

How to Support Teens in Listening by Ricky Knue

□Teens are quick to connect with each other by telling stories and passing along gossip via texting and social media. But students have lost the art of listening face to face by hiding behind the veil of anonymity. They talk at each other (of course, we adults do this too). As a public high school teacher, I clearly see a need for teens to learn to listen intently.

□In fact, few of us in modern society know how to listen. Henning Mankell's recent piece on DailyGood only reiterated today's penchant for incessant white noise chatter. In the African parable retold by Mankell, our two ears and one mouth are a reminder that we are designed to listen twice as much as to speak. Indigenous cultures, in such ways, emphasize the ability to listen, deeply respecting the words, and waiting in silence for wisdom to be verbalized. Within indigenous cultures there are storytellers, elders, and activities, and I wondered why we couldn't do the same in our institutions.

□So on the first day of class, even before I outline the expectations of the class, students fill out a survey about how they recognize their own listening skills by describing body language, listening habits, and preferences. They are asked to reflect on different scenarios from talking with peers, adults in authority, their guardians, and even when approaching strangers (fellow students in classes). They also recount the best conversation they have had within that past week, by sharing the finer points of body language, and how they felt afterwards.

□Then we move on to partner listening training. This is modeled after Rosa Say's management technique of the Daily 5 Minutes, where managers actively seek out their employees and get to know them better personally (family life, struggles, joys, gripes) by offering them five minutes of uninterrupted listening. The Daily 5 Minutes is a management style designed to head off personality conflicts, to be better able to meet the emotional and physical needs of employees, to find out the root of behavior patterns then help align values of human potential within the company.

□I have modified this management technique for my classroom. I've noticed many students remain apart from others in the classes and across campus. Quiet and stillness frightens the average student. Many do not even go outside. They usually travel in tight groups for 'safety', we refer to as cliques. Identifying with cliques is not part of the culture, or values, that I want to nurture in my classes.

□So every day my students arrive, they are asked to seek out someone new to them and sit with them. The students first turn their chairs to face each other, feet flat on the floor, knees facing each other, sitting upright at the edge of the chair, breathing. To me, this is offering the other person your heart. Students must fully turn to each other to begin the process. In the beginning it takes time and there is a lot of resistance. Next, students are

to give each other eye contact. The idea is to offer the other person your true self, the part of you that deeply connects the both of you together. This takes courage.

□By now, the class is squirming and uncomfortable smirks, giggles, and even some scowls cascade through the room. We press on. One person is designated the speaker, the other the listener. Students have a list of possible topics for prompts in case the four minutes have uncomfortable gaps of silence ... remember, the students are learning not only to listen, but to share. The only direction for the speaker is to talk about something of meaning for four minutes (maybe prompted by the list), which may include introducing yourself, what bugs you, your family life, where you want to be in fifteen years (early thirties), plans on how you'll get there, what you like best about school, and so on.

□The listener is directed to close the mouth, remain upright, breathe through the nose, open both ears wide, maintain eye contact, nodding encouragement if necessary. Most importantly however, the listener is directed to practice listening with an empty mind. This means to resist the desire to blurt, to tell their own story, to make judgments about the speaker, or to let the mind wander off into personal plans for the future or rehashing the past. After the initial four minutes are up, the students switch roles for one minute.

□The listener now speaks and recaps what they have heard, as the student who was the speaker maintains eye contact, posture, and nods encouragement. Teens will be teens, so at times there is a small discussion between the two where they are relating to each other (imagine that). Then, for the next five minutes, between the partners, roles are reversed. I know it seems counterintuitive to have a timer on this, but what I have found is even the most timid participant makes it through the process, and there is much more ease and less tension within the classroom. On a deeper level, as days go by, they also learn to remain comfortable in their skin and comfortable in silence.

□As a result, not only do these students feel more at ease when presenting a final project, they also acknowledge each other outside the class room with eye contact and a smile. This is huge in a large, diverse high school. Students also come to learn that they don't need to solve every problem they hear about; they just need to be fully present and inviting. We don't have to blurt whatever comes to mind, nor tell our own story. We begin to empathize with others when they trust us and share their joys and sorrows, dreams and ideas, smiles and quiet times. We begin to understand that listening is a great way to learn about and experience all life, and experience the joy of connection.

□Modern society has very few role models for youngsters to emulate how to remain calm when uncomfortable, so teaching the skills of listening and being present in the moment with an empty mind is something I myself continue to cultivate. Ultimately, as a teacher, all I can do is support them in getting familiar with their own inner space. But hopefully, they will also have the powerful insight I continue to come to: that listening to our own experience 'now' is the most powerful teacher there is.