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Good Writers Need to be Good Listeners, Too.

Marilyn Brooks

How we can use the Writing Process to reinforce listening skills?

Whenever we as parents, we as friends, we as colleagues, we as teachers, talk, we assume that the reciprocal function is happening in our audience—they are, of course, listening. And because we are language arts teachers, we are fully aware of the importance of all communicative functions—reading, writing, listening, and speaking. However, research supports the observation that while all four communicative modalities are important, and all four work together to promote language acquisition, interpersonal and professional relationships, and complete literacy, our curriculum frequently neglects one of our most critical receptive skills—listening. As writing process teachers, we can use listening as a way to improve the conferencing process while reinforcing good listening behaviors in other settings.

According to research, people spend 14% of their daily communication behavior in writing, 16% in speaking, 17% in reading, and 53% in listening (Brydon 80). Many days, the average high school student probably spends more than 53% of his school day being expected to listen. With this number in mind, let's recall the focus of most language arts classrooms. We have extensive curricular emphasis on reading, both in informational and literary texts, and on writing. We occasionally use speaking as a vehicle for varying assignments, and we will often remind students of how to prepare a report, skit, or presentation. Yet little

time is spent in the direct instruction of listening. Listening research suggests that we may be overlooking some serious realities: the average listener retains only half the information s/he has heard immediately after it is said, and after 48 hours, only about one quarter of the information is retained (Brydon 80). While we may assume that we don't need to teach listening because "it's easy to listen," or "if you can read, you can listen," or "everybody knows how to do that," realistically, students need instruction in the process and purposes of listening, and similar to a writer's toolbox, they need a "listener's toolbox" of strategies that will make them more effective in and out of school.

The validity of direct instruction in listening is even more imperative in Michigan in the current educational environment. Two external factors draw our attention to the need to address listening. First, The Michigan Curriculum Framework Content Standards and Benchmarks specifically includes listening as part of an integrated language arts program. For example, Content Standard 3, Meaning and Communication, says specifically in Benchmark 1, "Integrate listening, viewing, speaking, reading, and writing skills for multiple purposes and in varied contexts" (*Michigan Curriculum Framework* 10). Further, Benchmark 5 states, "Employ the most effective strategies to construct meaning while reading, listening to, viewing, or creating texts" (*Framework*, 11). In order to train students to use listening as a way to construct meaning, we must provide instruction and strategies about how we acquire and process infor-

mation in an aural mode. Similarly, if as reading and writing teachers, we believe that students benefit by reflecting on their reading and writing experiences, we must extend that metacognition to listening and speaking as well. Students who examine their listening behavior are better prepared to change that behavior. An integrated curriculum, then, requires attention to all the skills effective communicators use.

The impending extension of that premise should also be apparent. If the new version of the Language Arts MEAP goes online as predicted in 2003, students will be assessed on their listening skills. Listening will be officially validated as part of constructing meaning. While it is conceptually appropriate to include listening as a receptive mode, it is also politically practical to note that what gets tested gets taught. Curriculum specialists, administrators, and legislators all know that testing does impact curriculum, and some argue that such an impact is appropriate and desirable. We'll save the debate for another venue, but it is a realistic consideration to note that now is the time to include listening in our planning for instruction, tasks, and assessment in the classroom.

To begin this instruction, let's take a look at the fundamentals of listening theory. Authors in the field of oral communication may label the steps in the listening process and the purposes for listening using different vocabulary, but conceptually there are predictable patterns for examining our listening behaviors. I choose to use the vocabulary and conceptual framework described in the Objectives for Speaking and Listening generated by the Michigan Department of Education in 1992 (the famous "Lips and Ears" book).

Before we examine the conceptual frame, it is important to make one important vocabulary distinction. There is a difference between hearing and listening. Hearing is the biological process of having sound waves pass through the ear and arrive in the brain. It is an involuntary process. By contrast, listening requires a cognitive processing of those sound waves and is a voluntary process. It is important to remind students that they

hear many sounds; they choose to listen to very few.

Listening can be broken down into six steps which occur so rapidly in succession that they are essentially simultaneous. However, for the sake of examining a process, we will assume that they are indeed discreet steps.

Perceiving and Discriminating

In order to prepare to listen to a sound, the person must first become aware that the sound is occurring, and then separate that sound from the other aural stimuli that are bombarding the ear at any given moment. These processes happen when you are driving your car down the road and become aware of a foreign, inappropriate sound coming from your engine. First, you notice the sound, then you turn off the radio and attempt to zero in on the origin of the sound. Students can often relate to hearing unfamiliar noises in a darkened house when they are babysitting, and will admit that once they have "perceived and discriminated" the sound, it is difficult to ignore it until they have identified its source and explanation.

