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Constructivist Listening for  
Reflection, Integration and Action

Gayle R. Yamauchi-Gleason

Presidio Graduate School

[gayle.yamauchi@presidioedu.org](mailto:gayle.yamauchi@presidioedu.org)

831-588-8536

Yamauchi-Gleason, G. (forthcoming) Constructivist listening for reflection, integration & action. In Worley, D., et. al. (Ed.) *Best Practices in Experiential and Service Learning in Communication*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt. This chapter is made available with the permission of the publisher.

## Abstract

Constructivist listening is an approach to listening that allows the person speaking the opportunity to “construct” knowledge by reflecting on experiences or information, removing potential barriers to clear thinking and integrating new understanding. It is an applied communication practice that has benefits for both the listener and the person speaking. The Listener develops capacities for deep listening, presence and authentic connection while listening to others’ thinking and experiences. The Speaker develops capacities for focused reflection, critical thinking and reasoning, and creative, thoughtful action as they construct personal meaning out of information, concepts and lived experience. There are numerous ways that Constructivist listening can be used in the experiential and service learning classroom to foster reflective habits, build community, and deepen learning for students.

## Constructivist Listening for Reflection, Integration &amp; Action

## Rationale

In the communication discipline we often discuss various approaches or goals for listening behavior, such as listening for *content* or information, *empathic* listening or establishing mutual understanding, and *critical* or evaluative listening (Makau & Marty, 2001). Even in the world outside of academe, most of us are familiar with “active” listening (Gordon, 1977) that has the ultimate goal of mutual understanding via the use of interpretation and paraphrasing by the listener, e.g. “What I thought I heard you say was...”

All of these different types of listening are important and yet authentic listening with the goal of simply connecting with another has become one of the most under-rated communication skills. Our listening-for-connection skills have become rusty with the advent of video games, iPods, cell phones, computers, multi-tasking and the like. It seems as we have technologically “advanced” as a society the less time we find ourselves in the present moment, listening fully and connecting with others.

There are many benefits for us personally in listening to others; we get to notice how we are connected with our fellow human beings, we hear information about other people’s experiences and perspectives that expand our own, and we get the satisfaction of being consciously involved in the community of inter-relationships that are the web of life. But perhaps more importantly the gift of our listening deeply to others may have untold benefits for the person we are listening to.

Another goal or outcome of listening done well is its ability to be the connective glue that brings us and other people together. From a living systems theory perspective, it is believed that our natural state is to be together (Wheatley, 2005). I would even argue that we are each born

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with the innate capacity to listen authentically and effectively with each other and that it is possible to unearth our ability to listen deeply and connect fully. Authentic listening can convey our respectful attention and caring for another. All that it requires is our willingness to be in the present moment, to care, and to practice (Remen, 1996).

One way that we can develop our innate listening capacity is through a practice called *Constructivist listening*, described fully in Julian Weissglass' article, *Constructivist Listening for Empowerment and Change* (1990). For several years Weissglass and colleagues have used Constructivist listening in their work with students learning math, in staff development with teachers and in K-12 and university-level educational change work (Becerra, 2000; Becerra & Weissglass, 2004; Weissglass, 1998; Weissglass & Weissglass, 1987). Other faculty familiar with this practice have used it in higher education settings for empowering students to take charge of their lives, sharing about the effects of oppression in ones life, and giving and receiving support from fellow faculty who are working against racism in society (Love, 1986; Ni, 1992; Osajima, 1991; Renzetti, 2007; Roby, 1998; Yamauchi-Gleason, 2004).

As conceptualized by Weissglass (1990) this type of listening is based within a Constructivist perspective of learning as self-organization (Glazerfeld, 1989) as opposed to rote memorization, one's instincts, or a conditioned response. Constructivism views cognitive intelligence as a "flexible, adaptive characteristic of human organisms" (Weissglass, 1990, p. 356). In addition, Weissglass and colleagues argue that emotional residue can inhibit or alter the construction of knowledge. Therefore it is necessary that the "natural physiological processes of expressing emotions" (p. 356) be encouraged to facilitate one's making sense of their experiences so that one may think more clearly.

### Objectives

Constructivist listening is unique in that the ultimate goal or purpose of listening to another is that the person *speaking* be able to:

- Develop a trusting connection with the other that will enhance that person's ability to reflect on the meaning of life experiences,
- Express any feelings that may be interfering with one's clear thinking,
- Potentially construct knowledge or meaning for oneself, and
- Ultimately make decisions for present and future action.

In an environment of connection and support, Constructivist listening can facilitate the empowering process of voicing, feeling, releasing, creating meaning, deciding and acting. This process can be applied, practiced and adapted in many ways to facilitate the deep, transformative integration of experiential and service learning.

