

Do You Hear Me Now? An Active Listening Exercise for Teachers

Listening well—actively and deeply—is a skill that requires both **attention** and **intention**. It starts with our ears (making sense of words as well as the speaker’s tone) but also involves our eyes (body language says a lot). In a world increasingly cluttered with information, getting students to listen mindfully is a challenge. [Julian Treasure](#) suggests in a TED Talk that we are actually “losing our listening.” Teaching students to listen better will help them to succeed in your classes, as well as to engage more deeply with the world.

When you want your students to explore a specific topic or question, here’s a small group strategy to use that encourages active listening (along with offering all the advantages of collaborative learning).

Before starting this activity, review the following guidelines with your students:

First, you must listen with **openness**: suspend your judgments and biases and listen for those things with which you agree as well as those you might challenge.

Second, listen with **curiosity**: engage your desire to learn and understand, rather than to try to fix anything or simply offer your own point of view.

Third, listen **respectfully**: listen without asking questions that interrupt the speaker; jot these down and save them for later.

Fourth, listen **schematically**: listen for patterns, trends, and for what is not being said.

Fifth, listen **intentionally**: decide what you intend to do with the information you’ll learn.

There are only two rules:

1. Each person in the group must speak once before anyone can speak a second or third time.
2. If someone asks a question, someone else must answer it before another comment can be made.

Step One: Break the students into small groups of four or five.

Step Two: Give them the topic or question that you would like them to discuss.

Step Three: Each group should identify or appoint a group leader who will make sure the rules are followed and time is observed.

Step Four: One person begins by saying something about the topic or starting point question; the others listen using the guidelines noted above.

Step Five: Another student asks a follow-up question or comments about what has just been said.

Step Six: Repeat Steps Four and Five until everyone has spoken at least twice, or for a specific amount of time.

Step Seven: The group leader, with help from the group, summarizes the conversation and identifies any patterns or insights that emerged or developed.

Step Eight: Report out to the class.

You could follow this activity with a reflective journal entry, asking students what surprised them (it may be the difficulty of listening actively) and what new or interesting points/ideas they learned.

The first few times you try this, you may need to float around the room, encouraging students to stay on task. Once they get the hang of it, you'll find this activity combines active listening, active learning, collaborative learning, and writing, all strategies that help students to probe and reflect on their own learning.

Additional Resources:

Artze-Vega, Isis. "Active Listening: Seven Ways to Help Students Listen, Not Just Hear." Faculty Focus: Higher Ed Teaching Strategies from Magna Publications. 10/1/2012. <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/active-listening-seven-ways-to-improve-students-listening-skills/>

Mankell, Henning. "The Art of Listening." The New York Times. Opinion. 12.10.2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/opinion/sunday/in-africa-the-art-of-listening.html?_r=0