Attending

The next step requires the listener to focus on the particular sound that caught his/her attention originally. What is that strange sound in the engine? Or, is that the wind or someone tapping on my window pane?

Assigning Meaning

At this stage, the listener takes what s/he already knows about the context for the sound or the message, and matches the new information with what s/he already knows from previous experience and symbolic understanding. So the engine sound starts to remind you of the time your water pump broke. Or the strange sound in the house is really the ice maker in the refrigerator. On a more sophisticated level, a listener may take what the weather forecaster tells him on the nightly news, and check its consistency with previous experience and what he sees out his kitchen

window. In an educational context, assigning meaning requires extending our understanding of both vocabulary and conceptual knowledge as we assimilate more information and attempt to make it our own.

Evaluating

Once the listener has determined what the aural message means, s/he makes a decision on the value of the information. What s/he hears is either important or unimportant, useful or useless, agreeable or offensive, interesting or boring. Based on the individual's assessment of the value of the message, the listener decides to continue or to cease listening. If the history lecture is boring, a student may choose to daydream or plan the after-school activities. If the minister is too dogmatic, the congregation may choose to either mentally debate the content of the sermon, or simply tune out. Information that is perceived to have importance will be retained and transferred to short term, then long term memory. Useless material slips away quickly.

Responding

Once the listener has determined the value of the message, s/he will respond. The response may be overt or covert. Overtly, s/he may nod, frown, raise an eyebrow, ask a question or affirm with a verbal response ("Right on!"). Covertly, the listener may be processing information, connecting old material with new understanding, measuring the position of the speaker with what s/he already believes. In either case, the listener reacts to the message in a manner that sends some sort of feedback to the speaker.

Remembering

If the listener decides the information is important enough to be transferred to short or long term memory, s/he finds an appropriate retention strategy to make that happen. People take notes. Create mental associations of content. Repeat it several times in their heads. Design a mnemonic device to help retain information. There are many

ways to facilitate remembering, and students can usually offer what works for them.

In addition to looking at listening as a sequenced process, it is helpful to talk about WHY we listen. Again, the Michigan Goals and Objectives identifies five purposes for listening. While these purposes may overlap, for the sake of providing a vocabulary for talking about listening, these five purposes are adequately discreet.

We listen to discriminate. Like the first step in the process, we listen to separate sounds from each other. The foreign auto sound. The throbbing of the bass drum in the marching band. The soloist in the concert. Every young mother knows the wail of her child on the playground. Sometimes we listen to distinguish and respond to one particular sound.

We listen to comprehend. When the speaker is providing new information that we need to understand, we listen to comprehend. Students do this all day in class. Prospective retirees do this at retirement planning seminars. Lost drivers do this to figure out directions from a friendly face.

We listen to evaluate. We listen to decide what we agree with and what we don't. We listen to determine what is important and what is not. What is true and what is false. Wise consumers and an informed electorate need to listen to evaluate. Parents facing a barrage of excuses for a missed curfew engage in listening to evaluate.

We listen to be helpful. We listen because the other person needs to talk. The speaker needs to share an experience or an idea. It is important to remind students that often when one listens as a friend or as a counselor, we listen to help the speaker process an event or idea, not because we need to offer advice and "fix" the problem. It's an opportunity to discuss "mirror feedback" which merely reflects back what the listener hears WITHOUT judgment or advice. Carl Rogers offers the phrase, "I think I hear you saying . . ." as a way to

avoid evaluation and encourage the speaker to clarify what she is saying.

We listen to appreciate. Sometimes, we listen just to enjoy. We like Jay Leno as a comedian. We love the Beatles. We love to hear Aunt Marian tell stories about the old days. As children, we loved to listen to the old favorite books at bedtime. As adults, we enjoy a good storyteller, vocalist, or radio program. Garrison Keillor has built a career on our passion for listening to appreciate.

Now that we have established a working vocabulary for discussing listening, how can we integrate this information into our language arts classroom, and specifically, into our use of the writing process? The answer is quite simple. While we train students to participate in effective conferencing and response groups, we can reinforce good listening habits along the way. It's a logical marriage that will benefit both the listener and the writer.

Writer conferencing provides the ideal opportunity to describe and to model good listening behavior. The teacher-student conference is a powerful way to address writers' issues with the struggling writer. But it also allows the teacher the chance to demonstrate what good listening looks like, and how the listener can help the writer clarify ideas and develop strategies for revision. Yet this seemingly obvious and simple task holds potential pitfalls and quicksands if teachers are not aware of the power of their own listening in a teacher-student conference.