### Description

Although Constructivist listening is a practice that includes two or more people sharing time listening to each other and being listened to in return, it is not a dialogue or a conversation in the strictest sense. The process is more of an approach to a listening relationship that includes suggested attitudes and behaviors for both the listener and the person being listened to in order to enhance the thinking ability of the person whose turn it is to be the Speaker.

A glossary of terms as used in Constructivist listening may be helpful in understanding the implementation guidelines and examples that follow:

*Authentic.* Your true self, not who you think you should be or who others think you should be; who you really are.

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*Attention.* Undivided or undistracted, relaxed focus.

*Being in the Present Moment.* Maintaining your thoughts or attention in the present moment rather than being pre-occupied with past experiences (memories, worries, fears) or what might happen in the future; being fully aware and in the present moment.

*Emotional Release.* The freeing of pent-up emotions that naturally occurs as we're speaking of meaningful life experiences, e.g. laughing, crying, trembling, yawning, expressing anger.

*Flexible Intelligence.* Being able to think about and respond to situations in a creative, fresh, manner, as opposed to continuing to respond rigidly or out of habit.

*Re-evaluation.* A new decision, different perspective or "re-evaluation" is sometimes made regarding an experience if pent-up emotion can be freed so that flexible, clear thinking is possible. This process may be experienced as transformative.

*Thoughtful Questions.* Questions that the Listener asks that assist the Speaker to express and explore thoughts and feelings, rather than intellectualizing or retreating into superficiality.

### Implementation

Constructivist listening activities can be set-up any number of ways; for the purposes of this manual we will focus on two of the most common: (a) listening dyads/triads, and (b) demonstrations (Becerra & Weissglass, 2004). Remember that the key to each is the quality of the listening attention provided for the benefit of the Speaker.

In general, there are three basic uses of Constructivist listening: cognitive, affective & strategic (Weissglass, 1998). One may use Constructivist listening to facilitate the process of making new connections and constructing new understandings of phenomena. One may also use Constructivist listening to explore how they felt about an experience, either in the present or the past. One might explore how residual feelings from past experiences may be getting in the way

of their present effectiveness. Lastly, Constructivist listening can be used strategically as it is often helpful to think out loud with the attention of another when making goals and developing strategies for action and to do this without interruption from another person. Item 6 in the Instructor's role contains several suggested prompts for listening dyads/triads in the classroom, many of which integrate two or three of the uses outlined above.

*Dyads and Triads: Instructor's Role*

1. *Setting the context.* The instructor should formulate an introductory lecturette briefly describing the rationale for the class' undertaking of constructivist listening pairs. Describe the learning outcomes you desire, the rationale for the approach and the Listener and Speaker guidelines. Using the information that follows, thoughtfully construct questions or prompts for your students' first listening dyad (or allow students to choose). The instructor should set and maintain a tone of mutual respect and attempt to foster in the class a willingness to try a new type of learning activity.
2. *Time keeper*
  - (a) For a dyad/triad communicate that each person will get an equal amount of time. If the instructor keeps track and lets students know when to switch roles, students can relax into the activity and can usually listen more deeply because they know that there is a time limit and they will get an equal amount of time to talk when it's their turn to speak.
  - (b) The amount of time for each turn varies depending on how experienced students are with Constructivist listening, how complex the topic is and how much time you have to allow for the exercise. Usually it is best to start with simpler and shorter prompts and 1 ½ to 2 minutes for each person. Once students have experienced a few listening dyads,

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they tend to relax more and use the time to think more deeply and can easily talk for 3-5 minutes or longer.

(c) The use of a chime or pleasant sounding bell to signal the end of each turn is recommended and usually more effective than raising your voice above the noise of everyone talking at once.

(d) You may also want to bring an electronic kitchen timer if you don't have one on your watch so that you may relax a little while keeping time.

3. *Set-up.* At first, you might help with pairing students up by having people number off in an equal number of pairs. Friends usually sit together in class and counting off around the classroom through ten and then ten again (for example) will ensure more variation for the dyads. Tell the students when first starting out it is often easier to do the activity with someone they know less well. Also, encourage students to use listening dyads in class as an opportunity to get to know each other better; e.g. have them switch partners each time you have a listening dyad for the first several times you do this activity. You may also instruct students to pair up on their own. (e.g. "Find someone else you haven't done a dyad with yet this semester.") If you have an uneven number you might consider being in a dyad yourself or set-up one three-way or triad. You will have to keep track of two different times though, for example 3 minutes each in the dyad and 2 minutes each in the triad so that all groups end about the same time.

As space permits, ask students to spread out in their pairs or groups around your classroom. This decreases the possibility of one pair's speaking distracting another.

Depending on the number of students in your class there may be a useful, low hum of talking that will increase privacy for individual pairs.

