Learning to Listen to Students

By Benjamin Sloan

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Abstract
The author shares a teaching method that promotes student engagement and involvement in class reading and discussion.

> "…suddenly you begin to hear not only what people are saying, but what they are trying to say, and you sense the whole truth about them."
> --Brenda Ueland

I learned an important lesson while in prison – teaching in prison, that is to say – in Raleigh, N.C., between 1991 and 1995. On a particular day in a particular class, I turned a corner in my career as an educator, proving once again the truth of the Japanese proverb that goes "Oshieru wa manabu no nakaba nari: Half of teaching is learning" (Feiler viii).

On this day, like most days, I went to the North Carolina Correctional Institute for Women to teach an English composition class. When I was hired by Shaw University, in Raleigh, my contract stipulated that I teach classes in various prison settings, so guards peering into my bag at checkpoints and electronic gates clanking shut behind me were routine occurrences. Most of my colleagues could not tolerate the razor wire and universally drab setting, but to me the notion of prison inmates pursuing education in order to try to begin to improve their lives represented a source of hope, so I was proud to be part of the process.

Lesson in a Poem

My plan on this day was to "discuss" a poem by Audre Lorde entitled "To My Daughter: The Junkie On A Train," which I had distributed in a previous class and asked everyone to read (103). I often assigned poems by writers such as Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, Adrienne Rich, Lucille Clifton, Anne Sexton, or others whom I imagined these students in particular might find engaging for one reason or another. After passing through all the checkpoints and making it into the classroom, I proceeded with what I believed to be the best approach to this poem: I spent the first half of class lecturing about the author's use of diction, imagery, and other literary elements. The poem, by the way, involves a mother who, on her way home from a PTA meeting, meets on the subway a young woman who is clearly high on drugs – and this encounter inspires the mother to meditate upon the failure of parents, and society as a whole, to recognize and address young people's needs. So, having completed my presentation, I turned to acknowledge a raised hand in the front row.

My memory of this individual is that she seemed extremely young, though she was probably in her mid- to late-twenties. She smiled, thanked me, and asked if she could make some comments about the poem. She said that she had always found poems nearly impossible to grasp so avoided them at all costs, but this one intrigued her because, before coming to prison, she herself had been a heroin addict for ten years; this poem, as she saw it, was very much about her own life.
What this young woman then proceeded to do was discuss the poem based on her own experience, showing a deep, personal understanding that I could never pretend to have: she stood inside the poem looking out, while I stood outside looking in, and the difference between our perspectives was breathtaking. In fact, I sat and listened in awe at her ability to elucidate the poem in ways I could never hope to do. I felt like a fool. It occurred to me then, and to even a greater degree later as I reflected on this experience, that I needed to revamp the way I teach given the fact that each student clearly has hidden, undisclosed expertise that, once brought to light, could represent the most valuable basis for learning in the class on any given day.

Affirmation and a Method

Though what happened in the class that day functioned as a kind of revelation for me, I was not sure at the time how to turn what I had learned into classroom practice, so I began to look around for others who might have had similar experiences. Most of my colleagues continued like me to showcase their own expertise – day after day, semester after semester.

Eventually, I found a new model for classroom dynamics in an article by Jane Tompkins entitled “Pedagogy of the Distressed.” Apparently she had learned a similar lesson to my own:

> I learned . . . that every student in every class one “teaches” is a live volcano, or, as James Taylor puts it in his song, “a churnin’ urn o’ burnin’ funk.” There is no one thing that follows from this discovery, but for me it has meant that I can never teach in the old way again. By which I mean that I can never fool myself into believing that what I have to say is ultimately more important to the students than what they think and feel. I know now that each student is a walking field of energy teeming with agendas. Knowing this I can conduct my classes so as to tap into that energy field and elicit some of the agendas. (657)

In Tompkins’ article I found something practical I could adapt in my own classroom.

What changed my teaching were the following “rules of thumb,” and I will quote these in their entirety since they are at the core of Tompkins’ “method”:

> 1. Trust the students. Years of habit get in the way, years of taking all the responsibility for the class on yourself. You have to believe that the students will come through and not be constantly stepping into the breach. The point is for the students to become engaged, take responsibility, feel their own power and ability, not for you, one more time, to prove you’ve got the right stuff.
> 2. Talk to the class about the class. For mnemonic purposes, we might call this the “good sex directive.” Do this at the beginning of the course to get yourself and the students used to it. Make it no big deal, just a normal part of day-to-day business, and keep it up, so that anything that’s making you or other people unhappy can be addressed before it gets too big or too late to deal with.
> 3. Less is more. It’s better to underassign than to overassign. Resist the temptation to pile on work. Work is not a virtue in and of itself. Quality of attention is what you’re aiming at, not burn-out.
> 4. Offer what you have. Don’t waste time worrying that your thoughts aren’t good enough. A structure for people to use in organizing their thoughts, to oppose, to get their teeth into is what is needed. Not War and Peace.
> 5. Don’t be afraid to try new things. This is a hard one for me. I’m always afraid a new idea will flop. So it flops. At least it provides variety and keeps things moving. I call this the Shirley MacLaine Principle: if you want to get the fruit from the tree, you have to go out on a limb.
> 6. Let go. Don’t hang on to what’s just happened, good or bad. In some situations you probably can’t tell which is which anyway, so let things happen and go on from there. Don’t cling to the course, to the students, to your own ideas. There’s more where they all came from. (A corollary to this rule is: you can’t do it all. The whole point of this approach is that the teacher doesn’t do everything.) (658-659)