Tom Romano reminds us that one foundational truth about a writer's conference is that writers need to talk. ". . . writers need opportunities to talk about their own writing, to elaborate on information, discuss plans, verbalize dilemmas or problems they face. From such talk student writers begin to think critically about what they're saying and how they're saying it" (85). As writers talk, someone needs to listen. Lucy Calkins admits that listening is not a natural, conditioned response. It is intentional. "I used to think listening was easy,

that you just sat there and waited while the other person had a chance to say something, and then you talked. But I have come to realize that listening is the hardest thing I do" (118). Calkins goes on to make an analogy between listening and watching the ball while playing tennis.

"I once thought watching the ball in tennis was easy, too. When I was a kid, my mother used to shout from across the net saying, 'Keep your eye on the ball.' I remember thinking, 'Obviously you watch the ball.' Obviously you listen.

"But the other day on the tennis courts, I watched the ball—and it was an entirely new sensation. I was mesmerized by the ball; watching it come over, as if in slow motion, then the bounce, the climb; then it hung, suspended for an instant. Why was that day different? Because I wasn't apologizing for my bad shots or tidying my hair or pulling my shorts down so I wouldn't look fat or remembering to step into the ball. I wasn't thinking about myself" (118).

**Good teachers teach people,
not just content.**

Of course Calkins' last line is the key. Good listening requires setting aside distractions, even your own compulsion to respond immediately in order to let the writer talk. Romano also reminds us that the purpose of the conference is to help the writer, not prove how smart we are as writing coaches. In order to do that, we have to be willing to make the writer and the writing our focus. "Good listeners recognize the role of the listener in communication" (Osborn 67).

Having acknowledged the need for teachers to be good listeners in the writer's conference, let's extend that vision beyond just the conference setting. Good listeners connect themselves meaningfully with other human beings. This connection fosters respect, trust, and healthy interpersonal relations. Good teachers teach people, not just content. And in order for our budding writers to really grow, they must have a trusting, respectful relationship with the teacher/coach/editor.

People who listen attentively and selflessly lay the groundwork for the kind of honest, meaningful sharing that must happen for anyone (especially a writer) to express ideas openly and without reservation. While trust is critical in any classroom, in an arena as personal as a writers' conference, it is an absolutely essential foundation in the language arts classroom.

So how does our listening conceptual framework help us envision a more successful interaction as writers? First, we need to remind ourselves and our students that listening is a choice. That if we look at the six steps of the listening process, we make a decision to listen at step four—evaluating. We have chosen to “try out” the listening process at step two when we focus our attention. Once we have started to assign meaning, we are making more of a commitment to the process. But at step four, in the evaluation stage, we can choose to give in to distractions because we have found the message uninteresting or unimportant. So Calkins is right. Listening is not easy or automatic. Tom Romano quotes Donald Graves saying that “listening to children is more a deliberate act than a natural one” (100). Therefore, we need to take responsibility for the energy investment that listening requires. It is not politely waiting for the person to stop talking so we can put in our two cents. Osborn and Osborn remind us that good listeners, “. . . focus attention on the message, set aside personal problems when listening, and work to overcome distraction.” (67). Notice all the action verbs in that compound sentence: focus, set aside, work. Sometimes students see peer or group work as merely taking turns talking. They may need to be reminded that listening is WORK.

In addition, that fifth step of the listening process, responding, is a critical one. Romano, Calkins, Graves, in fact any writing guru, will point out that there are a number of appropriate responses to student writing and a number of “shut down” responses that can damage the process. Some of the best suggestions are to:

- listen attentively for content, tone, voice, intent in the piece

- listen attentively for struggle, frustration, celebration in the writer
- ask helpful questions—an art that many teachers need to develop (helpful questions encourage thoughtful responses from the writer)
- resist the temptation to “fix” the piece
- avoid cheap cop-outs like “Wouldn't you like to . . . ?” Such a question sets up the expectation in the student that s/he should do whatever the teacher asked (Romano 100-101).

Writer Anne LaMott describes her response to struggling writers this way:

Mostly what I do is listen, and encourage, and tell people what writing is like for me on a daily basis and what helps me and what doesn't. I tell people all the things I like about their piece—how wonderful the atmosphere is for instance, and the language—and also point out where they got all tangled up in their own process. We—the other students and I—can be like a doctor to whom you take your work for a general checkup. We can give you a place to show up and a little benevolent pressure, which we hope will help you finish stories and sections. We can give you some respect, because we know what it takes.
(153)

However, LaMott makes it clear that the decisions the writer makes after the conference must belong to the writer, not to the writing group. The response that the writer receives in the conference will have a tremendous impact on his/her ability to leave the conference with the information and the independence to return to the piece of writing with renewed insight. Tom Romano summarizes the responsibilities of responding appropriately and meaningfully when he says,

I tout conferencing because it is so immediately human. A written response does not feature an open, helpful, facial expression, eyes that show interest, a human voice repeating a writer's words and asking genuine questions based upon them. Further, the give-and-take of dialog allows us to avoid misunderstanding by clarifying our questions and listening to students' responses. (103)

Good listeners consider and appreciate the important contributions they make to a writer's process.

