

Learning to Listen to Student Voices: Teaching with Our Mouths Shut

Much of the power of the teacher resides in the capacity not to do work *for* students, through talk, purveyance and control, but in the willingness to work *with* students, through listening, accommodation, and collaboration, so that students can come to work *by* themselves.

I was struck in reading the articles in this issue how closely the student voices here match what we know from the research base, regarding, for instance, the engagement and learning that accrues from choice, talk, personal exploration and expression; from building instruction from preexisting interests; through getting outside the traditional instructional paradigms, such as I-R-E (teacher Initiates a question, students Respond, and the teacher Evaluates), with movement toward dialogic instruction where teacher and students co-construct curriculum and understanding. (See Wilhelm, 2007, for a review of such curriculum; Nystrand, 1997, for dialogic curriculum.)

The Teacher-Researcher as Listener

The power of *inquiry orientations* toward teaching and learning has long been a research interest of mine (Wilhelm, 2007; Wilhelm, Wilhelm, & Boas, 2009), and it can be justified in many ways, including on the basis of what the students in this issue have to say about engaging and powerful learning. An inquiry orientation means that we are rigorously inducting students into actual

disciplinary expertise—helping them to do what real readers, writers, and experts do—but in such a way that they can express their own thinking and explore their own identities vis à vis important disciplinary, world, and life issues. In such a case, the learning is purposeful and important, both personally and in terms of the discipline and wider culture; it is also a form of identity work, the primary task of adolescence (Erikson, 1963). Inquiry approaches, both in planning and execution, require “listening” to students.

In this column, I’ll make a case for another kind and level of inquiry and of listening: *teacher research* through which teachers learn from their students how to best teach them. If we do not allow students to do observable forms of work each day, and if we do not explicitly ask students what works to assist them, then we have lost the most powerful data sources available to make us better teachers—our students and their work.

Formative Assessments as Listening

Teacher research is mostly about setting up conditions and mechanisms to learn from your students what they are learning, what challenges they are facing, and what and how to best teach them next.

Asking and listening. You can learn from students how best to teach them by asking them explicitly about issues that affect their learning. You can ask them to simply name what they understand or find challenging. During class, you can ask students to give thumbs up/down about particular concepts and get immediate feedback, or use the “five finger method” in which students

are asked to flash all five fingers for complete understanding and confidence in what has been learned all the way down to a fist if they are totally confused. Simple written formative assessments can also help teachers to quickly assess what students have learned and what challenges they face, helping to plan the next lesson in a way that will assist them. One example is “muddy/marvy,” a form of feedback in which each student writes on one sticky note something she learned that excites her or that she can use in her final project; on a second sticky note, she writes one question, concern, or confusion to convey something she needs to know more about.

This past year, when students in the ninth-grade classroom of my student teacher Kaidi Stroud were not doing their homework, she asked them to write about how they did their homework and the challenges they faced getting it done. She found that most of her students had pretty good excuses: they had to take care of siblings or had sports and jobs, or faced other challenges. “Listening” in this way helped Kaidi to better understand her students and to teach them better by accommodating their life situations.

Process analyses: Eliciting and listening to students’ processes. Likewise, I’ve been using more and more process analyses of major assignments; that is, I ask students to tell me the story of their learning—how they went about completing different assignments and what they learned from this process. I often learn more from these analyses than I do from the completed assignments! I have students keep process portfolios of their work throughout a unit and compose cover sheets for various entries explaining what each item demonstrates about their challenges, what they have achieved, how they have improved, and how they might proceed. In this way, I not only learn from my students, but by consciously naming and reflecting on the process, they learn in very conscious ways from their own experience about how to learn.

Observing as listening. Of course, teacher research can also work more implicitly by simply watching and listening in on students on a daily

basis. Of course, there has to be something to listen to and work to observe. Each class period, I like to go through what I call “PPDD”—Purpose–Process–Differentiation–Deliverable. My classes always involve students *doing* something. At the beginning of each activity, I introduce that activity and its purpose vis à vis the unit goals and culminating project. If students are unfamiliar with the activity, I describe the process quickly and make available a written protocol. The protocol provides options for achieving the goal in different ways. Finally, there is a deliverable that requires accountability for each student and that will reveal to me and to them what they understand and do not yet understand; silent discussions where questions and uptake are written down, written think-alouds, one-sentence summaries, visual techniques like picture mapping and tableaux, drama work, and action strategies are all wonderful ways of providing visible signs of accomplishment and accountability that provide formative assessment data.

