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Cover Page Footnote

Roben Torosyan is former Founding Director of the University Writing Center and Lecturer at New School University, NYC, and is now Senior Consultant with leadingprinciples.com. He has facilitated workshops for some 2,200 participants at universities such as Columbia and NYU, and organizations such as Somnia, Inc. Contact Roben at roben@leadingprinciples.com.

Listening: Beyond Telling to “Being” What We Want To Teach

Roben Torosyan

We must be the change we wish to see.

—(Gandhi Institute scr. 1)

I want to offer readers what I have found to be the single most powerful classroom practice for encouraging deep listening and understanding and a way to explore misunderstandings as they occur “live” while teaching. In our culture of sensational sound bites and polarized arguments in the popular media, we see few actions and behaviors that aim at self-reflection and open-minded communication. Given this, I was pleasantly surprised in the weeks after 9/11 when I noticed fellow New Yorkers shoving each other less in the subway. People generally treated each other more gently than usual. Some friends even discussed international affairs more than before. Eventually, however, there was a change, captured by a wry *New Yorker* cartoon that November: one woman says to another, “It’s hard, but slowly I’m getting back to hating everyone” (Kaplan). Such a return to normalcy reflects not only “our difficulty keeping our minds fixed on the sufferings of people who live on the other side of the world” (Nussbaum 12), but a lack of practice in empathy generally, even close to home.

When people disagree, few know how to empathize with or understand, authentically and humbly, beliefs they strongly oppose. Students in particular come to college naturally preoccupied with their own opinions, having had little practice or facility in imagining ones that counter their own (Baxter Magolda). They also come thinking dualistically, in terms of right and wrong answers, seeing issues in black and white, with little nuance and much gross simplification of the complexity of life, almost as a necessity of where they are “at” in their development (Perry). Hence, students exhibit a lack of awareness of their own preconceptions and of multiple points of view. At best, they learn “reflective judgment,” the skill of “holding and defending firm points of view without exhibiting intolerance of other points of view” (King and Kitchener 254). Even such student development rhetoric, however, can privilege arguing over “listening,” and mere “tolerance” of views over actively connecting with the other end of any communication.

Despite these glaring issues in education and society at large, composition and communication curricula and pedagogy traditionally focus on reading and writing more than on the act of empathic reflection. The ability to listen to and fully understand another is rarely taught in classroom discussions, as “the

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dominant trend in our field has been to follow the lead of popular culture and naturalize listening—to assume it is something that everyone does but no one need study” (Ratcliffe 196). Advancing thinking requires that people work regularly to understand genuinely—more than simply assume they understand or, worse, simply not address—others’ ways of framing issues.

The question for me has been how to provide practice, concretely and demonstrably, in such acknowledging of others’ views. Beyond listening, I find that learning and understanding require trust building in which people self-disclose to a degree—discuss mistakes, admit what they don’t know, reflect on their thinking—in order to create a culture that emphasizes learning from experience (Torosyan, “Motivating”). In my, albeit limited, experience in six years of college teaching, I have found such trust-building most effective when the instructor also self-discloses, modeling a kind of “confessional consciousness” that an assiduous learner needs for life. As teachers of communication, we can get beyond merely telling people to listen better and instead actually embody or “be” precisely the kind of self-examining listeners we want our learners to become.

In answer, I propose using the process of “Group Empathy,” which has participants practice active listening with opposing views as they arise spontaneously during discussion. Akin to “sayback” (Elbow and Belanoff), the idea is not necessarily to sympathize, but to empathize, which in Carl Rogers’ definition means “to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person, but without ever losing the ‘as if’ condition” (3). The exercise splits a class into two groups, Pros and Cons, on an issue. Each group expresses its views, but unlike in most “debates,” listeners must paraphrase or say back the other’s points to the other’s satisfaction as follows (for a 90-minute session):

1. **Find a Controversial Topic.** (10-15 mins.) Ask “how many are for” and “how many against” issues like: abortion, death penalty, invading Iraq, gay and lesbian marriage, polygamy, legalizing marijuana, assisted suicide, parental spanking of children, affirmative action, etc. Neutral or undecided participants serve as “observers” of the process, reporting what they notice afterwards. (I usually press for topics until we find one where at least a third is “pro,” another third “con,” and the size is roughly equal.)