Looking at the five purposes for listening, we see that they could all be used during meaningful writers' conferences, but a listener should always know WHICH purpose guides any given conversation.

It is feasible that some writers may need to have the listener discriminate as they read. The writer is checking the piece for coherence . . . consistent verb tense, transitions that clarify sequencing, pronoun agreement. Such an intensely focused purpose may be exactly what the writer needs at a particular point in the revision process. It is helpful to the listener if the writer can steer the conference from the beginning by identifying what particular feature of the piece s/he wants the listener to focus on. "Would you please listen to my narrative and see if you can distinguish present events from the flashback that I inserted?" The writer seeks only to see if the listener can distinguish this single important variable.

We often encourage students to listen for comprehension in a first reading of a fresh draft. In fact, most free write or first draft sharings should focus simply on "Do you understand what I'm trying to say?" The appropriate responses should include questions for clarification and pointing out gaps in the movement of the piece. This is a perfectly legitimate use of a conferencing opportunity. However, students need to understand that listening to comprehend is simply an information-pro-

cessing activity and not an evaluative one. In the early stages of responding to a writer's work, in a writer-centered conference, it is important for the writer to know what the reader understood the piece to say. Any evaluative comments should come later in the process, and only when the writer has indicated that s/he wishes to hear the listener's suggestions.

The conference to evaluate is a two-edged sword. First, the listener must be certain that evaluation is part of the writer's agenda. Second, the listener should understand that responsible evaluation requires both compliments and suggestions. If one is seeking the VALUE of the piece (evaluation), writers learn important lessons by identifying what is well-done, keepable, treasured about the writing. Weaknesses in the piece should be discussed when the writer is ready and open to suggestion, and when the listener recognizes that his/her suggestions are only that—ideas for revision. The writing remains the writer's. Unfortunately, too often our educational system and even some of the learning groups we have used in school have fostered a sense among some students that this is their opportunity to "say what they think" and "set somebody straight." It should always be clear from the beginning of the conference whether or not the writer is seeking evaluation. And responsible listeners understand their purpose on any given occasion.

Much of our writers' conferences should be helpful (i.e., therapeutic). They are opportunities for listeners to ask insightful questions that help to lead the writer to a new vision or insight about the piece, while supporting the writer's efforts and encouraging perseverance and enthusiasm. This clearly is the vision of the conference that Romano models in Chapter 7 of his book, *Clearing The Way*. His intent throughout the series of conferences that he has with a student about her poem that recalls her parents' deaths and her reactions is to help her figure out what she wants to say and how she feels about the event. Those caring conversations, where he carefully avoids telling her what she should do, but rather gently guides her with

questions and friendly observations, lead her to a touching, personal, private piece that only she could have written. Surely this is the goal of a helpful listening partner.

Lastly, we should all encourage students to listen simply to appreciate. Celebrations like the read-around format that many writing groups choose offer liberating opportunities for listeners to simply enjoy without the burden of finding clues, asking questions, or offering suggestions. We and our students listen simply to savor pieces of writing. We help students value writing when we provide opportunities to just BASK in their accomplishments.

Clearly then, there are ways that we can reinforce good listening behavior while teaching writing in our integrated language arts curriculum. Because the writing process does encourage students to read and write, but also to speak about and listen to writing, the interdependence of the processes is clear. What we need to do is envision ourselves as guiding students to use all their communication skills intentionally and effectively. Their reciprocal nature can only strengthen our classrooms and our students.

Having explored the academic attributes of fostering good listening habits in the language arts classroom, it may be “dessert” for the reader to consider Ann LaMott’s use of an old Mel Brooks metaphor. The comparison reminds us that to BE a writer, you have to be LISTENING to what goes on in and around you. ‘Listen to your broccoli, and your broccoli will tell you how to eat it,’ Mel Brooks said” (LaMott, 110). LaMott goes on to encourage writers to listen to the little voices inside themselves—the voices that will help the writer decide what a character would do, or what a character would say. She tells writers another word for such “voices” is intuition—trust your intuition is her advice. “You need your broccoli in order to write well. Otherwise, you’re going to sit down in the morning and have only your rational mind to guide you” (111). You may need to nurture your intuition, coax it a bit. But ultimately, she urges us all to listen TO OURSELVES. “So try to calm down, get quiet, breathe, and listen. Squint at the screen in your

head, and if you look, you will see what you are searching for, the details of the story, its direction—maybe not right this minute, but eventually” (113).

Because their ears are open to many opportunities, good writers are good listeners.

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