulkner’s “Barn Burning” for discussion. At home, they read the story and used their journals to record observations and to raise questions they would bring to class. Meanwhile, I prepared by rereading the story, refreshing my memory on detail and structure so that my ears would be freshly tuned to the day’s discussion. The table is also my workplace, so I am usually sitting there when the students arrive. That was the case on this particular day.

Eric and Tom are the first to enter. Before they even sit down, one asks the other, *What is wrong with this Abner guy? Is he a pyromaniac?* They laugh, but they have opened up a possibility. By the time

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<sup>3</sup> Shay Mayer, conversation October, 2005 in reference to classroom observations relevant to her dissertation, *Analyzing Agency and Authority in the Discourse of Six High School English Classrooms*, Harvard University, 2006.

every seat is filled, the initial questions—addressed to each other—have transformed into observations. Abner is clearly the center of the story they read. They want to know what makes him act the way he does, and they begin to gather details: *Look here*, Mitch says, *he strikes his son without emotion*. Mitch reads the passage, notices the language. His classmates are listening hard. I am listening, too. This is a dance of their own making. *Yeah, he hits Sarty just like he hits his mule*. They turn to that page and compare the language of the two passages.

Together they have defined their project: to make sense of Abner Snopes. And because it's their project, they are engaged in its progress. *He doesn't seem quite human*, Rebecca observes, *He's always described as dark and flat, like a silhouette and expressionless. Where is that?* Tom asks. There is more flipping of pages, more reading from the text. Ella leans forward: *I'm thinking about those little fires he builds whenever they're camping*, she says. *Do you think they're related to his coldness?* Before long, several classmates agree that Abner is terrified of his own emotion and keeps it tamped down—like those little fires. They talk about how controlling he is, how cold-blooded. And then Lilly asks, *Do you guys think he's envious?* And she reads a line in which the narrator tells us that Abner is envious.

Toward the end of class, several students have suggested that Abner Snopes is a man outside society who lives by his own rules. By the time they leave the room they have serious concerns about his humanity; they still have questions they want to pursue. They'll be back. And since it is *their* project, they'll be prepared.

## A Listening Pedagogy

In my old, teacher-centered classroom, I would have been the one posing all these content-oriented questions; I would have been calling their attention to the details of the text. My assumption would have been that the students' interests were the same as mine, and I would have been badly mistaken.

Sarty is the character who catches *my* interest in this story. Why wouldn't he catch theirs as well? He's young, they're young. In my early practice, I would have come into class with questions and passages ear-marked so that we could have a thorough discussion of the character of Abner's *son*. I would have given them *my* reading of the story and I would have missed theirs altogether.

So where was I in this, most recent, discussion of "Barn Burning"? I was there, of course: I had work to do. I was trying to listen to them in the way that Eleanor had listened to me: I was inquiring into their *thinking*. My remarks may have sounded something like this: *Pyromaniac? What makes you think so?* Or, *Can you say more about those small fires?* Or, *Help me understand what you mean by "emotionless."* I was giving them time, too, and the freedom to slip into silence. My students and I are comfortable with silence. Often, a classmate's luminous remark will send us all searching, noodling in the dark. Perching before the next flight.

When I'm working well, I speak maybe four times in a 50-minute period—and I try to make those remarks brief. Such teaching requires continual self-discipline: I will admit that my own enthusiasms are sometimes hard to contain. My interests and interpretations—my understanding—continually threaten to burst into the open. Put another way: my ego is always ready to get between the students and their explorations—*like a robber breaking in upon their thoughts*. I must be vigilant. To practice a pedagogy of critical exploration, a *listening pedagogy*, the teacher must be ready to stand out of the way.

The important story is the one constructed out of the relationship between each student and the work at hand. If you listen closely, you can hear it being built. ●

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