2. **Caucus.** (7 mins.) Break people out into groups to hear their members’ reasons (no spokesperson). Observers listen in. (I keep this brief, reminding all that the important part is the process yet to come.)

3. **Share.** (7 mins.) Regroup. Ask all Pros to express their reasons one person at a time.

4. **Listen and Acknowledge.** (10 mins.) Ask Cons to listen and only afterwards “say back” what they heard in their own words (as necessary, I remind people not to contradict, challenge, or interrogate—only acknowledge and ask questions for clarification). Pros correct misunderstandings, and Cons “acknowledge” what they missed until the Pros say they feel heard out and understood.

5. **Pause to Reflect.** (15 mins.) All share a) how they felt during the process, b) what made acknowledging difficult, c) what they noticed, thought, or learned. (I focus reflections on the process as opposed to topic content and call especially on observers.)

6. Repeat Steps 3 and 4. (17 mins.) Cons share opinions; Pros listen and acknowledge.

7. Reflect and Sum Up. (20 mins.) Finally, all note other emotional reactions, methods used to listen to and understand opposing views, and any other insights.

While similar to “structured controversy” (Johnson and Johnson) and “constructive controversy” (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith), this process does not make participants reverse roles and argue the other side’s points. Instead, the focus is on testing whether one has understood someone to the other’s satisfaction, a test that is all too often missing from most communicative contexts where debate usually runs roughshod over dialogue.¹

Letting Our Mistakes Be the Lesson

Often the exercise seems most effective if I am willing to shift my own teaching plan as events unfold “live” during discussion, sometimes admitting my own struggles as they arise. I learned this the hard way when I reviewed a video recording of a Group Empathy session that I taught.² One student (pseudonym John) opposed the whole exercise, complaining, “I feel the whole thing with this—this empathy is—is very *unnatural* and causes more stress than it—it relieves.” The tape revealed that I had not fully attended to his protests, prompting him to object repeatedly.

At the time, students chuckled at John’s outburst. Frustrated, he responded:

Why is everyone laughing at me? I’m trying to be serious and make a serious point. Because when you’re sitting there and we have to suppress our feelings in order to, like, sit there and logically evaluate what they said . . . we, like, we *know* what they said. Like, we both speak English here.

I later realized that because many students share John’s concern that paraphrasing feels too mechanical, I should have explored his point rather than press my own. Instead, I only replied, “You’ve got some responses from people” and moved on quickly to other students’ comments, possibly because I felt the student’s protest threatened my teaching objectives. John then repeatedly raised his hand in protest. My own refusal to deal with a difference of opinion, during a discussion about dealing with difference, distorted the communication even further.

On this issue, Joseph Harris presents Min-Zhan Lu’s case in the following way: “to begin to understand the other we must also question how our own positions in the culture filter what we can see and hear” (167). My position influenced me to selectively direct attention to other comments than John’s resistant one. Only after the fact did I realize I missed an opportunity to use my erring self to illustrate the lesson. As Gandhi observed, “We but mirror the world” (241). When I see things wrong in students, things I want to fix perhaps by

¹ I learned the particular method from my late mentor, Rachel Lauer; once Chief Psychologist of the New York City schools, Lauer used her work in the group dynamics movement to later develop an interdisciplinary educational framework, pedagogy, and curriculum aimed at human development (see also Torosyan, “Applying”).

² All of the quotations of student statements in this essay are transcribed from classroom videotapes.

teaching, I might stop and look at myself first, to see in what ways I may be doing something similarly ill-advised. Gandhi entreats, “As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. . . . We need not wait to see what others do” (241).³ To truly influence change, I may need to demonstrate that I am willing to change.

Returning to John’s protest, had I noticed myself ignoring and deferring John’s assertion, I might have admitted it and said:

Wait, notice how even *I* had difficulty acknowledging John’s point—because it was against something *I* cared about deeply. I wanted you to value empathy, so I worried that acknowledging the point that this suppresses feelings might somehow ruin my position. What a challenge: how can we acknowledge an opposing view *without* necessarily losing our own?