4. *Distractions.* Make sure cell phones, pagers, iPods, laptops, or other distractions are turned off and/or put away for the duration of the activity.
5. *Confidentiality.* This is key to making this practice work. Experience with this practice has shown that if people feel safe enough they will tend to bring up or review important experiences and feelings. Safety is fostered when one knows that they will not be interrupted, ridiculed, or criticized for what they are thinking or feeling and that the Listener will keep what is said in confidence. The agreement of confidentiality by all parties is key to this feeling of safety. For Constructivist listening there are two different levels of confidentiality to give attention to:
  - (a) Do not tell others what the person you listened to was talking about, and
  - (b) Do not bring up with the Speaker later (after the listening dyad) what the Speaker discussed during their turn. (Rationale: The Speaker feels safe to think out loud because of the thoughtful environment of the listening dyad or triad and may NOT in regular conversation. Each Speaker gets to choose what they want to discuss and disclose in a Constructivist listening pair and if they are concerned about their experience being brought up by someone later they may feel less safe to disclose important experiences during their turn.)
  - (c) It is useful for the instructor to be positive, pleasant and firm in ensuring that the guidelines are kept. The guidelines may appear at first to be somewhat contrived and you may get complaints that they feel “unnatural,” but they are not arbitrary and after several listening dyads their importance will become apparent. Light humor is also sometimes helpful in reminding people of the guidelines. For the first several times you do dyads in a class you might ask the students to help you re-create the guidelines on the white board

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before you begin. You can also create a simple chart to post as a reminder the first several times they do dyads until the guidelines are clearly internalized. Being overly authoritarian in ensuring the guidelines are followed has often not worked.

6. *Topic prompts or free choice?* In an instructional environment and when first using this activity it is often useful to have a question or a short series of questions to prompt and focus the reflection and thinking of the student during her or his turn. Doing this may also better assist you in meeting your learning outcomes for the activity and eventually the course. It is also possible with a group experienced in Constructivist listening to not give them a topic and let people choose what they would like to reflect upon during their turn. Below are several prompts that have been used in a variety of classroom situations:
  - (a) *To help students focus on their personal experience of learning and school.* What are some of your earliest memories of school or learning? Was school easy or was it a struggle, either academically or socially? From the things that you did in the classroom, to the behaviors of your parents and teachers, what messages did you take away about yourself as a learner?
  - (b) *To help distracted students focus their attention on the classroom experience, or a way to simply start class each day.* What is on your mind as you come to class today that you need to set aside so that you are ready for learning?
  - (c) *To begin with past, personal experience related to a course topic in order to prime the student for the construction of new knowledge on the topic.* Who was the first woman leader that you remember working with? How would you describe her leadership style or approach? Do you think her style was effective? What impressions were you left with in regards to women as leaders?

(d) *To help synthesize learning after an exercise, simulation, case, or simply at the end of a class period.* What insights did you gain about dysfunctional and functional roles in groups from the activity? What did you learn about your own behavior in group-settings? How might you use these new insights in groups you are currently a part of?

(e) *To reflect on ones overall field experiences during a service-learning course.* So far, what have you learned about yourself from this placement? What are your strengths? Where do you struggle? What would you like to focus on improving for the balance of your placement?

(f) *To reflect upon and improve one's interactions with clients during a service learning placement.* How are your relationships going in your placement? What specifically seems to be going well? Where could you use a hand? Are there any interactions you've had that you'd like to review or reflect upon more deeply? Are there any changes in your behavior, response or actions you'd like to take in this relationship from this moment on?

(g) *To routinely deal with upsets, confusions, curiosities or 'aha' moments that may occur during a placement.* Is there anything that happened this past week in your placement that you'd like to reflect upon? How did this make you feel? Does this remind of any experiences from your past? How was it alike? How was it different? Is there anything you'd like to do differently as result of this reflection?

(h) *To reflect upon one's learning from the beginning to the end of a course.* Using our course learning outcomes for guidance, describe how your level of proficiency has changed (or not) in each of the learning outcome areas. Where did you learn the most? The least? Where do you want to keep learning? How do you see yourself applying this learning beyond this course?

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### *Dyads and Triads: Listener's Role*

1. *Listener's attitude.* The foundational attitude is one of relaxed interest and delight in the person who is speaking. The thought in your mind might be, "I'm happy to sit here and listen while you share your experience or think out loud," or "I'm confident you can figure this out by yourself."
2. *Non-verbal guidelines.* All non-verbal behavior should mirror #1. Attempt to show your authentic attention to the other person throughout their turn. For example, it can very reassuring when the Speaker discloses a difficult or confusing experience and the Listener maintains an authentic, caring expression on their face. Before the first listening activity you may want to have the class describe how they know when someone is listening or paying attention (non-verbally) and what non-verbal behaviors typically signify that people are NOT paying attention. This simple activity can help students self-regulate their non-verbal behavior.
3. *Verbal guidelines.* When people first begin Constructivist listening you may choose to give them these first two guidelines and then ask them NOT to communicate verbally, but only non-verbally, through their body language (#2) and the attitude that they project (#1). This allows students to experience what it's like to fully listen to someone and not feel pressured to respond (as in a conversation or dialogue). This also allows students to experience what it is like to be fully listened TO; to know that they can take their time to express their thoughts and feelings and realize that they won't be interrupted. Doing Constructivist listening in this manner a few times at the beginning of learning this practice is often a profound experience for many students, both as a Listener and as a Speaker.

