

Plan for MC 300 Collaborative Study, Spring 2018

Listening to Multiple Contexts: Connecting the Embodied with the Social

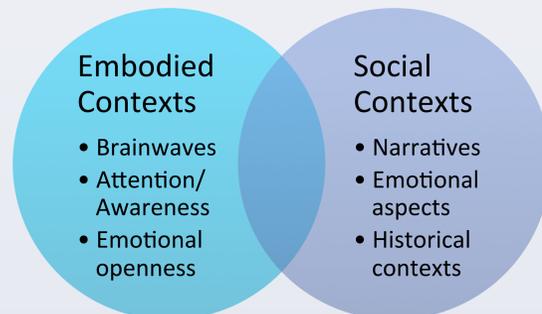
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Abstract

Most educators would probably agree that an important aspect of students' education – in addition to gaining knowledge of the multitude of social issues that exist – is for those students to learn how to listen deeply to the marginalized voices that face these social issues. The ability to listen, however, requires an understanding of social contexts and embodied contexts. This two-credit MC 300 collaborative study will use an interdisciplinary approach to teach both. Students will learn about the complex social contexts that exist during listening, including the difficulties that some marginalized voices have in being heard. They will also learn about the embodied contexts involved in listening, including how one's brainwave activity, physiological, and psychological states act as additional mediators during listening. Students will be encouraged to adopt a responsible, reciprocal, self-aware, and empathetic stance in relationship to both sets of contexts, culminating in a multimedia project informed by listening. They will also teach and work with younger students (either high school or junior high school students), in creating a similar, smaller project. In the process, they will apply and model this deep listening for these younger students.



Barriers to/Harmful Forms Listening

James Madison students, as participants in an academic institution, should be aware of the ways that academics have used a version of listening in ways that were harmful to marginalized voices. For instance, intellectuals have attempted to listen to research participants – or subjects, rather – without interrogating their own historicity (Spivak 296). This lack of reflecting on one's own positionality is even more harmful when intellectuals then strip away the complexity of another person's perspective by molding it into a more familiar linear or binary framework. Often times, this occurs when words that have no English equivalent but are still translated as though they do (Said; Mignolo 11). If a listener does not reflect on their own positionality, including their past narratives about other people, they will remain unconscious as to how these contexts are filtering the voices talking in the present moment. This kind of communication is especially harmful the narratives used to filter another person's narrative contain limiting threads of systemic racist, sexist, or homophobic narratives.

Another harmful consequence that can result from listening is for the listener to adopt the belief that identity is singular. This is extremely problematic for marginalized groups that may be seen as having a one true "authentic self," a belief that belittles their many intersecting identities (Royster 562). This traditionalist view of identity also tends to privilege commonalities in a group and across different groups, and "differences are often glossed over or erased" (Ratcliffe 32). Such approaches to listening are often connected to a belief that the true self of a marginalized group lies only in some fixed time in the past. Trying to fix a person or group in the past, again, belittles and ignores the way that identities constantly shift in response to history and change. As Stuart Hall argues, "Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised [sic] past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (225).

Barriers to/Harmful Forms Listening (Cont'd.)

Research in psychology and neuroscience can enrich our understanding of barriers to deep listening. Psychologists Brown, Ryan, and Creswell, for instance, discuss the ways in which "phenomena can remain hidden from conscious awareness because they represent threats to the self-concept or to aspects of self that are ego-invested" (213). Students tend to have emotional attachments to existing identities and unsurprisingly, emotional resistance to perspectives that challenge these identities (Brown et al.). Neuroscientific research helps us understand the role that fear plays narrowing and externalizing a student's focus (Siegel 78). Such a physiological state is not conducive to listening empathetically to another person's perspective.

Deep Listening

Listening to another person's perspective is a complex process. From the brief literature review above, we can see that it requires an understanding of diverse historical contexts, as well as interrogating one's underlying ontological beliefs about identity (e.g., as singular or plural). Listening also occurs within an embodied context; listeners have brains and bodies that mediate their understanding and representations of other people's experiences. Attachment to reconceived narratives, fear, or even stress can constrain one's ability to engage in two deep kinds of listening: strategic contemplation and tacking in/ tacking out.

