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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that the culture seems to prize a "good listener," which is a compliment used in everything from a grade school report card to a description of an ideal marriage partner, listening actually is a less privileged interpretive trope than speaking, writing, or seeing. This paper, citing essays by Krista Ratcliffe and Nikki Giovanni, demonstrates that listening is also informed by ethnicity and that a cultural bias against listening exists at the level of race and class. The paper explains that one educator hoped to help facilitate cross-cultural interaction in her classroom, so she set out to devise a simple listening heuristic that teachers and their students could use and that she could test. The paper offers some thoughts on listening and its components and summarizes some strategies used in education for the deaf. It finds that Ratcliffe's philosophy of rhetorical listening, which privileges listening and upgrades its importance in the logos, implies a listening pedagogy that demands individual and collaborative responsibility. According to the paper, preliminary findings in the educator's 2-semester study which follows student listeners' progress over a sequence of paired courses indicate that students do respond to a pedagogy emphasizing a critical listening apprenticeship based on shared negotiation--the pedagogy includes creating an undisturbed collaborative space, a sanctuary where "noise" is minimized, an opportunity for listeners/speakers to tell their respective stories to culturally and sexually contextualize their position in a discussion, and to learn to depend upon an evolving critical dialogue for interpreting what they see and hear. (Contains a 14-item rhetorical listening bibliography.) (NKA)

Rhetorical Listening in the Diverse Classroom: Understanding the Sound of Not Understanding.

by Linda Bannister

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Rhetorical Listening in the Diverse Classroom:
Understanding the Sound of Not Understanding
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In a terrific article in the December 99 issue of CCC, Krista Ratcliffe effectively demonstrates how listening is overwhelmingly backgrounded in our cultural consciousness. Despite the fact that we seem to prize a "good listener," which is a compliment used in everything from a grade school report card to a description of an ideal marriage partner, listening actually is a less privileged interpretative trope than speaking, writing or seeing. A classic example of this comes from the pop psycholinguistic text, "You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation" (1990). In it Deborah Tannen points out that our culture socializes men and women to listen differently. Men routinely listen confrontatively—challenging whoever is speaking to a verbal duel to determine who is the quicker witted, or better at repartee. Women, on the other hand, often listen by smiling, nodding, asking clarification or restatement-type questions and providing encouraging verbal cues. Men listen via these implied questions: Have I won? Do you respect me? Women are socialized to listen by implying, Have I been helpful? and Do you like me? (Tannen, 129) Thus, Tannen argues that listening is gendered and subordinated, as women are to men and listening is to speaking.

Ratcliffe goes on to demonstrate that listening is also informed by ethnicity and that a cultural bias against listening also exists at the level of race and class. Specifically, listening is not as necessary for white people as it is for people of color.

Ratcliffe presents this via Nikki Giovanni's classic argument in her essay on racism included in the book *Racism 101*. She draws on the 1959 film *Imitation of Life* (1959, Directed by Douglas Sirk) to illustrate how the average white woman doesn't understand the average black woman. Lana Turner's character Lora says to her maid Annie, played by Juanita Moore, "I didn't know you belonged to a lodge." The black maid replies, "Well, Miss Lora, you never asked." Giovanni comments: "There was no women's movement; there was a white women's movement and black women never were, nor felt included. It's all been an imitation of life to us, and the long walk home won't change that" (Giovanni 85-86). White speakers (and listeners) wear the blinders (or ear stops) that privilege affords them. The white woman Lora has not imagined her maid's life, beyond the cleaning she does, while the black woman Annie is privy to the intimate details of Lora's life. How can one listen to that which one is neither curious about nor even politely attentive to? Arguably, black-white relations have improved since the time *Imitation of Life* was filmed, but many cross-cultural relationships are marked by a perceived superiority on one member's part that often results in listening "neglect." Not uncommon in such relationships is reciprocal neglect caused by both members' perceived superiority.