After students have experienced listening and being listened to several times (including a few de-briefing discussions on the experience), I encourage them in the Listener role to begin asking a few *thoughtful* questions, or questions that are for the benefit of the Speaker. Again, this is not a conversation or a dialogue so these questions are NOT for the Listener's benefit because they don't understand the full story or they're simply curious about something, or they want to talk about what the Speaker's story reminds them of or begin telling their own story.

Or, you may choose to allow the asking of *thoughtful* questions (see #4) from the beginning. The following are examples of situations and questions that are for the benefit of the Speaker:

(a) While talking about what elementary school was like a young man recalls that he struggled the first few years with reading & writing. He says he cannot remember any details about this. You might ask, "Do you remember a particular time when reading or writing was hard for you?" After a while he is able to recall a time when he felt embarrassed when he couldn't read while his classmates did so easily and laughed at his attempts. He might remember feeling frustrated and embarrassed. You might say kindly when he's finished, "I'm sorry they made fun of you." Then you could ask, "Do you remember other times when you felt embarrassed in school?" Or, if he simply can't remember another difficult time you could ask, "Do you remember things that seemed easy for you in school?" Oftentimes people will start remembering difficult times once they can start talking on the topic in general. Also, recalling both good times and hard ones are useful, as it points out to him that not everything related to school was difficult.

It is possible that any held-in feelings from these early experiences may be eroding this young man's confidence in his *current* ability to succeed in school.

In general, it is useful for the Speaker to be able to finally release his embarrassment and frustration rather than hold it inside, and it is helpful for you to listen warmly, attentively, and relaxedly which may be unlike anything he experienced from others when he was young and experiencing this. It is often just this warm, relaxed attention that is needed for people to let out their old feelings so that they may replace them with a renewed feeling of confidence and willingness to try new things. It is most useful when the Listener can be attentive and relaxed and encouraging while feelings flow out. Remember, the listener need not "fix" anything.

(b) While helping a young woman reflect on her experience of a group process & dynamics activity in class, she may be reluctant to say more than, "It was okay, it was fine, I had fun." You might respond by asking, "What was it like for you when Reggie interrupted when you were sharing your ideas about how to proceed? Have you ever had that experience before?" If she still seems reluctant to respond, you might lightly joke, "Didn't you want to tell him to shut-up?" She may laugh and then be able to talk about what happened in the group, her response, and other times she may have responded similarly. Then you might ask, "The first time you remembered this happening, what could you have said to that person to get them to listen to you instead of going quiet?" After she comes up with some ideas (or you give her some more funny ones if she can't think of anything) you might ask, "What might you have said to Reggie to get him to listen to you during the exercise?" The idea is to help this young woman see herself as

capable of contributing something useful and able to assertively and respectfully respond to any unthinking behavior towards herself by another person.

The goal is not to denigrate Reggie but to encourage the young woman to respond to his behavior differently so that she can be heard and he can get some useful feedback about how his behavior affected someone else. Later, she may approach Reggie herself and engage him in a discussion of her and his part in the dynamic process that occurred.

Sometimes the thoughtful use of humor can bring people out of their embarrassment to share and reflect. “Going quiet” is a response often used by those who feel easily intimidated, which often stems from past experiences of not being listened to and eventually giving up in similar situations.

Also, there are often many useful solutions to any given situation. Once the old timidity is addressed and released, this young woman may begin to think quite quickly and flexibly of several workable responses to Reggie’s behavior in the moment things are unfolding.

(d) You are doing a listening dyad in class to help students prepare to write their final, integrated reflective essays that you have asked them to tie directly to the service learning course’s four learning outcomes. One student’s placement was in a school for “disadvantaged students” near campus. One of the learning outcomes of the service-learning program is to come to “understand and appreciate the experiences of those who are different from us.” The Speaker has a little trouble at first thinking about her learning in relation to this outcome. The Listener asks, “Remember back to the first time you went to your placement. What did you notice about the surroundings and the people and

how did you feel in that environment?” This allows the Speaker to reflect back to that experience and describe the details of what she saw and how she felt.

If the Listener is still unable to think of anything to say you might ask, “How is this similar to what school was like for you?” The Speaker thinks and reflects on a few similarities. She thinks that since she supports the teachers in the classroom directly she knows that the teachers are dedicated and care about their students. She can also personally relate to the children feeling bored or distracted at times. She noticed that although the school and equipment are clean, most of the equipment was older and not always working.

