

# *Listening Works:*

## *The Essential Tool for Holistic Teaching and Learning*

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### **Abstract**

This university classroom story illustrates the importance of overcoming our own fears as educators to truly listen to our students. In doing so, this professor discovered that empowering her students to listen enabled them to find connection through difficult conversations.

**Keywords:** *listening, listening circle, holistic education, communication*

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We were in the homestretch, with only four weeks left in the semester. By this point, the 25 university students in the listening class had formed strong bonds and were comfortable with each other. Throughout the course, there had been many opportunities for self-disclosure and connection, leading to lively discussions. During one such spirited discussion, someone blurted out the word “abortion.” *WOOOOSH!* The energy in the room instantly shifted. I could feel the group veering into a different, potentially scary direction.

“Whoa!” I quickly intervened to steer us back on course. This wasn't the planned topic, nor was I prepared to delve into it.

I wasn't sure how we got there, but there we were. Now what?

For the past decade, I have been teaching listening courses at Kean University (KU) and Montclair

State University (MSU) in New Jersey, in the New York metropolitan area. My classes reflect a diverse mix—ethnically, academically, economically, and in age—creating an environment filled with varied experiences and unique perspectives.

After 15 years of teaching Interpersonal Communication and public speaking-focused Introduction to Communication courses, it finally hit me: I barely touched on a critical element of effective communication. I taught my students the importance of self-awareness, understanding others, managing emotions, and maintaining relationships. However, I overlooked the most crucial tool for connecting with others—listening. My focus had been on teaching the value of expressing yourself in ways that make others listen to you. I had yet to entirely emphasize the power of listening to understand and connect with others. Through listening, students and educators can truly

learn about themselves and each other. Furthermore, listening-focused communicators tend to have more holistic perspectives, making them more effective speakers. It turns out that most of us don't think about listening. We assume that if we can hear, we can listen. However, listening is a skill. The good news is that it's a skill we can develop with education and practice. In my listening courses, we spend an entire semester developing listening skills. We explore listening barriers, styles, and tendencies. Our focus extends to becoming self and socially aware and developing the ability to manage oneself and relationships. Armed with emotional intelligence, students are encouraged to approach interactions with a listening focus rather than a speaking focus.

Of course, we discuss strategies and techniques for having difficult conversations. Then, I send them into the world to practice these conversations independently. Logistically, it's challenging to simulate difficult discussions in the classroom. We meet for just an hour and fifteen minutes twice a week, and with 25 students, recognizing and managing everyone's emotions in an intense conversation is complex. I was standing in front of my listening class, trying to figure out how to proceed. So, I asked them, "Is this a topic that you want to discuss?" The consensus seemed to be, "Yes." "Okay, let me think about it," I responded. "For now, let's continue with today's topic, and I will get back to you about whether or not we will have an in-class discussion on abortion."

There were many reasons why I wanted to avoid bringing up this topic in class. It's highly sensitive and could provoke strong emotions in the participants. Ensuring everyone's emotional safety would be challenging with limited time and a large group. Plus, the group's diverse perspectives meant opinions would vary widely, making it challenging

to manage passionate expressions. This could be a disaster. I was scared.

Yet, there was one compelling reason why we had to have this discussion in our class. If students couldn't engage in a civilized, challenging conversation after a semester of honing their listening skills, what is the purpose of a listening class? What hope do we have for those not trained in listening to have civil discourse? It's interesting how many people quickly grasp the purpose of a public speaking course—learning to articulate and deliver messages effectively. Yet, the importance of enhancing one's ability to listen and understand someone else's message often isn't as obvious.

My objective here is to explain and partially justify the purpose of listening courses. Since holistic educators must use their keen listening skills to understand and adapt to their students, and holistic education centers on connection to the world, I am assuming that readers appreciate the value and need for people to be competent listeners. I aim to share the context for my decision to give my students the space to engage in a challenging conversation. We constantly stress the importance of listening. Children are told to listen to adults, romantic partners ask to be heard, and society urges us to listen to each other. Yet, despite these demands, few are rarely taught how to listen effectively. We acknowledge the need for societal listening but seldom provide the support necessary to empower people to listen.