Used this way, John’s comment would not threaten my teaching objectives, but instead only invite critique of my point (thus enhancing students’ critical thinking), and let me put my suggestion into practice (thus modeling empathy during real disagreement). As the Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu instructs, “If you want to lead the people,/you must learn how to follow them” (ch. 66). To me this implies that, ultimately, the more I as a teacher can go with contrary or critical comments, trust my students, dare to slip up and be both learner and authority, the more they may gain courage to do likewise (Torosyan, “Motivating”). Diana Hacker has similarly invited us to embrace Taoist principles, whether we practice nonaction in conferencing with students, watch the timing for teachable moments, or settle for small victories in teaching. To begin, teachers can—as Devon Cook has shown—use their *own* “successful blunders” to get students to take more responsibility for their knowledge construction.

To truly examine my own practice along with my learners means treating learning not as “information” but as “transformation” (Mezirow). In particular, for me to learn from objections to my planned direction, I must teach with an “action orientation” in the spirit of feminist research that values “use of the situation-at-hand” (Fonow and Cook 2). Yet to run class “thinking on your feet” like this can be demanding, at least at first. “The most difficult challenge for the teacher in the open-ended seminar derives from the unpredictability of spontaneous human conversation,” as Donald Finkel describes eloquently in his slim book *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut* (41). In answer, the author recommends that professors tolerate unpredictability; use open-ended, probing questions; and all the while stay with their own sense of surprise and learning anew.

Teaching with such an open mind prompts the challenge, “how might teachers and students grasp what students want without the teacher prescribing what students ‘really’ want or should want?” (Lu and Horner 266). I struggle to push what I think is good for my students. Yet I can tell they are learning precisely when they “dis-identify” from pushing agendas themselves. In the classroom discussion, after another student, Jamie, gave her opinion, Zabeina realized:

I didn’t even *think* about that, and [after the process] I really *valued* what you said and it made me go back to the table and restructure my thinking on the whole situation . . . I was like

³ This is the original text from which this paper’s epigram was later adapted and passed down by his family to the Gandhi Institute, according to Michelle Naef at the Institute.

"Oh, well lemme go back and think more, and think about it."

So you, your point, really got across.

Over time, Zabeina in fact grew gradually clearer in her informal expression and formal composition, possibly thanks in part to this focus on the other's counterpoint.

The structured imposition of "acknowledging" thus avoids the chaos into which "free debate" usually devolves. People eventually learn to *assume miscommunication* as the norm, to presume they have not understood another until the other actually says so. For instance, students often are surprised at how abbreviated the acknowledger's recollections are; they notice what bores or distracts others, as well as when brevity is needed. The speakers or writers then have no choice but to be more direct and pointed if they want their points acknowledged as intended. As they withhold judgment, even if only temporarily, they move from mere arguing and conflict to sharing and negotiating. They also get better at using repeated feedback to improve their clarity of expression. The more students listen to themselves as reflected back by an acknowledger, the more they know, too, what they are themselves trying to say, thus becoming better first editors of their own messages.

Frequently, students create a straw man representation of an opposing view, making it easier to tear down. But, after Group Empathy, they may summarize opposing arguments more effectively, not solely according to preconceptions, but as intended by the opposition. At one point in the classroom discussion, after Zabeina said how helpful it was to rethink her own view, Jamie argued heatedly, "I don't think it helped *me*, because I'm the type where I just wanted to get my point straight *across*, at the time." Zabeina implored, "But wouldn't you rather have your point *valued* and help the other person as opposed to just throw it out there?" This gave pause to Jamie, who eventually replied, "Being that you said it was valued more now, I can take that into consideration, and it could help me in the future. I won't interject so quickly. I learned a lesson." Because Zabeina first showed *she* was willing to reconsider, Jamie was more ready to reconsider in kind.

Over time, empathy can help ease people out of monological dogmatism towards greater attention to otherness and caring for fellow human beings as ends in their own right, more than mere means to win an argument or establish a power relation. I therefore find this activity can build trust most effectively if timed sometime after the course's initial sessions, but within the first third of the semester. Just the act of hearing someone else acknowledge one with care tends to instill mutual respect, as it did between Zabeina and Jamie. Especially when others disagree with one's view, a relationship can grow if both parties demonstrate willingness to put aside their judgments long enough to understand how the other sees things. Thus, if time is devoted especially to the "Pause to Reflect" and "Sum Up" steps, people can better deal with intense feelings they may experience in hearing views that offend them or with which they vehemently disagree.