The Listener might then ask, “How is this different from what school was like for you? Was there anything that took you by surprise based upon your personal experiences?” The Speaker reflects on how the surroundings differed from her own schools growing up in a more “advantaged” neighborhood. The surroundings were clean and neat AND the equipment was new or nearly new and in good working order; there were fewer students in each classroom in her own school so it seemed easier for her teacher to help each student; and there were many parents who came in during the day to help out in the classroom.

The Speaker then is able to imagine that she and other service-learning students placed in the classrooms in some ways are a replacement for the parents who are not as involved in this disadvantaged school. She reflects that the parents might be at work or at home with other children. She remembers that her mom and dad were able to take off work to help in the classroom and go on field trips because of the types of jobs they had, or that one parent was able to earn enough money so that the other could “be more

available for the children.” She imagines what it might have been like for her to not have her parents be able to be such a big part of her school experience. She imagines what it might be like for these young students to not have the close connection between home and school that she was able to have and feels this is unfair for the students.

She begins to think out loud about several ways that this problem could be addressed in schools today. She decides to write about this in her integrated reflection essay and begins to come up with a plan for how to address this issue in her future classroom as a teacher. She notices that she feels inspired and motivated to make a difference and take action. She now has much to say about the learning outcome, “understand and appreciate the experiences of those who are different from us” in her final reflective paper. Better still, she is committed to taking action from her learning after the course is finished.

The previous scenarios are hypothetical and not meant to reflect what any one person’s experience *should* be. They are simply meant to illustrate a range of possible issues, applications and responses for the use of Constructivist listening.

#### *General Guidelines for Asking “Thoughtful Questions”*

1. Even though “Thoughtful Questions” can be very helpful for the Speaker when done well, the most important thing about being the Listener is to relax and show your sincere interest and attention to the person you are listening to. Oftentimes this is all that is needed or necessary.
2. One of the most important things that you can do as the Listener is to notice how the Speaker responds to your questions. You will know if they are useful for the Speaker if

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they seem to focus their attention on the topic at hand rather than distract them, or help them to think more deeply about their experience.

3. Oftentimes Speakers will talk about the details of some event that they are reviewing with your attention. If you notice that they seem to have some feelings about the experience that they may not be fully expressing, it can be useful to ask, “How are you feeling about all of this?” or “How did you feel when that happened?” These types of questions focus the Speaker’s attention on any feelings that might need to be expressed or released, which will then help the Speaker to focus on the meaning of the event more clearly and any possible future actions they may want to take.
4. Besides assisting the Speaker to focus when it is their turn to be listened to, Listeners can also assist by reminding Speakers about the reality of the situation they are sharing, be it from the present or the past. If someone is regretting an action one might say, “It sounds like you used your best thinking at that moment in time,” or “It sometimes happens that things turn out just fine,” if the Speaker seems prone to worrying or fretting. The idea is not to placate or patronize but to simply point out a picture of reality that is not shadowed by regret, worry, fear, anger, or colored by other feelings. This is one of the key roles of the Listener in Constructivist listening. While in connection with another person they serve as our ally in assisting us to see where our feelings may be confusing our clear thinking in a situation.
5. The key to being an effective listener in Constructivist listening is to realize that it is not your job to “fix” the Speaker’s problems or give them advice. The Speaker gets to choose what she or he wishes to explore during her or his turn. The reality is that each of us is fully capable, given the chance, to consider our situation, let go of any feelings

getting in our way of thinking clearly, chose a course of action (if necessary) and act on our decision. The Listener is an able guide through this process.

### *Dyads and Triads: Speaker's Role*

The Speaker's role in Constructivist listening is the simplest and at times can be the most challenging.

1. If you are someone who is more comfortable in the listening role, try to take advantage of the entire time allotted for you to consider your question or prompt. You deserve this much attention.
2. If you are someone who often talks easily and at length, slow down, reflect on the question or prompt, and stop when you've finished your thought once you hear the signal from the timekeeper. You and your partner(s) each deserve equal speaking time.
3. Refrain from criticizing or complaining about the Listener or your mutual acquaintances when it's your turn to speak. Constructivist listening is not appropriate for problems or disputes and these should be resolved through respectful, direct dialogue.
4. Take advantage of the warm attention of your Listener. Notice what it feels like to have someone's undivided attention. Adopt the attitude that you are capable and intelligent.

### *De-briefing Guidelines*

Regular de-briefing of both the process and content of Constructivist listening pairs is essential to developing this practice and the capacities necessary for the Listener and Speaker

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roles. After the very first practice of Constructivist listening it is highly recommended that you lead the group through a de-brief exercise that includes two parts:

1. *Process.* First talk about what it was like to be the Speaker. You might hear a variety of reactions; from, “Finally, I didn’t have to worry about being interrupted!” to, “I was so uncomfortable not knowing what the other person thought about what I was saying.” Or “I just can’t talk without feedback from the other person!” It can be useful to talk about where all these feelings and experiences stem from. You can reflect as a group about other experiences of being listened to fully. Oftentimes it is difficult for students to recall any time, a testament to how eroded our collective listening abilities have become.

