

Active Listening

Unlike writing and speaking, listening has traditionally been treated as a given, rather than as a skill to be explicitly taught, practiced, and developed, particularly at the college level. But strong listening is central to effective teaching and meaningful learning—it enables us to better understand our students’ perspectives and progress, and fosters their deeper apprehension of content.

“Active listening” is just what it sounds like: a transformation from conceiving of a listener as a passive recipient of information into a responsible participant in the communication process. Thus, encouraging active listening in the classroom shifts a top-down approach that positions students as passive consumers into a more dialogic learning environment, where students are reflecting on and responding to course material—and thereby learning more deeply.

Try these activities to foster active listening:

- Require students to have note-taking tools in hand during discussions, and model active listening yourself by taking notes you sometimes share with the class.
- Make the goal of a particular act of listening explicit: Are students listening in order to discuss later? In order to gather information? To pose a follow-up question? To evaluate the content of what they’ve heard? To identify a main idea or important detail? As you identify the type of listening they need to do, consider too that related skills may differ. For example, listening to evaluate usually demands analytical, deconstructive skills, while listening for a main idea relies on synthesis.
- In class discussions, ask students to use the LARA method of responding (listen, affirm, respond, and add) in order to keep them focused on one another, not only what they have to contribute.
- When students are formally presenting to the class, provide a “listening guide” that asks the audience to perform targeted listening (rather than merely seeking their evaluation of the presentation’s efficacy). For example, you might ask listeners to list the presenter’s strongest evidence, restate their central message, or describe the moment of least clarity.
- In lectures, pause for students to respond to content either in writing or by talking with a neighbor.
- Ask students to share in pairs, and then to summarize their partner’s work for the whole class.
- Model for students that active listening is a form of inclusion, and that the listener is responsible for attending to the speaker’s communication without bias.

References

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- Lippi-Green, Rosina. *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Waks, Leonard J., ed. *Listening to Teach: Beyond Didactic Pedagogy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015.

See also

- In-class Writing
- Inclusive Pedagogy