The first form of deep listening, strategic contemplation is listening deeply, reflexively, and multisensibly [sic]" (loc. 332). This concept, put forward in *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*, assumes the inseparability of emotion and logic; the embodied aspects of our experience are intricately tied to our perceptions. Thus, we have a responsibility to learn to listen to our own embodied experiences as a necessary precursor to listening to another person's perspective. The second form of listening, tacking in and out, is a matter of practicing different levels of awareness. Tacking in can be likened to looking up close at something, as in using a microscope. Tacking out can be likened to looking at something from a distance, as in looking at the earth from outer space (loc. 36). Tacking in and out, then, is a very specific method of listening that prevents one from getting stuck in any particular vantage point while encouraging them to listen to multiple dimensions of someone's experience.

Proposal and Objectives

I am planning an MC 300: Collaborative Study course, "Listening to Multiple Contexts: Connecting the Embodied with the Social," for spring semester, 2018. This course will present an interdisciplinary approach to teaching deep forms of listening. This course will include a community engagement element; James Madison students will have the opportunity to collaborate with a group of students (potentially a group of eighth graders from the local Gardner Academy). In this class, students will be encouraged to:

- identify some key ways that marginalized voices have difficulty being heard
- recognize the complexity and multiplicity of identities, and why it is important to do so
- understand the way that one's state of mind – including their brainwave patterns – mediates their ability to see and empathize with a different person's perspective
- Recognize and articulate the intersections between one's personal, embodied practices (e.g., habits of mind, emotional responses, etc.) and the many social contexts of which they are a part
- learn key communication and mindfulness practices that can foster a state of mind conducive to deep listening (i.e., strategic contemplation and tacking in/ tacking out)
- practice responsibility in being aware of one's emotional and narrative contexts
- apply these deep kinds of listening with various groups
- document their journey of developing deeper listening skills through a media project
- model and teach these deep kinds of listening to a group of younger students, while guiding them to do the same

Research Questions

- In what ways does an interdisciplinary approach that draws from rhetorical, communications, psychological, and neurological perspectives support students' practice of "strategic contemplation" and "tacking in/tacking out"?
- Can this interdisciplinary approach help students' recognize and articulate connections between the embodied dimensions of their lives (e.g., emotion, habitual ways of paying attention, etc.) and the social contexts in which they live?
- In what ways can these deep listening practices effect meaningful social change in the local community?

An Interdisciplinary Approach to Listening



Teaching Approach and Research Methodology

I will use Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's discussion of backward design to anchor my pedagogy. This approach (see figure below) seeks to connect classroom activities to the larger gains sought for each unit. It also asks instructors to identify successful curriculum: how will you know when learning has occurred? In addition to using backward design, I will also seek to do pre and post assessments (Bass). This approach will help ensure that my teaching responds to each students' unique context.



In assessing student's learning, I will also draw from Mansilla and Duraising's "Targeted Assessment of Students' Interdisciplinary Work. The authors offer three criteria for assessing student work: "be well grounded in the disciplines...; show critical awareness (...the work is mindful of the purpose and means by which the disciplines have been brought together as well as the limitations of the contributing disciplines and integration in light of the aim of the work; [and] advance student understanding (the work demonstrates that the student has developed a new model, perspective, insight, or solution that could only have been possible by integrating more than one disciplinary lens)" (223). This last assessment tool, especially, informs one of my class objectives: "Recognize and articulate the intersections between one's personal, embodied practices (e.g., habits of mind, emotional responses, etc.) and the many social contexts of which they are a part." Students, in reaching these objectives, will learn both the value of interdisciplinary approaches, but also how disciplines have common genres, discourses, methodologies, etc. that create both affordances and limitations.

This course is simultaneously a research study with community engagement. I will continue to utilize the support from the Center for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement. I will also draw from a methodology that acknowledges and responds to the fact that "community-based research "messy;" unpredictable, mutable, contingent, serendipitous, complex, and challenging" (Walton and Zraly 46). I will constantly engage in methodological reflexivity. In essence, I will seek to practice the same deep kinds of listening that I will be encouraging students to do. In fact, I see my modeling this kind of responsive, tuned-in listening as absolutely critical to my pedagogy.

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Contact

I highly value feedback and interdisciplinary conversations, as they teach me new ways of looking and understanding. If you would like to talk, or if you have any questions about my research, please shoot me an email: erinschaefer9@gmail.com