If you like to talk, being a listener will be challenging to you. If you mostly listen to others then the role won’t be too difficult for you. BUT, when it is the quieter person’s time to talk, they often find they have trouble talking through their turn; they are often so accustomed to taking up less space that they have trouble taking up their rightful amount when given the opportunity.

Those who are more talkative can often hold forth without interruption, and sometimes have to be gently but firmly reminded that their time is up. Keeping each other to the equal timeframe is often good practice in boundary management for students.

2. *Content.* Next talk about the content of the questions that were initially asked. Remind students of the confidentiality agreement which means they should only share with the larger group what they wish to about their OWN experience and to NOT share the content of what their partner talked about during their turn. Do not force students to share but encourage and leave a space for the possibility. This will help maintain a feeling of safety around the listening practice. Oftentimes the large group discussion

spurs more connections for people and they share these new insights spontaneously. This discussion can serve as your segue way to the rest of your topic or class.

In general it is often much easier to get a thoughtful discussion going in class when you first start with a listening pair about students' personal experience with the topic. This allows students to gather their thoughts. It also seems to prime their minds for connecting any new insights from the day's class to their previous experiences and learning.

4. *Additional de-briefs.* It is useful to continue content debriefs following topic-oriented listening pairs unless time is an issue. It is important to continue process de-briefs or at least ask for questions about the roles of speaking and listening for the first several times that students do listening dyads, and then you may need to do so less often unless you notice students having difficulty maintaining any of the guidelines.
5. *Addressing challenges with confidentiality guidelines.* As a part of future process de-briefs it can be useful to talk about how it is going for them to follow the confidentiality guidelines. Has anyone slipped up? How did they handle it? Ignored it, reminded the person, or maybe the person remember in the middle of their reference? It's useful to encourage people to say something like "oops!" or "sorry" and to move on. When learning something new it does happen that we make mistakes and they will probably happen less often if we acknowledge our mistake, apologize and move forward.

### *Demonstrations*

Once you begin to allow "thoughtful questions" it can also be useful to do a demonstration with a volunteer, where you as the instructor stand or sit in the front of the room with a student and demonstrate the process of asking questions. Then, during the de-briefing

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students can ask you questions about why you asked the things that you did and you can get feedback from the Speaker about the usefulness of the questions. This is a delicate process whereby the Speaker needs to be willing to agree to discuss the process and perhaps the content of their listening time with the class as a whole. You will need to check with the chosen Speaker ahead of time to ascertain their willingness to participate in front of the class. You will also need to be thoughtful about which student you ask; who would be willing to be forthcoming in front of the group and reflect below the surface on their experience? The two-part confidentiality guidelines outside of this class discussion are as important here as for the dyads and triads.

### *Constructivist listening “homework”*

The practice of Constructivist listening assists students in their interactions with clients, family and friends by improving their capacity for deep listening. Routine practice and debriefing in-class is key to the development of this listening *practice*. Once the practice and its guidelines have been introduced in class, assigning out-of-class listening dyads with classmates as “homework” will also assist in building the capacity for deep listening and allowing for further reflection, integration and action for students.

There are many pedagogical uses of this basic practice for experiential and service learning. Constructivist listening facilitates the natural release of emotions that may be getting in the way of clear thinking. This practice also assists learners to integrate theory, concepts and class discussions at the end of a lecture, class activity or experience and generally facilitates deep reflection, knowledge construction and action. In the Reflection section that follows, several students reflect on their experiences of learning the practice as well as describe how the process has helped in their learning and communication skills.

### Evaluation

Many reflective activities in use in experiential and service learning focus on journaling, portfolios and final integrative papers. Constructivist listening may be used instead of or in addition to these narrative, written forms of self-reflection. This practice facilitates and encourages reflection throughout a course or experience *in connection with fellow classmates* and has the added benefit of bringing fellow students closer together in a supportive environment. Students additionally learn how to listen well and build effective, supportive relationships with others. Anecdotal reports from students indicate that they and their family, friends & co-workers notice an improvement in the student's day-to-day listening skills *and* commitment to taking action.

Constructivist listening requires that those learning the practice be willing participants in the process as well as be willing to implement the guidelines consistently. As long as an instructor and her or his students are willing and able to make these commitments, the learning process will unfold smoothly and the full benefits of this practice can be realized.

Constructivist listening facilitates one's progression through the full experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) by allowing for the iterative process and integration of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. In connection with others, Speakers are able to explore feelings they may have about their experiences, step back and observe the patterns and dynamics of human interaction, construct an understanding of this experience, and make decisions about future intentions or actions based upon their personal theorizing.

