

LEE KNEFELKAMP

# Listening to Understand

FEATURED TOPIC

I AM TRAINED as a counseling psychologist, and for the past thirty years I have taught courses in counseling theory and practice, intercultural communication, college student development (with emphasis on intellectual, interpersonal, moral, and spiritual development), theories of identity formation (especially with respect to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality), adult learning, ethical issues in the professions and organizations, and the psychological aspects of organizations and organizational change.

The content of such

courses is often challenging and causes students to examine both their own and their peers' attitudes, values, and perspectives. And because my students are expected to work in teams and small groups, they have significant opportunities for discussion of their perspectives.

I have found it helpful to prepare students both for the intellectual and the interpersonal work that will be expected of them and for how they will be expected to conduct themselves in class. On the first day of class, students are asked to read and reflect upon "Listening to Understand," which I include as an addendum to all my syllabi. They are then asked to discuss their responses in small groups. We then have a large group discussion, and at the end both the students and I sign a form stating our intentions to abide by the expectations set forth in "Listening to Understand." I have found that this simple exercise helps students treat each other with respect—especially when the topics are controversial. And it helps students begin to understand the intellectual tasks required of them in the course.

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LEE KNEFELKAMP is professor of psychology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and a senior scholar at AAC&U.

**All classes are essentially intercultural encounters**





## Listening to Understand

In addition to the texts in this class, each participant is, in effect, a *co-text*. Your background and life experiences make up an important part of the class. Your instructor holds the perspective that all classes are essentially *intercultural encounters*—among individuals in the class, between the readers and any given author, among the authors and the students and the professor. We are all learning how to most effectively learn from one another. Such a classroom requires particular capacities and commitments on our part. It also requires a *mutual effort* in helping each other both understand the course material and the differing interpretative positions we may bring to a more complex understanding of the material. While each of us seeks to advance our own knowledge, we are also a community in which we are each responsible to help the other members of the community learn effectively. In addition to seeking to understand the context and concepts of the course, we

- seek to acquire intellectual skills and capacities that will enable us to work effectively with the complexities of the course material;
- seek understanding of multiple modes of inquiry and approaches to knowledge and the ability to judge adequate and appropriate approaches from those that are not adequate or appropriate;
- seek to develop increased self-knowledge and knowledge of others;
- seek to understand how the material we are studying relates to our own previous learning, backgrounds, and experiences, and how we can use and apply our new knowledge effectively;
- seek to develop the ability to critique material in a mature manner using our own previous learning and experiences as part of the critique when appropriate;
- seek to develop the communication skills that facilitate our learning and our ability to listen, read, reflect, and study to understand.

In order to accomplish our goals, we need to develop the capacity of *listening for understanding*. (Of course, listening for understanding can also be applied to how we read and observe as well as listen and communicate.) *Listening for understanding* involves

- listening for the meaning/standpoint/positionality of both others and the self;
- listening for the affect that results from the standpoint(s);
- staying in communication even when one is confused or fearful or unsure;
- searching for the appropriate response;
- acknowledging that understanding does *not* imply agreement;
- taking responsibility for one's own perspectives, stances, and actions;
- seeking to expand one's complexity, personal integration, and skills so that one can respond in appropriate ways to a wide variety of complex situations.

We will be working with these concepts as we conduct an assessment of student learning preferences and needs during the first weeks of the course. □