

Listening with Raw Openness Dr. AnaLouise Keating

Listening is a crucial yet too often overlooked element in effective class discussions and other forms of dialogue. Below are some suggestions which, if we all practice, will enhance class discussions. I describe this process as deep listening, or “listening with raw openness.”

* **Deep listening entails respect for each speaker’s “complex personhood”**

(Cervenak et. al.). As we listen, we remind ourselves that each individual we encounter has a specific, highly intricate history, an upbringing and life experiences which we cannot fully know. We don’t know the forces that shaped her and, at best, we can only partially ascertain her intentions and desires. Our understanding is always partial and incomplete.

* **Deep listening entails vulnerability and flexibility.** When we’re vulnerable, we can be open to others’ perspectives and willing to acknowledge the possibility of error. Vulnerability can facilitate transformation. As Paula Gunn Allen suggests, such vulnerability can be an important part of growth: And what is vulnerability? Just this: the ability to be wrong, to be foolish, to be weak and silly, to be an idiot. It is the ability to accept one’s unworthiness, to accept one’s vanity for what it is. It’s the ability to be whatever and whoever you are recognizing that you, like the world, like the earth, are fragile, and that in your fragility lies all possibility of growth and of death, and that the two are one and the same” (65).

* **Deep listening entails asking for clarification.** Before we respond, we should clarify the speaker’s message, to make sure that we’ve understood as fully as possible what s/he’s saying.

* **Deep listening entails frequent pauses and the ability to remain silent.**

Sometimes it’s best simply to listen, and not respond verbally (especially if those responses would involve offering solutions, drawing analogies with our own experiences or those of others, or speaking without first self-reflecting).

* **Deep listening enables us to challenge the ideas, not the speakers:** We can respectfully, but forthrightly, challenge desconocimientos, misunderstandings, and expressions of falsehoods and stereotypes about our own groups and other groups. When doing so, it is vital that we challenge the stereotypes/racism/ideologies/etc. not the speaker herself.

Sources

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