Beyond the world of experiential and service learning, practicing Constructivist listening can enhance one's interview skills in employment interviewing and field research. In Yamauchi-Gleason, G. (forthcoming) Constructivist listening for reflection, integration & action. In Worley, D., et. al. (Ed.) *Best Practices in Experiential and Service Learning in Communication*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt. This chapter is made available with the permission of the publisher.

professional education and development the practice can assist in instilling necessary reflective behaviors in managers, teachers, health care providers, or for those working in a variety of “helping” fields. The practice has also been adapted to explore issues of diversity and equity, to assist with coalition building and to develop ally skills across a wide range of constituency groups in society (Becerra & Weissglass, 2004; Brown & Mazza, 1997; National Coalition Building Institute, 2003).

### Reflections

I have taught the Constructivist listening practice to many people over the years as a workshop leader, organizational consultant, instructor of traditional-aged undergraduates and professor to graduate students who are working adults. This past semester I’ve had the opportunity to capture the written, reflected experiences of MBA students in a Sustainable Management program, many of who are returning to school after a lengthy absence from the classroom. Our course is focused on personal development, team effectiveness and communication in a reflective learning environment. The program is offered in a blended or hybrid learning environment: five times throughout the semester students come together for an intensive, four-day residency, spending one whole day in my class. In between residencies we do our coursework online, via the phone and with the use of other virtual learning technologies.

The excerpts below reflect the beginning experiences of students as they learned the practice first in class, face-to-face; then practiced again over the phone with a partner in between residencies. Students do at least one listening dyad during residencies and one in-between residencies throughout the semester. Interspersed throughout the following reflections are descriptions of how students have taken the actual practice, or insights from it, into their daily lives.

This first reflection is from a student describing her first two times of listening dyad practice. She describes her initial discomfort with the process (a common reaction at first) as well as what she notices about herself as a Listener and a Speaker. She also describes her observations of her interactions with others in her workplace as a result of the practice:

“I thought that the constructivist listening exercise practiced in class was very interesting and challenging at the same time. After the class, I realized that I was one of the “active” listeners. I found it difficult to hold back my feedback while my partner was speaking. During the exercise, I had to make a conscious effort to not say anything. At the same time, it was excruciating not to be able to let my partner know that I was listening to them. After the second listening dyad exercise, it became very apparent that I needed to pay more attention on how to be a better listener.

Another realization was, how uncomfortable I was with silence. I think overcoming the awkwardness of silence was even harder on the phone than in the class exercise where I could see the other person. I found myself almost preferring to ramble on to avoid the awkward silence.

During my workweek, I practiced listening to my co-workers without interrupting them. I realized, when I listened to them without interrupting, they continued speaking and elaborating on the issues longer than they would have if they had been interrupted.”

B. Altan-Schirmer (personal communication, September 2, 2008)

The next two students are describing what they notice from being in the Listener role:

“As the listener, I occasionally felt the desire to “help” by verbally indicating that I was following a thought or by verbally interspersing words or sentences to bridge the speaker's thoughts. To illustrate this, during today's listening practice, my partner briefly lost the thought, paused, but then quickly found it again. I wanted to come to help, but held back, just to realize that such pauses can help the speaker to recollect her thoughts and refocus.”

H. Eberle (personal communication, September 2, 2008)

“My undergrad degree is in journalism, and through that training I studied the art and science of interviewing and active discussion as a means to gather information. That is an activity that requires, as I was taught, a more active style of listening. While you want your subject to be able to openly respond to questions, you are constantly directing the conversation to achieve *your* ends, as opposed to just letting the conversation happen. With this exercise I'm learning

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that by not speaking and allowing the other person to openly communicate without interruption, you can gain a greater understanding of their perspective, as opposed to continually interpreting their perspective. I'm getting through this challenge by simply telling myself to "shut up." So I find I'm learning more about myself by listening than I am by speaking."

J. Gelfand (personal communication, September 2, 2008)

The following two reflections are about the experience of being the Talker; of being fully listened to without interruption:

"As a talker, I felt an element of freedom and ease for the first few minutes of the exercise. However, after a few minutes I began to stumble on some of my words and had to take more pauses. I felt somewhat awkward for a moment. I interpret this moment as kind of shift that moved me away from "scripted" responses to a more thoughtful talking."

D. Michael (personal communication, September 2, 2008)

"The Constructivist listening practices have been useful as the topics have allowed me to explore my own anxieties and feelings about returning to school after 20 years. As a speaker, I was allowed to focus on my own thoughts, and as new feelings emerged, was able to express them immediately. This was a very positive experience, but it was also difficult to take all of the time for myself as I tend to be more focused on the other person when I am conversing. It felt good to let go of worrying that I was taking up too much of the conversation. In both of these conversations, I left feeling very connected to my partner, and that we had a shared intimacy, even though we were strangers."

