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Active listening for effective student engagement

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Presentation abstract

Active listening can play a key and positive role in our relationships with others (Wolvin and Coakley, 2000; Bodie, 2011; Ellis and Abbot, 2018). When we fail to listen, we risk a lack of trust, empathy and insight; all crucial in effective communication. Whilst a lot of literature focuses on how active listening benefits students who use it, there is less understanding of the role of learning developers actively listening to students (Canpolat et al., 2015; Shernof, et al., 2017; Eggenburger, 2021). Active listening by learning developers is, I would argue, vital in order to properly engage with and understand students. Utilising active listening in one-to-one situations, for example, may give students more confidence to express themselves and improve their relationship with and perception of their educational experience (Lochtie, 2018). True active listening requires the listener to tune into the words of another person and suspend their assumptions (Lipari, 2010); embracing 'listening being' in our learning development practice may create a more positive student experience by building a person-centred atmosphere (Lipari, 2010). With discussions around the importance of developing a sense of belonging in students gaining traction even before the COVID-19 pandemic, active listening deserves more attention. Moreover, in the context of high workloads and the increasing pressures of our higher education system, active listening is a neglected area of personal and professional development (Wolvin and Coakley, 2000). In this workshop, participants discussed how active listening can enhance their interactions with students whether online or in person. We refined our skills through practical, reflective activities, with a focus on the issues that impede our ability to listen and how we can improve. We also considered how listening feels from different perspectives and what kinds of behaviours we expect from a listener.

Keywords: active listening; reflection; student; one-to-one; conversation.

Community Response

Angela's session prompted attendees to critically reflect on their understanding of active listening, associated techniques and the importance of such skills in terms of working in the field of learning development:

> We shared our experiences with table activities, first reflecting on the things that influence us in conversational settings – for me it was a partnership between finding a pause in the conversation and the need to take time to reflect on the discussion (before it moves on)! We identified possible solutions and social cues, as well as listening within different professional and personal settings.

> Before this session I would have described myself as a good listener but this session made me much more aware of the skills needed to truly actively listen. For many learning developers time is a constraint (30 minutes back-to-back appointments) where we have to adapt quickly to the student in front of us, judging how much active listening we can honestly engage in. I have always been very conscious of the power of silence within conversations as I think this gives students space to consider their responses and feel listened to. However, I also feel we are under constant pressure to do this quickly, efficiently and with a clear outcome at the end, so actively listening then invariably includes thinking ahead and being less in the moment as I might want to be.

Some of the key takeaways for session attendees included:

How to use of silence when working with students:

> This relaxed and collaborative session highlighted the expectations that we face to maintain and prioritise communication. This can be interpreted in different ways, but it is interesting to hear that, as professionals, we can be reluctant to embrace a silence and listen actively.

> If we are speaking, why are we speaking?

The extent to which conversations with students need to be guided:

The last reflection makes me wonder whether ultimately it is important to both actively listen and pro-actively guide conversations at times. Active listening is definitely important, but students do not come to us because they want sponges who soak up everything they say. That is an important part, but we also have a role as the expert or mediator who is more familiar with university learning and who can put things into perspective a bit…

The importance of being present in conversations:

This session really got me thinking about the potential tensions that can emerge between demonstrating active listening (such as 'performing' active listening via verbal and bodily cues) and actually being present in a way that allows the listener to fully absorb and engage with what is being said. I think we need to acknowledge that one often comes at the expense of another and there needs to be space for both for a discussion to be productive. It has also prompted me to be more reflective on what good listening really 'looks like' (beyond the normative framing of nodding, smiling, and minimal responses). To me this seems heavily context dependent and requires an ongoing process of micro-observational and adaptive skills (although of course we cannot think of it as such within the moment as the self-consciousness that would come with this makes it very difficult to actually 'be present').

Awareness and consideration of social and cultural listening norms:

The group came together at the end and we had quite an interesting wider discussion about indigenous cultures and their listening norms.

Next steps and additional questions

Two key questions that were generated by this session included:
- How can early career learning developers be supported to understand and develop effective active listening skills?

- How can experienced learning developers be provided with ongoing opportunities to refine their active listening techniques?

Author's reflection

It has been fascinating to read the reflections of workshop participants and their thoughts on this topic. The rich discussions in the room really do show the complexities of active listening and the balance that we often feel we have to strike in student discussions between listening and guiding. With the luxury of time, this becomes less problematic, but logistical constraints mean that we are often under pressure and this can inhibit our ability to listen well.

The depth of discussions and reflections prompted by this workshop show how personal and yet universal our experiences of listening are. There is much to be learned, for example, by deploying silence in conversation, as a means of giving space for processing and allowing a conversation to find its natural course rather than filling silence with less useful inputs.

I am also conscious that the experience of listening can be very different in an online context. This is not something that we specifically focused on during the workshop, but I think that 'cameras off' situations can produce a listening dynamic which is perhaps more honest in that it removes the 'performative' element of showing that one is actively listening. This became very apparent during the pandemic when flipping our one-to-one consultations online resulted in adapting to a new listening context. Contrasting online and in person listening would be an interesting line of future discussion and reading.

I hope that the workshop has stimulated further conversations about listening beyond the immediate participants. Listening is a fundamental professional skill and I continue to try to improve my listening with a view to giving students a better one-to-one experience and meeting them where they are more effectively. More widely, I think that listening well is a life-skill that can have positive repercussions in all aspects of life, which is as good a reason as any to think about it more deeply.

Acknowledgements

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