

Service-Learning Course: Listening Post

Source: Landry-Meyer, L., Miller, A.W., Herman, S., & McDonnell, K.S. (2014, October). Developmental relationships and civic-minded graduates: Listening Post. In Dominquez, N. & Gandert, Y. (Eds.) *7th Annual Mentoring Conference Proceedings: Developmental networks: Mentoring and coaching at work*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico.

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ABSTRACT

The service learning course, Listening Post, cultivates developmental relationships with peers, undergraduate teaching assistants (UTAs), and co-instructors in two cohorts each semester: newbie and alumni. The use of alumni (students who have successfully completed the course) is educationally beneficial (Smith, 2008), enhances developmental relationships, and promotes course sustainability as alumni sustain the service of listening while the new cohort is trained.

Developmental relationships enhance student success to become civic minded graduates (CMG). A civic-minded graduate is considered someone who has completed a course of study and has the capacity and desire to work with others to achieve the common good (Bingle & Steinberg, 2010). The intersection of three dimensions: student identity, educational experiences, and civic experiences contribute to the development of a CMG (Steinberg & Norris, 2011) and are embedded in the Listening Post. A student's inclination toward community rather than self is key in this model and is nurtured through developmental peer relationships.

We will present how intentional self-reflection combined with the learning and practice of non-judgmental listening in a supportive community environment is beneficial to the common good of a campus community. A combination of in and out-of-class peer mentoring is most effective in supporting student learning (Smith, 2008) and serves the dual purpose of developing relationships. There is an intentional connection between self, course concepts and community that supports service and learning through civic engagement (Cress, 2012). UTAs, alumni, and faculty will present their community experience based on peer teaching and other strategies (e.g., talking circles).

What is the Listening Post?

The Listening Post is an academic course with an integrated service learning requirement that was started on our campus in fall 2011. Students walk into class on the first day and observe chairs set up in a circle, a box of crayons in the middle, and live music (typically accordion or ukulele). It is intentionally set up to be unlike any other classroom they've encountered. The physical layout contributes to the development of a community atmosphere to create intimate and trusting relationships between peers, alumni, UTAs, and co-instructors.

As an academic course, it is purposefully designed to be an experiential learning environment – learning to listen to self and others. Once students learn about themselves and active listening strategies, they complete service learning hours (ranging from 2 to 6 hours/week) at a Listening Post located in the campus student union or at an off campus satellite location.

As a campus service, the Listening Post is a place just for listening – not counseling, nor giving advice. The physical layout of the Post consists of 4 camp-style chairs (2 for listeners, 2 for talkers), a 'hear' to listen sign, and a dry erase board to post a question of the day. While sometimes the Post is referred to as 'random people in chairs', it enhances the campus community, creates a welcoming environment, and offers the secure knowledge that 'somebody' is always willing to listen, no matter what. All individuals are encouraged to sit and talk with a listener in a safe public place.

Developmental Relationships

Developmental relationships can be formal or informal and occur when an individual takes an active interest to advance the development of another (Rock & Garavan, 2006). For the Listening Post, developmental relationships are formed resulting from the course and may extend over a semester or longer and are voluntary. Listening Post relationships include instrumental/practical assistance, such as mentoring, offering alternate viewpoints and emotional assistance, such as encouraging one to grow and friendship (Janssen, vanVurren, & deJon, 2013; Rock & Garavan, 2006).

There are two cohort/classes each semester: The Listening Post and the Advanced Listening Post. The Listening Post consists of new student listeners, while the Advanced Listening Post is for alumni who want to assume a peer leadership role. Each cohort class has voluntary undergraduate teaching assistants (UTAs) who have completed the course. As of May 2014, 124 students have been trained, 31 students have returned as alumni, there have been 14 UTAs, and 3 faculty members have shared the co-instructor role.