Ratcliffe goes on to demonstrate powerfully how listening has been diminished, not only by gendered and cultural relationships but also by our current logos, or system of discourse within which a culture reasons and derives its truths. Speech and writing are *masterly* expressions and reading is a means of mastering the masterly expression. All three, speech, writing and reading subsume listening, which has become the least powerful form of logos. Ratcliffe makes a call for restoring listening to a more powerful

position in the contemporary logos and for us to become "apprentices of listening rather than masters of discourse" (Ratcliffe, 203). Broadly, she calls for listening to exist in fuller, undivided logos, where we do not read for what we can agree with or challenge (as academic reading teaches). Instead she suggests we listen for the "exiled excess and contemplate its relation to our culture and our selves" (203). It's not naïve, relativistic empathy (I'm Ok, You're OK), but an ethical responsibility to argue for what we deem fair and just while simultaneously questioning what we deem fair and just. She advocates a "strategic idealism when listening with the intent to understand." She defines understanding as a kind of "standing under" a discourse to listen for more than a speaker/writer's intent or for our own self-interested intent, but with intent. Intent to understand the claims, the cultural logics within which the claims function *and* the "rhetorical negotiations" of understanding (205). Such listening, Ratcliffe says is listening with the intent to receive not master a discourse. Ideally, listening can become a "trope for interpretive invention" (220).

With Ratcliffe's philosophy of listening in mind, I set out to devise a simple listening heuristic that teachers and their students could use, test it, and report the results here at CCCC 2001. I hoped to help facilitate cross-cultural interaction in my classroom, and create an environment where better listening could occur. My research started with definitions; though Ratcliffe's was thorough, I hoped to add to it.

We are all aware of the distinction between hearing and listening: to hear is merely physiological; to listen is a "psychological posture culturally disposed" (Jeff Rasula, "Understanding the Sound of Not Understanding" in *Close Listening*, Oxford University Press, 1998, 233). The implication is, of course, that to hear is to simply

receive and register an aural signal, while to listen is to “understand.” The cultural dimension of listening actually suggests that listening involves much more (or much less) than understanding. Because listening is a physiological posture culturally disposed, it usually involves “correction” and/or “displacement” of a given signal.

When students and teachers in diverse classrooms listen to each other, they inevitably correct and/or displace what they hear to fit their own psychological and cultural being(s). Sometimes this process serves “understanding” by leveling differences and emphasizing commonalities, but often it results in confusion and misunderstanding. Race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexual orientation are, arguably, the major factors that affect listening. Ethnicity and gender are the two most researched and commented upon categories, so I planned to focus my efforts there.

LMU faculty members are trained in our Teaching Center to recognize the socio-cultural factors that influence their teaching and their students’ learning and are given strategies to raise cultural sensitivity. We are instructed on how to create a “safe” classroom via some notes on class discussion. These include the following:

- No personal attacks.
- No language that offends.
- Deal with language that may be offensive to you.
- Examine unintentionally offensive comments for their source.

This list of suggestions of course implies that the students’ *listening* will have an enormous impact on their class discussion, and that personal attacks, offensive language, and even unintentionally offensive language are probably routinely displaced and misunderstood. Though the list is unquestionably humane and intends to respect

diversity, it might be impossible to implement unless listening skills are directly addressed.

So, what does real listening look like, ideally the productive, rhetorical kind Ratcliffe wants to promote? It occurred to me, as I read through definitions offered by psychologists, philosophers, cultural critics and rhetoricians, that it might be useful to go back again to the physiological, to explore how Deaf Studies defines listening and how educators of the deaf approach their students. If, in fact, listening is a rhetorical act, it is also one in which cultures, communities, disciplines and selves construct boundaries. People (and students) inevitably create boundaries between themselves and others, between themselves and texts by the way they listen. It seemed to be common sense that we all are, to varying degrees in varying contexts *deaf* to one another. What do deafness and not listening have in common? What do deaf educators have to teach us?

The culturally insensitive listener (or non-rhetorical listener Ratcliffe might say) is possibly analogous to what is called a "partially hearing or hearing-impaired person" in Deaf Studies jargon. Such a person has difficulty cutting through all the ambient noise and hearing the central or primary message. (In Ratcliffe's terms, the "cultural logic" might be masking the central "claim.") Deaf Studies teaches that the "listening environment" must be "noise" free. "Unwanted sound" must be kept out (Webster and Wood, 180) and seating position of the hearing-impaired child must be carefully considered. Also long stretches of "unpunctuated listening" without practical tasks or concrete examples can severely task the hearing impaired. Hearing-impaired persons should also always be able to see the speaker's face and body to take advantage of

facial expression and gesture clues. They also can be helped to hear by being adopted by another child who is less impaired (*Children with Hearing Difficulties*, 179-180). All of these Deaf Education practices are useful to the Rhetorical Listening Teacher.

Other phenomena observed by educators of the deaf or hearing-impaired include "storytelling" as an aid to listening. When speakers "talk" to the deaf, they need to "set the scene" before relaying the most vivid experience or salient event(s). Coherent conversation with the deaf involves "storytelling" to flesh out the bridge to literacy. Also questions, by their nature are demanding and controlling. The hearing-impaired need to be trained to become equal partners in the conversation and allowed to "question the questions," and contribute to the topic (*Teaching and Talking with Deaf Children*, 50).