I found these six points radical and transformative, especially the notion that we might surrender absolute control and “let go” in our classrooms. What an idea! As to the more specific application of these premises, Tompkins went on to say, “What [my] method boils down to is this: the students are responsible for presenting the material to the class for most of the semester” (655). I took this idea, and other guidance from her article, and developed an activity that I call Starters.

How Starters Works

Given any particular reading assignment, a student working alone or with other students will give a brief (three- to five-minute) informal oral report in order to start our discussion. In other words, the first persons to speak about assigned material are the students themselves.

When the Starter has finished, other students are invited to respond and voice their views. I emphasize that, as Starters, students should be creative and approach the particular work in their own way; however, I offer the following suggested guidelines:

- Briefly discuss any new vocabulary, although please limit yourself to a maximum of five new vocabulary words. Also, please put the definitions in your own words as it is always more useful to paraphrase rather than quote directly from the dictionary.
- Discuss what you consider to be the main idea, or main ideas, in the writing. Whether we agree or not, this is a useful starting point for any discussion.
- Briefly describe the author’s style. (Hint: it is sometimes easier to discuss “style” when comparing one writer with others you have read.)
- Describe how this particular piece of writing relates to your own life: Did you or someone you know have a similar experience? Does it remind you of events that have touched your life in some way?
- Quote a notable brief passage (a sentence or paragraph) and discuss it in some detail.

I always strongly emphasize that they are delivering an informal report, so they should simply stay in their seats as they communicate their comments to the class. They may speak from notes or an outline, or even read word-for-word a prepared set of comments – whatever makes them most comfortable. Though the class is not a speech class, this is an opportunity for people to develop and practice their oral communications skills in a friendly, supportive environment. By the way, I make every effort to put the class in a circle for the Starter reports in order to encourage discussion.

When the discussion is finished, I ask students to give me their notes because I award them a grade for their oral report. I use two criteria for giving them a grade: First, I consider how thorough they were, based not so much on my own personal agenda, whatever it may be, but rather based on the fact that they touched on different aspects of the piece of writing given their own judgment regarding what was or was not important. The second quality I look for is simply the level of energy or enthusiasm they bring to their presentation. As the saying goes, enthusiasm is contagious, and part of the goal is to open or start a discussion, so the more impassioned their delivery, the more likely other students will respond to what they have to say.

My goal – not always an easy one to realize – is to listen to the students' remarks without comment, without judgment. Once the Starter has given his or her report, I work to keep my mouth shut and allow students to respond first; my job is to try to hear what is important to them.

However, sometimes it will appear to me that for whatever reason (for example, that the assignment has made a student overly nervous), some Starters will apparently communicate what they imagine I want to hear, rather than what they genuinely think – so in a case like this, when the report is over, I will ask a simple question or two, such as "Did you like this piece of writing?" or "What aspect of the piece did you respond to most strongly – either in a positive or negative way?" My experience is that often the Starters, feeling relaxed after their reports are done, will respond to questions like these by opening up and conveying their real feelings that they had thought were not appropriate in the "official" report.

Benefits of the Method

For two main reasons, I continue to use this Starter activity in all my classes – for what has now been ten years. First, I have learned that what many students want more than anything else is simply to be heard – to have a voice. This activity offers them a safe environment within which to communicate their ideas. Secondly, it forces me not only to become a better listener but also to seek out and ask the questions that will help students find their own answers.

Of course, as we all know, these are difficult challenges, especially listening, really listening, to others. When I start to backslide and run on at the mouth, as I regularly do, I remind myself of the young woman in my prison class ten years ago and her valuable insight into Audre Lorde's poem. I also like to reread another article I have found useful: Brenda Ueland's "Tell Me More: On the Fine Art of Listening." Passages like the following one help get me back on the right track:

> When we are listened to it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. Ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life. You know how if a person laughs at your jokes you become funnier and funnier, and if he does not, every tiny little joke in you weakens up and dies. Well, that is the principle of it. It makes people happy and free when they are listened to. (Ueland 104)

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