Of course the paradox is that the exercise also arguably forces otherness to become assimilated. If an "other" is to be respected in its uniqueness, it should not be "relegated to a clearly understood place," but rather, "it must be faced and questioned—to the degree that the person or text maintains its otherness" (Haney 39). The more students actually acknowledge what they are hearing, the more they risk missing anything that cannot be reduced to an acknowledgment or

paraphrase. Before they can grasp this, however, students often experience frustration at losing their argumentative impulse due to the process. At another point in the discussion, students seconded John's complaints. As Jamie said, "Because it was so structured, I had to wait and by the time I waited, it felt like my argument wasn't *worth* saying because she had already proven what she wanted to prove." In effect, Jamie was being required to focus on the other more than on blurting out her point when it hit her. Understandably, however, she regretted the delay in reaction that the procedure forced, as it meant she might lose her nerve. At the time, another student was about to disagree in turn with Jamie, but I asked her to acknowledge Jamie's point. It might have been more productive had I said, "Yes, it's frustrating not to be able to counter the other person; it makes you forget or lose the force of your own point. Can you remember your original response while *restraining* it in order to first understand the other?" One goal of such an intervention would be to expand students' thinking to more than the either/or reduction of "This is either a good or a bad practice." Eventually, they might even realize the inherent philosophical limit of the exercise: when you restate, you always obliterate something of the otherness you are acknowledging (or assuming to "know"). We should resist the tantalizing certainty of a final, "Ah, that's it, *that's* their point" and instead respect what may be ultimately irreducible about the other's meaning.

From Exercise to Live Disagreement among Faculty

Interestingly, faculty participants had a similarly dichotomous disagreement after they tried out the exercise at a conference. I had shortened and adapted the design to fit a forty-five-minute time slot. I simply asked participants to pair up, find an issue on which they genuinely disagree, and then acknowledge each other to their partner's satisfaction—with an observer watching each pair's process. People were very well behaved throughout, acknowledging the other before sharing their own views. After a time, I interrupted their mini-dialogues and brought us back together to examine what happened. Our discussion, however, began to feel to me all too safe and secure. People behaved very professionally and skillfully, suggesting many had possibly already used the method in their own instruction—especially likely given the popularity of sayback.

At one point, however, the discussion dynamic changed radically. It began when one professor noted, "I have my students do this too, and I try and have them do it without writing down what the other person is saying. That way they pay closer attention to the person." Her partner in the exercise disagreed, "Actually, I understand there's research that shows that people who doodle or write while they're listening often pick up *more* than those who don't." Shaking her head in disagreement with him, the first professor said she wants the students to practice being engaged in the moment, to indicate that they are listening. The man countered again, saying that just because they're writing doesn't mean they've disengaged—in fact, they might be more engaged than those who maintain eye contact.

It was perfect. We had a "live" disagreement—only all signs indicated the pair would simply repeat their own points of view "at" each other, or move on without teasing out each other's meaning. So I took a risk and asked, "Could I ask you to acknowledge each other's view here, now, in front of us? I know this

is difficult the way I'm putting you on the spot." Fortunately, miraculously, generously, the two participants agreed to do so.

Peter Elbow was himself a participant in the session, interjecting at this critical point: "This is a fascinating process that's going on right now." To me, what was so fascinating was examining a live dynamic as it evolved in front of us, beyond merely talking about empathy in principle. I wasn't sure asking the two participants to allow us to observe would even be productive, as they might feel like they were putting themselves on the line in an invasive way, or they might easily acknowledge each other's view without yielding anything interesting. I wondered, would they expose a real, if small, conflict in front of us? I hoped so, for, as Dewey claims, "no thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another. When it is told, it is, to the one to whom it is told, another given fact, not an idea" (159). It would help if I weren't simply "telling" my idea of empathy, and instead they would practice it in front of us. I speculated, also, whether they might find that behind their apparent quarrel of opinion might lay a deeper misunderstanding of what each meant in the first place and that their two points might not be mutually exclusive.

