Abstract

Research in psychology and neuroscience can enrich our understanding of barriers to deep listening. Psychologists Brown, Ryan, and Creswell, for instance, depict a scenario 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-involved” (213). Students tend to have emotional attachments to existing identities and unthinkingly, emotional resistance to perspectives that challenge these identities (Brown et al.). Neuroscience helps us understand the role that fear plays in neurologically and externally and externalizing a student’s focus (Siegel 78). Such a physiological state is not conducive to learning empathetically 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 recontextualized narratives, fear, or even stress can constrain one’s ability to engage in deep two kinds of listening: strategic contemplation and listening in and out.

The first form of deep listening, strategic contemplation is listening deeply, reflectively, and multi-sensory (Siegel 78). 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 deep listening, backed in Freire’s (2018), 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. 16). Tacking in and out then, is a very specific method of listening that permits one from getting stuck in any particular viewpoint 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 critical approach to teaching deep listening. This course will include a community engagement component: students will work in collaboration with a group of students (potentially a group of eight graders from the local Gardner Academy). In this class, students will be encouraged to:

- Identify some key ways in which one’s embodied experiences have difficulty being heard
- Recognize the complexity and multiplicity of identities, and why it is important to do so
- Understand the notion 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 interactions 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
- Use these kinds of listening to deepen their ability to listen (i.e., strategic contemplation and tacking in and out)
- Practice responsibility in being aware of one’s own embodied experience

In assessing student’s learning, I will also draw from Mansilla and Duran’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 in light of the aims of the work; [and] advance student understanding” (The work demonstrates that the student has developed a novel model, perspective, insight, or solution that could only have been possible by integrating more than one interdisciplinary “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 researching these objectives, will learn both the variety of interdisciplinary approaches, as well as 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 respects to the fact that “there is no ‘voice’ in social research” (inseparable, untranslatable, mutable, contingent, serendipitous, complex, and challenging) (Walters and Zaloty 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.

Barriers to/Harmful Forms Listening (Cont’d)

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 (Royer 562). This traditional view of identity also tends to privilege commonalities in a group and across different groups, obscuring differences that are often overlooked or “rapidly categorize” (Ratcliffe 32). Such approaches to listening are often connected to a belief that the truth of such a marginalized group lies only in some fixed time in the past. Trying to fit a person in the past, group, and identities and ignore 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. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation.

Embodied Contexts

- Brainwaves
- Attention/ Awareness
- Emotional openness

Social Contexts

- Narratives
- Emotional aspects
- Historical contexts

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 melding 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 did (see 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 their past narratives about other people, they will remain unconscious as to how these contexts are filtering the voices talking in the present moment.

Social Contexts

- Narratives
- Emotional aspects
- Historical contexts


Research Questions

- In what ways does an interdisciplinary approach that draws from rhetorical, communications, psychological, and neurologological perspectives support students’ practice of “strategic contemplation” and “tacking in and out”?
- Can this interdisciplinary approach help students’ recognize and articulate interactions between the embodied dimensions of others’ (e.g., emotion, habitual ways of paying attention, etc.) and the social contexts of which they are a part?
- In what ways can these deep listening practices effect meaningful social change in the local community?

An Interdisciplinary Approach to Listening

I will use Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe’s discussion of backward design and my pedagogical models. 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 post and pre assessments (Barriers to/Harmful Forms Listening). This will help ensure that my teaching responds to each students’ unique context.

Teaching Approach and Research Methodology

I have been an enormous privilege to be an Interdisciplinary Inquiry and Teaching Fellow. I’ve gained such as sense of community from working with the other fellows and meeting with James Madison faculty. I am particularly grateful for Colleen Tremont and the work and care she put into facilitating our learning. She has mentored me in so many ways.

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

Works Cited