Environmental teaching: Creating supportive situations for learning. The educational enterprise should be about the primacy of the process of *learning*, and *teaching* is important insofar as it serves learning. Teaching involves creating the situations, structures, and levels of assistance that lead to learning, what George Hillocks (1995) calls “environmental teaching,” i.e., the act of planning our teaching by creating situations and activities that will lead students to construct new understandings and develop new capacities. Such work must be based on what we learn from our students.

To create a powerful learning environment, the teacher as researcher has these jobs:

1. Organizing student inquiries by creating and sequencing activities, moving from what is close to student experience and interest to that which is further away, moving from the known to the new.
2. Creating situations in which conceptual understandings related to the inquiry will be shared—the teacher’s, those of experts, those of the students.

3. Creating situations in which procedural understandings—particular ways of knowing—will be modeled, mentored, and monitored, always ending in students' independent use.
4. Monitoring each day what and how students are learning so the next day's lessons can address student needs, propel them through their zones of proximal development, and help them outgrow their current selves.

Teaching with our mouths shut. Learning involves working through new concepts and processes that develop in concert through purpose-driven activity. *Learning* involves thinking, talking, writing, composing, acting, and applying. *Teaching* involves listening and watching, responding and collaborating in ways that extend students' continuing impulse and capacity to learn. *Teaching* is often about not knowing, but it is about wanting to know and knowing how to proceed. *Learning* is about learning why and how to learn; it is about the willingness and capacity to engage in sustained investigations, perhaps extending over a lifetime.

All of this means “teaching with our mouths shut,” the title of a wonderful book I've been reading by Donald Finkle (2000). Finkle points out that when we teach with our mouths shut, we have a lot to do, but what we do is in service of students taking over the work and constructing the understandings. We teach questioning strategies in the context of the inquiry so that students learn to ask the questions and set the agenda for discussions. We instruct students how to do think-alouds (Wilhelm, 2001) so they can share and improve and refine each others' reading and thinking. We teach how to create substantive presentations and engage in group work so that they can teach each other how to interact, how to learn, and what is significant. Student understanding becomes a subject as well as a goal of learning. We help students to write and engage in “process analyses” in journals, blogs, and wikis, so they can learn from each other the procedural, and we assist them to compose culminating projects that classmates will read or view to learn

about the conceptual. All of these kinds of activities help students to “listen” to themselves, and to each other, and also help teachers to listen to students as learners.

Conclusion: The Classroom as a Community of Learners; The School as an Intellectual Community of Teacher-Researchers

Through inquiry, the classroom can become a vital and engaging intellectual community that requires all of its members. It requires student voices for planning, for teaching, for working through, negotiating and representing what is learned. Those of us engaged in teaching through this kind of inquiry know the joy with which students undertake work that is meaningful to them, work that explores and expresses identity and possible selves, work that displays growing competence and actual accomplishment.

Schools, too, can become empowering and joyous places for teachers when they engage with their students and each other as an intellectual and inquiring community, learning to learn together, “listening” and learning from each other. At my National Writing Project site, we have a vital teacher inquiry community that supports school-based book clubs, study groups, professional learning communities, and teacher-research groups. When teachers inquire together, they not only create a professional community that helps all members to outgrow themselves, they also experience and model what they can help students to do together as well.

In my experience, engaging in this kind of learning always involves careful “listening” and a powerful form of pleasure—it is often “hard fun,” but it is fun nonetheless. Let us not forget the pleasure of a significant and challenging task, and the greater pleasure of successfully meeting it *with other people*. Helping students to do this kind of inquiry, and doing this kind of work together with other reflective teachers, makes it more powerful, more pleasurable, and more worth doing.

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