As they proceeded, the man tried to acknowledge the woman's point about the value of not writing while listening, but the woman indicated that her original point had not fully been heard. Likewise, the woman then tried to acknowledge the man's differing view in favor of writing while listening, but the man indicated that his view was not being fully understood by her either. We were witnessing at least two complex events: a) two people struggling to understand each other, and doing so in front of a group, but also b) a more admirable degree of actual *engagement* than often occurs between individuals in disagreement. Each may have been hindered, initially, by what Gadamer points to in meaning making: "If a person is trying to understand something, he will not be able to rely from the start on his own chance previous ideas" (238). Thus, our pair's first impulse may have been to assume meanings based on their own prior conceptions of each other's views, while true understanding would require them to be open to learning something new—to be "sensitive" to the "quality of newness" in the thing they are considering (238).

I find it so rare for faculty members like me to actually clarify whether we've understood one another, let alone our students. The very act for many would feel unnatural, until practiced to a point of fluency. It can also make one look unaware or vulnerable, affecting power dynamics adversely for the inquirer. Yet, if we as teachers do not model such inquiry ourselves, how effective can we be at eliciting insight, creating knowledge and meaning, and achieving greater depth and awareness?

Implications: Inevitable Bias, Ambiguity, and Democracy

Without truly empathizing with people day to day, outside of structured exercises, we may not reach our deepest objectives, be they in the classroom or in any communicative context. As Gadamer argues, "The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias" and to let whatever one is trying to understand "assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings" (238). Rather than immediately subject what I hear to my own judgment or assert my view in the foreground, I should be more receptive; I should at least sit with a new understanding and allow

it to work “against” my own view in my mind.

As a teacher, I want to practice what I preach, to be effective in evoking the change I want so dearly to see. I would like to teach less by words and more by lived example. This leads me to ask whether I can accept my inherent *inability* to escape my own bias or even simply to understand certain perspectives. This would require maintaining enough respect to know that, as Vygotsky found, “Direct communication between minds is impossible. . . . Communication can be achieved only in a roundabout way” (150). Despite my best efforts to understand, I must tolerate a core ambiguity in attempting to grasp any other view. Such awareness becomes crucial when dealing with “identity conflicts” where the very attempt to understand another entails a challenge to one’s ethnicity, nationality, or other personal source of identification (Rothman), often creating an impasse that cannot be settled without extensive cycles of missteps and mediation.

Yet my deepest interest in empathy is, in fact, less in its impact exclusively on teaching any subject per se than on a far wider agenda, namely that of creating little democracies in every classroom (Lauer), and, beyond teaching, providing people with skill-building in the dying practice of respect worldwide (Sennett). The problem of listening and understanding is, as Vygotsky observed, not restricted to students: “It is not only the deaf who cannot understand one another but any two people who give a different meaning to the same word or who hold divergent views” (141). One wonders what impact a deep kind of empathy could have at the level of world leadership. If the global potential of such understanding was truly recognized, in conjunction with discoveries from game theory, such as the Prisoner’s Dilemma (Wright) and other win/win, trust-building problem scenarios (Fisher, Ury, and Patton), possibilities for political progress might be unlimited, even in the face of inevitable power dynamics.

Finally, after observing many miscommunications in academe, I wonder whether a new way of “being” as teachers is needed on a grand scale. If the ultimate aim of education is improved self-reflection, understanding, and meaning-making, then we need to move well beyond constructed experiences that merely simulate or model what we want students to learn. As Dewey wisely diagnosed nearly a century ago:

That education is not an affair of “telling” and being told, but an active and constructive process, is a principle almost as generally violated in practice as conceded in theory. Is not this deplorable situation due to the fact that the doctrine is *itself merely told*? It is preached; it is lectured; it is written about. (38, my emphasis)

Rather than do more telling, we arguably need to try “being” differently (Duffy). In this spirit, I hope that others will increasingly use the live goings-on that occur constantly in our classrooms, when people are in a learning mode, particularly when there is genuine disagreement between participants. Such times are arguably the most teachable moments, when learners are keyed in and most engaged with what is going on and, therefore, most ready to consider other ways of thinking and being. ☺

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