Alumni serve as peer teachers and demonstrate their knowledge through peer mentoring and class facilitation. Their dedication to the practice of listening enhances the development of other students' listening skills. As one alumni indicated, "I couldn't

resist...having the ability to continue to listen and being able to pass what I learned onto a brand new group of listeners was what lead me to continue my involvement.” Once students obtain alumni status, they are able to retrospectively recognize the value of alumni and UTAs. It is common for alumni (even those not officially enrolled in the alumni cohort) to attend and participate in the newbie class. Evidence of the commitment to the course content is that alumni who are not officially enrolled willingly attend the 3-hour night class to contribute to class discussions. Students become familiar with one another, forming trusting and supportive relationship between and among alumni. Developmental relationships are also created when students take on the responsibility of authentically listening and caring about one another.

Allowing alumni to serve as peer mentors and teachers is a valuable educational experience to them and to the students in the new cohort. As alumni are current university students, there is a perception of equality. Students appear to relate more fully to one another, so they can be supportive and learn from each other more easily. Alumni already possess the skills and experiences and willingly serve as mentors for their peers. Alumni have admitted that they are still learning themselves, but believe it is beneficial to their educational experience and personal growth for students to be taught by someone who has first hand experience at the Post.

In addition to the academic course, alumni sustain the Post during the initial weeks at the start of each semester while the new cohort is being trained. The alumni serve as the listeners during the transitional period. The Post has become a fixture on campus symbolizing a place to vent, talk, and share. This symbolization came into focus when a group of students were setting up the Post at the start of a semester and were greeted by applause and ‘glad to see you back’ demonstrating the value of knowing that someone is out there who cares enough to listen.

Bill Thompson, a retired minister who is now retired from the university, conceptualized the Listening Post. His philosophy was that a co-instructor model would demonstrate to students that power is shared within the classroom. A foundational belief was disagreements in pedagogy or viewpoint by co-instructors will be welcomed in order to model that disagreements and counterpoints are essential in dialogue and discussion. This pedagogical strategy demonstrated the need to be non-judgmental and to recognize that everyone has a different worldview even when teaching. In the same spirit, UTAs are empowered to provide a student voice during class and in the preparation of class.

Civic-Mindedness

Civic-mindedness is having a knowledge and involvement in the community with a sense of responsibility and commitment as a member of that community (Bringle, Studer, Wilson, Clayton, & Steinberg, 2011). The conceptual framework for a civic-minded graduate represents the integration of identity, educational experiences, and civic experiences (Steinberg, Hatcher, & Bringle, 2011; Steinberg & Norris, 2011). These dimensions are embedded in the Listening Post.

While course-learning outcomes are salient, the outcome of being civic-minded has become important. A student’s inclination toward community rather than self is nurtured through developmental peer relationships throughout the course. A sense of community and feeling of responsibility toward the Post and peers has evolved. While many campuses are effective in creating a sense of belonging, the simplicity of listening face-to-face in the development of community is often overlooked. The Listening Post focuses on the skill of listening while creating the developmental relationships amongst students and instructors. The course creates a culture of authentic relationships that nurture students’ while simultaneously allowing students to feel a sense of group identity allowing them to work on the developmental task of individual identity.

The **identity dimension** integrates a student’s understanding and awareness of self and their self-concept (Steinberg et al., 2011). To be an effective listener, one must learn to listen to oneself through intentional self-reflection. When students know their strengths, weakness, biases, and stressors, they can give complete attention to a talker. As stated by one alumni, “the Listening Post made me realize how poor of a listener I was when I began, and I can now tell when others are, and when they are not listening”.

Learning to be non-judgmental is one of the most important outcomes associated with self-awareness. This is not to say that you don’t ever have judgments as a listener. In fact, you sometimes do, but the learned behavior is to take note of the judgments, then gently put those judgments aside. Judging another person based on what little you know of them can give a false impression of that person. More importantly, when a judgment about a person is made, there is a shift from giving the gift of attention to what a person is saying to the process of judging. There is a loss of focus from the meaning behind what is being said to a focus on personal thoughts and ideas about the other person.

