

WHEN WE LISTEN...

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I walk into an Ohio high school classroom. Fresh from my education degree, I prepare my lessons the way I know how. Equipped with McDougal Littell's teacher's manual for teaching classes in American and British Literature, I am ready. I spend massive amounts of time examining how to introduce Shakespeare, Chaucer, pastoral poetry, and the short story. To teach a speech class, I read numerous accounts of how to teach types of speeches: expository, how to, persuasive, and informative. However, I find it ironic that for years I have taught about language and literacy and even the composition of the speech-making process but have neglected the importance of listening to stories. In a rush to find the meaning of Chaucer's general prologue, I missed the more powerful narratives found both in and out of my classroom.

I did not create an environment for hearing how my students felt about being a migrant, African-American, or simply a freshman, nor did I create a place to share my life as an educator and a person. In a real sense, I opened the doors for the text but not for me and my students. It took many lessons to discover that, whether we teach history, Algebra, literature, or health, listening to students is integral to the curriculum.

As a teacher and now college professor, after many trials and errors, slowly, I have learned to listen to my students' stories, especially when the stories are about unjust actions. It took time, but I now realize that listening to stories from my migrant students about picking grapes is as important, if not more important, than reading *The Grapes of Wrath*. Making spaces to hear how students feel isolated and alone is part of the curriculum as much as talking about awkward sentence constructions or historical time markers. I want my students to know they are part of the community and curriculum of our classroom. They too have stories to share, and most importantly, I will listen to them, despite the fact that I can't pre-determine what is said.

As Cunningham (2015) states in *Story: Still the Heart of Literacy Learning*, "When we open our classrooms to talk, we invite randomness, uncertainty, and potentially chaos" (p. 130). I say it is this unpredictability and freedom that allows stories to emerge. Stories build community. Cunningham (2015) continues,

When stories matter, we are changed. We ask new questions. We offer small acts of kindness to strangers and friends alike. We give more of ourselves. For stories to take root in our classrooms we must be open to the ways our students will be changed by the stories we read to them, that we view together, and they are willingly share with the class. (p. 136)

After talking with my students at the university about the serious problem of bullying behavior, my students decided to take action by becoming "Random Agents of Kindness," based on the ideas in the book *Secret Kindness Agents* by Ferial Pearson (2014). The book details how planning and actively engaging in kind acts each week builds a community of kindness. However, this is done in secret. Each week my students tell stories of their shared kindness only with their fellow "kindness agents." One student wrote a note to a professor who was often the subject of ridicule, expressing what she learned from him. Another delivered food to a cancer survivor. Although each student acts anonymously, we do make space to share our stories

weekly, and this enriches the experience for everyone. Many more have joined while others are talking about it as we build upon each narrative. I listen to my students' stories every time we meet. My students also listen to me.

As educators, we can be both storytellers and story listeners. Stories can be powerful. Jerome Bruner (2002) states in *Making Stories*, "stories impose a structure, a compelling reality on what we experience, even a philosophical stance" (p. 89). Stories, to Bruner, are how we make meaning, and this meaning needs to be valued. Bruner (2002) continues, "we should not write off this power of story to shape everyday experience as simply another error in our human effort to make sense of our world, though cognitive scientists are sometimes wont to do this" (p. 8). As educators, how often do we share our own narratives with our students? How often do I serve the role of teller or listener? In an effort to standardize learning, are we isolating the rich narratives of our students and at what cost? Pinar (2004) speaks to looking back and reflecting. How often have I missed valuable stories while trying to adhere to the mandated texts or standards?

I didn't plan this lesson. Let me explain. The janitor called me into the hallway. He showed me old blankets, textbooks, baby food, and a yellow journal. He said, "I found this on the roof. I think someone was living there." The journal told her story. It was the gripping, authentic story of a previous student who hid on the roof with her baby to avoid the fists of a boyfriend and the anger of a father. The journal bore only her first name. The bell rang. I was still reading the journal when my students entered. They asked me about it. They wanted to know the story. They soon invested in the story. They began real conversations about what should be done—call the police, try to find her parents, or return the journal—to name a few. Without planning, students wrote in their journals describing possible action plans we could take to find and help the student. For the next four weeks, their plans about the journal became the curriculum. Investing in this story, they told their own. I heard stories of angry parents, teen parents, and empty homes. I had never had a stronger teaching plan. I let the students lead, listening to their needs, not the standards. We connected through community with some of the best collaborative writing I have experienced. Stories have a place in the classroom.

Students should be integrated into curriculum. Should I pay as much attention to them as I do the texts? Pinar refers to curriculum as an "ongoing, if complicated, conversation" (Pinar, 2004, p. 188). If I view listening as part of that conversation, why don't I do it more often?

How engaged can I be when I reflect on my work as a teacher, or better yet, how vulnerable can I be when I rewind to examine my teaching practices? In *currere*, one is asked to slow down. Using the autobiographical method requires this slowing down process. Pinar (2004) encourages us "to remember even re-enter the past, and to meditatively imagine the future" (p. 4). This what I intend here, to rewind my teaching practice so that I may reflect and take a deeper look at my listening strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps, I will learn more by listening to what memories reveal about listening.