Educators of the deaf have identified a "deaf personality" (*Deaf Young People and Their Families*, 182), or a person who exhibits a lack of sensitivity to others, over dependence, unsociability, impatience, and often react with anger and aggression. This description is dramatically similar to one offered repeatedly by my colleagues who teach in our core "American Cultures" courses in describing culturally insensitive individuals. Deaf people are described as in crucial need of "wide peer group social interaction because it facilitates the development of interpersonal and intimacy skills, including cooperating with others, resolving conflict, and developing flexibility in relation to others" (*Understanding Deafness Socially*, 65).

Reciprocity and mutual aid are hallmarks of the deaf community; everything from car pools to care during sickness is a social interaction/group support that creates solidarity and an opportunity to communicate cultural norms through behavior *and* language. Some deaf educators subscribe to "Total Communication" (133), where all

the teachers, students, and parents, hearing and deaf, are encouraged to sign and talk simultaneously. The more MCE (Manually Encoded English) is seen and spoken English is heard together, the faster over all communication skills are said to develop.

Deaf children are encouraged to use language in "collaborative contexts where meaning is being made and shared" (*Rethinking the Education of Deaf Students*, 37). Creative drama can help language use flourish among deaf children (39), where they tell stories or recreate literary characters through role-playing and reveal meaning they can't always articulate in words." Also rather than include merely readable texts, meaty or provocative texts may inspire more skills/language practice (157).

In general, deaf or partially hearing persons are encouraged to assist hearing by using their other senses and by filling in information through guesswork. Some deaf students are understandably resentful about their situation and hearing people and resist such techniques. This is similar to a culturally insensitive/deaf person who refuses to listen to what's being said and is not disposed to making any "hunches" in attempting to understand.

Rhetoric tells us that shared conclusions follow from shared beginnings. All students are deeply enmeshed in powerful cultural icons or ways of approaching problems and issues (these are the cultural logics to which Ratcliffe refers). If these icons or logics are questioned by others, it's easy to see why they resist when we ask them to grant others agency, to value others' identities while their own are disallowed. Moving from the monologic to the dialogic is essential for both parties in a "conversation" if rhetorical listening is to occur. In a classroom, which is by definition, a site of difference, a "contact zone" between often-conflicting cultures (à la Mary Louise

Pratt), rhetorical listening is impossible without some of the collaboration and negotiation the Deaf Pedagogy summarized above implies. Ratcliffe's philosophy of rhetorical listening, which privileges listening and upgrades its importance in our logos, implies a listening pedagogy that demands individual and collaborative responsibility. Deaf Pedagogy holds some promise here, if we accept the premise that cultural insensitivity is a kind of deafness or impaired hearing. My preliminary findings (I'm in the midst of 4 case studies of student listeners representing both sexes and 4 ethnic groups—a 2-semester study following their progress over a sequence of paired courses in their major) indicate that students do respond to a pedagogy emphasizing a critical listening apprenticeship based on shared negotiation. The pedagogy includes creating an undisturbed collaborative space, a sanctuary where "noise" is minimized, an opportunity for listeners/speakers to tell their respective stories to culturally and sexually contextualize their position in a discussion, and to learn to depend upon an evolving critical dialogue for interpreting what they all say and hear. Students are asked to attend to (and comment upon when relevant) their own and others' expressions, gestures and postures when they substantively contribute to meaning-making. Creative drama is used to role-play ideas when misunderstanding persists, and students are assigned "buddies" that may or may not share their ethnic heritage. Purposefully thorny texts with multi-cultural perspectives are chosen as the subjects of class discussion. Admittedly, these are not startlingly new methodologies, but the rhetorical listening perspective that launches them is most promising. I'm eager to report on my case studies, which will be completed in the Spring 2002.

I'd like to end with a quote from Krisnamurti:

“. . . (M)ost of us listen through a screen of resistance. We are screened with prejudices, whether religious or spiritual, psychological or scientific; or with our daily worries, desires and fears. And with these for a screen, we listen. Therefore, we listen really to our own noise, to our own sound, not to what is being said. It is extremely difficult to put aside our training, our prejudices, our inclination, our resistance, and, reaching beyond the verbal expression, to listen so that we understand That is going to be one of our difficulties (*The Art of Listening*, Preface).” Listening is difficult, but rhetorical listening holds much promise for us all – in our classrooms and in conference, wherever people speak and want to be heard.

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