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# Active Listening for the Classroom An Important Motivational Strategy

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Have you thought about the communication experiences you provide for your students and colleagues? Listening skills are critical in shaping the teaching and learning relationship. The passing on of information, knowledge, ideas, beliefs, skills, suggestions and aspirations are fundamental to that relationship. Why then do we tend to assume that our students can communicate at a level that is in some way commensurate with their general ability and experience? Like most skills, listening skills are developed through experience. We must be making such assumptions as we rarely seem to spend time outside primary education teaching children and young people how to communicate, how to listen to, and take turns with others through the development of positive communication etiquette.

It can be argued that children and young people today have less opportunity to develop a relevant emotional vocabulary outside that learned from the (often Americanised) media. Communication with machines often supplants communication with other people and for many children, real emotional experiences are achieved via DVDs, computer games or virtual reality based experiences. Lacking the vocabulary they may turn to the use of expletives to express emotional states and yet deny they are

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using expletives as they know what they were thinking. Amongst young people, individual words are taking on global meanings. The word 'gay' which once meant "happy" and then later to denote a homosexual, is now thrown around in a wide variety of contexts, many having nothing to do with either of those two meanings. Students talk about that lesson being gay, that bag is gay and that idea is gay. Add to this the new language that is growing (Cn U spk Txt?), which is almost entirely functional rather than descriptive and the potential for improving this situation does not seem to be offering much hope for the future.

For the staff who work with children and adults it has never been more important to be able to listen to their students and teach their students how to reciprocate in a meaningful way. Listening involves many skills other than those connected with hearing someone speak. Students need to know and be able to see that their teacher is interested in what they are saying. This makes helps students feel relevant, cared about and emotionally connected to their school or college. Research has shown that developing a sense of belonging or connection is an important component in developing the student's motivation to learn.

Too often teachers try to combine listening to students whilst carrying out other tasks. It doesn't really matter whether you are a good multitasker or not, and most are not as good as they think they are, it is essential that the student can see that you have enough regard for him or her to give undivided attention to what they wish to say. It is easy to perform routine tasks while listening to students but the messages you are given can make this an extremely negative experience. Often you lose the whole event of the non verbal communication taking place. We have all seen students answer a question where the mouth has pronounced "yes" whilst the eyes say "no". How do know what is being communicated if you are not using a significant communication tool, your eyes. Equally you cannot provide the nonverbal feedback which such communication events require. In many ways it is similar to covering your mouth when talking to someone who needs to lip read.

When you are in a situation in which communication is a necessary activity, try to follow three basic rules.

- Listen with your ears, your eyes and your mind.
- Seek to let the other know that you are interested, involved an attentive
- Maintain the discussion on what the other wants to say and don't hijack it for your own use.

If we can adopt this model of communication with our peers we can be more effective in both meeting our students' needs and in modelling and developing effective communication skills in them.

In fact, at times teachers are evaluated for their multitasking ability; however, unless you appear to be completely focused on the student speaking to you, he is apt to think you care neither about what he is saying or him. Consequently, in addition to really listening to students, we must also *show* we are really listening.

An effective way to demonstrate your attentiveness is to use *active listening* technique:

- For gaining self-understanding,
- For improving relationships,
- For making people feel understood,
- For making people feel cared about,
- For the ease with which it is learned.

By using active listening with students, you build the relationship of trust and caring essential to students' motivation to learn.

*By teaching active listening, you help students overcome poor listening habits such as:*

"Turning a speaker off and dwelling on the plethora of internal distractions we all have.

Letting an early remark of a speaker, with which one disagrees, develop a prejudice which clouds or puts a stop to any further listening.

Allowing personal characteristics of the speaker or his poor delivery to prevent understanding."

Since these poor listening habits interfere with classroom learning as well as interpersonal communication, learning active listening, specifically, the *feedback* step, may also improve students' study skills. In the *feedback* step the listener summarizes or paraphrases the speaker's literal and implied message. For example, in the following dialog, Para provides feedback to a student by guessing the student's implied message and then asking for conformation.

*Student: I don't like this school as much as my old one. People are not very nice.*

*Para: You are unhappy at this school?*

*Student: Yeah. I haven't made any good friends. No one includes me.*

*Para: You feel left out here?*

*Student: Yeah. I wish I knew more people."*

Although some people recommend giving feedback with a statement rather than a question, the objective remains the same--to clarify either the factual and/or emotional content of the message. By refining the listener's interpretation of his statements, the speaker gains greater insight about his own feelings, he may reap benefits of a catharsis, and he knows the listener is really paying attention to him. The listener improves his ability to focus on a speaker and to think about implied meanings.

- Active Listening
- Steps and Instructions
- Active Listening Steps

Although the feedback step is at the heart of active listening, to be effective, each of the following steps must taken:

- Look at the person, and suspend other things you are doing.
- Listen not merely to the words, but the feeling content.
- Be sincerely interested in what the other person is talking about.
- Restate what the person said.
- Ask clarification questions once in a while.
- Be aware of your own feelings and strong opinions.
- If you have to state your views, say them only after you have listened.

These steps, quoted from The Self Transformation Series, Issue no. 13, are simple; however, becoming skilled in active listening requires considerable practice after the purpose and steps are thoroughly explained and examples are analyzed.

Performing the steps effectively depends on skill in giving appropriate feedback and sending appropriate verbal and non-verbal signals.

#### *Verbal Signals*

- 'I'm listening' cues
- Disclosures
- Validating Statements
- Statements of Support
- Reflection/mirroring Statements

#### *Non-Verbal Signals*

- Good eye contact
- Facial expressions
- Body language
- Silence
- Touching<sup>2</sup>

Because most of us are occasionally guilty of sending messages that interfere with communication it should be especially helpful to review Gordon's 12 Roadblocks to Communication.

### The Art of Active Listening

Most humans, unless impaired in some way, can hear fairly well. Fewer, however, really know how to listen. Listening describes a more active phase of hearing. Good communication and understanding are made possible by active listening. Active listening is both an art and a skill. It is something to be appreciated, but it doesn't come without some practice.

### Active Listening Techniques

These techniques show others that you are paying attention to them and are interested in what they are saying.

It is very important to use "I" messages in a support group to convey one's feelings to the entire group. If feelings aren't expressed, they are often disguised behind the group. "I" messages also provide a preventative focus in that they keep undesirable behaviors in check or they can insure that some things don't happen or get carried away. The use of "I" messages may also provide a soft mechanism for confrontation and correction in that "I" is perceived as being softer than "you".

This produces less defensiveness except when the "I" message is misused-"I think you're stupid."

"I" messages may be used in various situations, such as when dealing with things that detract from the group process. For example, something to say to a person who interrupts is, "I know you have a lot to say but I need to let Bill finish..." A second situation in which an "I" message may be effective would be when stopping or slowing the advice addict. When this person says, "You should, must or ought," reply with "it sounds like you have certainly had some experience in this area but I think we need to let Mary decide for herself what she needs to do." Finally, a third situation in which an "I" message may be conducive is when confronting an error and disagreeing. Examples are, "Joe, I'm wondering if you could tell us how much you have thought that out?" or "I'm having real trouble with Joe's last statement. How do others feel?"

Once using "I" messages, the advantages will be clearly seen. First, "I" messages foster honest communication which is modelled by the facilitator for others to follow. An "I" message also helps to soften emotions, tension, and conflict that is bound to arise. It also reduces defensiveness and better prepares the recipient for criticism or feedback. A third important advantage is that "I" messages allow the facilitator or group leader to maintain control or impose direction, which is the facilitator's responsibility.