Self-reflection is the key to being a non-judgmental listener. Recognizing biases and preconceived notions that affect the ability to listen effectively is critical. These biases and notions act as a mirror, which allows a person to see only their perspective. Good listeners should act like a window allowing them to see others’ perspectives. It is important, when being an effective listener, to listen through a window in a non-judgmental manner.

The **educational experiences dimension** represents academic knowledge and technical skills (Steinberg et al., 2011) gained through Listening Post. Learning and practicing of non-judgmental listening is a major component of the academic course. The primary pedagogy for the academic knowledge is the use of talking circles. A talking circle is based on the Navajo tradition where everyone in the classroom community sits in a circle with one opening (Wolf & Rickard, 2003). Each person in the circle has the opportunity to speak while the rest of the ‘community’ listens. The speaker typically holds a talisman and is the only one able to speak – no one can

affirm, or ask questions. Upon completion of sharing, the person passes the talisman to the left for the next person to speak during their turn.

While listening to others, students are to empty their thoughts and give the gift of attention to the speaker. Developing the skills of not practicing, or contemplating what one will share during their turn is a learned skill. Often, individuals focus inward to themselves thinking of what they will share or how this talker's experience is similar to theirs. This inward shift means the listener is not listening. The offering of attention is often a new gift that many individuals are not used to. Seeing the effects of giving such a simple gift of attention is intrinsically rewarding. When the individual has been heard, you can see them smiling and being put into an overall positive mood. Talking circles develop listening skills, foster respect for others' viewpoints, and develop a deep sense of community among participants. By the end of the semester, students recognize when their attention shifts and learn the skills required to give the gift of attention and to be nonjudgmental.

Talking circles are reflections that stimulate growth in the skills of citizenship by involving students in the process of community building and inspiring the developing of listening skills. As students listen to one another, there is a shared personal experience that emerges. Students analyze and explore the meaning of their knowledge and experiences in the context of a community of fellow learners. The communal format of the talking circle requires a great deal of openness and honesty from students, an important educational experience and personal growth opportunity. The strong community created in the talking circle reflective process makes students aware of their place in community settings allowing them to become sensitive to their impact on that community, promoting social responsibility.

The **civic experiences** dimension embodies leadership, participation, civic organization, and service (Steinberg et al., 2011). A student's inclination toward community rather than self is key and is nurtured through developmental peer relationships within the Listening Post. As a service-learning course, students are 'tested' through their listening ability and are constantly tuning and improving their listening skills becoming better listeners. Students and alumni provide an outlet for people to be truly and fully heard without fear of being judged or misunderstood. The most common parting comment after being heard is: "I really needed that" or "I'll be back" or "I wish I had known about this earlier" or "I feel so much better, thank you".

The Listening Post has evolved from one on-campus location in the student union to satellite locations in the community (e.g., Ronald McDonald House, an assisted living facility, and local coffee house) and much more. Alumni present workshops for other university classes and organizations to educate about the value of listening and to demonstrate active listening techniques. Public talking circles have been held to reach a broader campus audience. Several students have implemented a traveling Listening Post across America tour taking the skills they learned in the course 'across America' stopping in each of the contiguous states and hosting a Listening Post. Alumni assume leadership roles as alumni or as UTAs to enhance the Post by extending the communal benefits of being heard. Weekly reflection journals from listeners document the value-added to the campus community by providing an outlet for others to be heard. Listening is a way to build an authentic community.

Summary

The Listening Post is a transformative class for students. It is congruent with the developmental needs of students, specifically identity formation and the human need to be heard. When the developmental needs of students are met, a relevance to learning is created, empowering students to be engaged in the learning process. The sharing of self during class often provides a sense of personal validation and belonging to a community. There is an intentional connection between self (identity), course concepts (educational experience) and community (civic experience) that is weaved throughout the Listening Post. The culmination is the creation of civic-minded graduates.

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