We need to have difficult conversations. Listening is challenging under normal circumstances. Consider your ability to listen to others' stories, needs, and complaints. How can we expect people to effectively listen during difficult conversations if we find them challenging? The ones where we hear things that we don't want to hear. Or we must listen to opinions that we don't share. Frankly, I

think that listening is hard. I also believe that good listening is crucial to all our relationships and the well-being of our global society. That is why I had to face my fears and discomforts and help my students have this difficult conversation.

Coincidentally, that evening, I was scheduled to participate in a virtual listening circle with members of the International Listening Association. Throughout the day, I had been grappling with how to approach the situation in my class. The listening circle provided an invaluable opportunity to seek advice from a group of international members on the risks and benefits of discussing this topic in class and strategies to prepare effectively. This group is committed to advancing the practice, training, and research of listening. They provided me with the confidence and tools to move forward.

I returned to my class and disclosed my concerns regarding this endeavor. I informed them that if we had 100% interest in having this conversation, I would revise the final weeks of class to focus on preparing for this challenging conversation. This meant that I would provide the guidelines regarding how to prepare, and they would be responsible for the preparation and execution of the conversation. The students could respond to the query anonymously and were given various ways to participate or opt out. Every single student wanted to be a part of this. I stressed the importance of preparing for difficult conversations for the next few weeks. I led the group in various exercises that helped them increase their openness to each other, enabled them to practice expressing themselves effectively, and introduced them to various listening structures. Ultimately, they had to choose which structure they wanted to use for their conversation. They also had to create the guidelines and rules for the event. They decided that the discussion should be within a listening circle. When I suggested that we break the group

up into circles of 4-5 participants, they said that they wanted to remain as a group of 25—they wanted to be able to listen to everyone. They knew that meant they would have minimal individual speaking time and much listening time.

The Listening Circle Day arrived, and the group was excited to begin. The giant circle was formed, and all the parameters were shared. The first young woman began by informing us that this was a complex topic because she came to the table as someone who had been trying to get pregnant for the past five years. We then heard from someone whose perspective was informed by the fact that they were the child of a 16-year-old mother. We also heard about participants who brought religious views to the discussion. And someone whose views had evolved after having children. One student commented that being an adopted child influenced their views. The stories and sharing were intense and varied. Everyone was focused and respectful for over an hour. At the end of the session, I saw a group of students huddled around the young woman who had shared her desire to get pregnant. They were embracing her. She was in tears. I reached out to her, “Are you okay?”

“I feel so loved,” she replied.

A group of diverse people with different opinions on a highly sensitive topic came together to share their views. It is beautiful that listening enables people to connect across a topic that can bring animosity and anger. Feeling heard resulted in feeling loved.

I hope you recognize the many elements of holistic education present throughout this story. Notice the focus on the individual’s needs and abilities, the importance of building connections, and the value of learning within a meaningful and relevant context.

Most importantly, I hope you see the significance and effectiveness of teaching and learning listening skills. We all have the potential to become better listeners.

At a time when listening to the news and knowing the turmoil our world is facing, watching my students listen to each other gives me hope.

Listening is central to holistic education: we all learn when we listen to our students and teach them to listen.

Perhaps, in the future, there won't be a need to explain to anyone the purpose of a listening course.

### **Author Bio**

**Sandra Bodin Lerner:** My 11th-grade trigonometry teacher's response to my question, "Why do I need trigonometry?" propelled me toward becoming an instructional designer and informs my work as a communication coach and principal at Be Compelling! Without any evidence, she claimed that trigonometry was "good for you." My grades strongly disproved that notion. My work with students and clients focuses on making learning meaningful and relevant. This philosophy has shaped my role as the founding Director of Exhibits & Education at the Hudson Valley Children's Museum, my work as an adjunct professor at Kean University and Montclair State University, and my career training groups and individuals from the corporate, educational, and nonprofit sectors. I have an MA from New York University in Instructional Media & Technology and a BA in Child Socialization from Binghamton University, State University of New York.