When I look back, I move forward. The topic of my reflection is listening to my students' stories. How often did I listen in the classroom? How did I listen? Did I silence any students when I was teaching? It has taken me years to realize that listening flourishes with an invitation and focus. There is much to hear when I open this space as a teacher. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write:

As researchers, we come to each new inquiry field living our stories. Our participants also enter the inquiry field in the midst of living their stories. Their lives do not begin the day we arrive nor do they end as we leave. Their lives continue...their landscapes in the broadest sense, are also in the midst of stories. (pp. 63-64)

I need to place in our curriculum those landscapes of stories, especially when I need to hear stories of inequity. I have learned that, when wanting others to share stories pertaining to unjust treatment, we place the listeners in a vulnerable position. So, I need to model vulnerability in telling stories. And, I need to respect listening. I need to know when to speak and when to be just there, fully, for another. Sometimes as educators, we offer great strength and support by not speaking.

Many years ago, while waiting to be a guest speaker in a class called "Communication" the teacher informed me, "I don't know if you will be allowed to enter." I was surprised. I thought I was there to tell stories. I was the storytelling teacher. But, I waited. He appeared again. "They voted. You can enter, but you can't talk." I agreed. This class was for "problem students"—gang members, bullies, and loners. As hard as it was to say nothing, I remained silent. The students shared personal stories. I listened. One student told of a principal who teased him. Another shared advice on how to avoid that same principal. Then, the conversation turned to skipping a dance. They then talked about local bands. As an outsider, I had not earned the right to speak. What occurred was instructive: I witnessed how the students valued the real conversation within their group. It changed me. It built trust between us. I began to invest more time listening as a result of this experience.

Fine (2003) explains what happens when a school does not listen. "Most educators at this school, however, seemed to survive by not naming or analyzing social problems. They administered and taught in ways that established the school as a fortress for mobility out of the students' communities" (p. 21). Do I really want a fortress as a classroom, or instead of a guarded place, do I want a place where students feel free to talk?

Reviewing my work as a storyteller in the schools and, at the same time, a full-time teacher, I understand that listening actively creates trust. This occurs between the listener and teller. Are classrooms generous places for our students' stories? For genuine stories to be shared, listeners need to trust the teacher asking for them.

Giving students' stories the stage, I enter a world different from my own. Often, I had censored stories when I was uncomfortable. For nine years, I taught a class called "Opportunity." A principal once told me, "It is called that because the kids have more opportunity to go to jail than class." My students came from difficult and troubled backgrounds and, from the get-go, I was encouraged to be a "hard, male disciplinarian" when addressing these students. I tried, even though "male" was the only one of those words that really applied to me. My students were silent. I could not motivate them. They had rough, hard-edged stories, and I was trying to be something I was not. When I learned to let go of this false identity and ask with sincerity, their stories surfaced, and they opened up to dialogue and conversation. I heard my students beyond the administrator's words. We built community.

I learned that, by being willing to be uncomfortable, I could provide the space for people to tell uncomfortable stories. My students knew the space where they were silenced. Being silenced is different than being silent. When they tell their stories, I listen. But, it took me a long time to realize this.

Another time in class, I told stories about when someone beat me up. “I was jumped!” My students’ eyes got big with attention, and they focused. Then, I added, “I did not fight back.” I told my students that I worked hard at a stance of non-violence on a daily basis. The bell rang. I heard one student say to another as he left the room, “Mr. Cordi is a coward.” Everyone left except for Juan. Juan was from East Los Angeles. He urged me, “You should tell the class that it is not too late for them to change.”

He told me his story. Juan was in a gang. His gang was his family. At least, he thought this, until he was left alone staring down the end of a pistol. The rest ran as soon as the gun was drawn. He survived. He and his mother had risked everything and spent all of their money to move to the Central Valley, he explained. I just listened. He repeated, “Mr. Cordi, tell the students it is not too late.” He knew change was possible. It was his story. He left the gang. “It was not my family.” I believe that, because I took the risk of being uncomfortable and telling my story, Juan felt safe to share his.

I once received a letter from a student who I had taught in Doha, Qatar. She was an amazing young lady from Jordan who discovered the power of her narrative voice. Although she is still a high school student, she travels the Middle East giving workshops on story to college students. Her letter said, “You have been here Mr. Kevin. Tell them we are not ISIS.” She shared her feelings that the Western news was trying to define all of the people from the Middle East as ISIS, including her. She was not ISIS. This was a place for me to listen and share her truth—to be an ambassador for my students. As educators, we sometimes need to speak for our students so that they are not silenced.

As I look back, I want to move forward and listen more to my students. I invite them to be uncomfortable in my classes. In turn, I want them to feel safe to be vulnerable. In order to do this, I model vulnerability. As educators, we need to carefully bridge the roles of teller and listener. The poet, e. e. cummings, is often quoted as having said:

We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals that deep inside us
something is valuable, worth listening to, worthy of our trust, sacred to our touch.
Once we believe in ourselves, we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight,
or any experience that reveals the human spirit.

Listening deeply is a strength. I create space for students to share, to feel their own value reflected in the generosity of our being there, truly hearing their stories. These qualities of listening and sharing with vulnerability, rather than suggesting solutions or assuming things about others, may be the keys to understanding the world.

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