J. Berg (personal communication, September 2, 2008)

The next reflection is about the experience of asking "thoughtful questions" for the first time as the Listener:

"In our class dyad, my partner and I did not ask any questions, the dyad flowed smoothly and when you [the instructor] asked about how the questions went, I commented to my partner that I feel I get distracted by asking questions, I stay in my head and my partner responded saying she feels they change the conversation.

For our phone dyad, we noted that questions were to be part of this round and then very naturally each asked a pertinent question. Upon completion of our monologues, I said I felt my question changed her direction but she said it was

actually helpful and took her more in-depth. She said she felt her question may have taken me off track but it actually help broaden where I wanted to go. So we were both apprehensive about asking questions, both asked them appropriately and naturally but felt negative about the impact of asking and positive about being asked the questions. A good progression for pushing oneself and learning the outcome.”

J. Bookey (personal communication, September 30, 2008)

The following two reflections describe the felt difference between thoughtful and less thoughtful questions:

“I discovered through this listening exercise that the more sincerely I listened, the more interested I was in the conversation. It also prompted me to ask sincere and inspired questions. Inspired questions can be very simple or even naïve. Inspired questions are asked at the right time and bring the speaker to hidden treasures.”

L. Moisan (personal communication, September 30, 2008)

“There is an energetic difference within a question when it is clear that the listener is asking for the benefit of the speaker. It seems the questions people ask most frequently are intended to either relieve a misunderstanding that is causing some form of tension within them (i.e. the listener needs clarification for his or her own comfort), or to appear as though he or she is paying attention to the speaker. It’s an entirely different experience when a listener asks a thoughtful question for the sole sake of supporting the speaker or helping him or her to fully express themselves.”

A. Wilson (personal communication, September 30, 2008)

Besides facilitating the capacity for deep reflection and enhancing listening and speaking capabilities, Constructivist listening is also very helpful for allowing students to actually reflect on the content of their learning and how to move from theory to practice; from thought to action.

The following reflection is from a student describing how the Constructivist listening dyad practice was critical to her meaning-making of a class activity:

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“I found our listening dyad on the World Café<sup>1</sup> useful in that I’d not really reflected too much on the experience until discussing the activity with my phone partner. It was surprising how much I gained from the Café’ but how little memory of the day was in my frontal brain until speaking about it on the phone. Life moves so quickly, and we are learning so quickly. How do I remain present in these meaningful conversations after the Café’ is over? Until I have a breakthrough I’m tacking my notes to the wall above my desk. It was nice as well to have the constructivist questions as I felt like I was less in a confessional and more in an engaging conversation. I appreciate the intimate exchange with my classmates during these exercises.”

E. Kimball (personal communication, September 30, 2008)

Lastly, a student reflects at the end of the semester on how the principles of a dialogue process learned in class, in concert with the practice of reflection, allowed him to decide to act differently in personally challenging situations:

“The controversial issues process<sup>2</sup> highlighted the point that when you drill down through the emotion and volatility, through the defensiveness and ego, we most often can find some common ground to build on. I felt inspired by this. I also felt motivated to work through my own challenges. I’ve been trying something new recently. When faced with opposition, rather than resort to cynicism and emotions, I try to take a breath and better understand.”

B. Mascioli (personal communication, November 21, 2008)

Some students take to Constructivist listening immediately, some approach it at a more measured pace, and some have varying degrees of resistance from the outset. Virtually all find some benefits in the end. It is important to be prepared for this range of reactions; reassuring your students about the ins and outs of learning any new or unfamiliar practice or routine. Constructivist listening encourages the expression of emotion and it can be expected that feelings about learning the practice will surface in the process.

Constructivist listening is a secular practice that is experienced by some to be both transformative and empowering. One unique aspect of this form of listening is the focus on its

effect on the speaker. For this reason, it might be interesting to explore this communication practice from the perspective of its social justice contributions in creating a particular quality of interactive experience or social world (Pearce, 1998, 2007). What is the difference between simply thinking about or talking out loud to oneself to “process” or reflect upon experiences, or writing as a way of knowing, (Richardson, 2000) and practicing Constructivist listening in close connection with the warm, authentic attention of another human being?

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The World Café is a conversational process based upon a set of integrated design principles that are informed by living systems theory and allow for the collective creation of ideas and solutions about questions that matter. For more information, please consult their website:

<http://www.theworldcafe.com/>

<sup>2</sup> The Controversial Issues Process was developed by the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI), an international, non-profit, leadership training organization in Washington D.C., USA. For twenty-five years NCBI has worked to eliminate racism and other forms of discrimination and prejudice throughout the world by teaching the skills of coalition building, conflict resolution, and prejudice reduction. For more information, please consult their website:

<http://ncbi.org/>