

Introduction

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Did you ever sit in a classroom while a teacher talked her way through a lesson and you felt so tired you had to place your head on your desk? Can you remember looking up to see half your fellow students horsing around or falling asleep? Can you remember listening to a teacher lecturing to your class and wondering “what does this lesson have to do with *me*?”

Or let’s turn this around. Maybe you already are a teacher. You’ve had a course to teach with pre-set learning objectives, a curriculum guide, a textbook and a final exam. Your job was to “cover” the material and prepare your students for the test. So you found *yourself* talking your way through lessons, drilling on important facts to be learned and memorized, or cognitive routines to be mastered. You’ve looked up and half of *your* students were horsing around or falling asleep, or looking up at you with their eyes asking “what has this lesson got to do with *me*?” And you have thought “something is wrong with this picture; something has to change.”

If you’ve had these experiences and they’ve troubled you, you are not alone.

When didactic methods—those based on teacher talk and passive student listening—dominate instruction, students and teachers suffer from boredom, exhaustion, and alienation. Critics have condemned these methods for more than 150 years as “cram school” and “test prep.” The educational visionary Paulo Freire (2000) calls didactic pedagogy the “banking” method—teachers make deposits of knowledge for students to store in their memory vaults—and he says it causes “narrative sickness” for both teachers and learners. Yet didactic pedagogy continues to dominate schooling even today. There has to be a better way.

The Problem with Didactic Methods— Teacher Talk and Passive Listening

More than 100 years ago—which is a long time ago but also long *after* didactic methods had already been soundly denounced by educational critics and professors in teacher education programs—the eminent American philosopher and educator John Dewey identified didactic pedagogy as *the* foremost problem in education. In *School and Society*, Dewey (1899) tells an amusing tale:

Some few years ago I was looking about the school supply stores in the city, trying to find desks and chairs which seemed thoroughly suitable from all points of view—artistic, hygienic, and educational—to the needs of the children. We had a great deal of difficulty in finding what we needed, and finally one dealer, more intelligent than the rest, made this remark: “I am afraid we have not what you want. You want something at which the children may work; these are all for listening.”¹

Dewey uses this anecdote to introduce “listening” as a term of art that extends beyond listening in the ordinary sense to include other forms of passive information reception in didactic teaching.

The attitude of listening means, comparatively speaking, passivity, absorption; that there are certain ready-made materials which are there, which have been prepared by the school superintendent, the board, the teacher, and of which the child is to take in as much as possible in the least possible time. (SS, mw.1.22)

Dewey notes that most reading in schools, e.g., reading from textbooks and basal readers, is also a kind of listening: students listen in their minds’ ears, so to speak, to reading contents that are predetermined by some external authority without regard to students’ present interests and purposes, and in contexts where they have no opportunities to respond. He says:

If everything is on a “listening” basis, you can have uniformity of material and method. The ear, and the book which reflects the ear, constitute the medium which is alike for all. There is next to no opportunity for adjustment to varying capacities and demands. (SS, mw.1.22)

School reading and teacher talk convey ready-made, secondhand materials, which even when heard remain unassimilated, not understood: just so many words standing “on a dead level, hostile to the selective arrangements characteristic of thinking . . . existing as verbal symbols to be mechanically manipulated” (Dewey, “Contributions to A Cyclopedia of Education,” *Collected Works* mw.7.268).

Such materials, he says, “inevitably (have) a disintegrating intellectual influence” (Dewey, *How We Think, Collected Works* mw.6.326). Simply put, didactic methods cannot support thinking and learning. Thinking and learning are individual acts—of gathering materials, selecting from them and then organizing the elements selected, along with other resources, in creative ways, to serve individual or group purposes. In didactic instruction the materials are already all selected and organized without regard to learners’ unique purposes, and without use of their specific capabilities.

We have to wonder why didactic methods continue to dominate instruction. And the answer is not hard to find. Despite their drawbacks, these methods are, surprisingly, quite well adapted to both the classroom situation and the larger society.

Classrooms are crowded with young people brimming with energy that must be controlled and directed. Intuitively, it may appear that without top-down control youthful creative energies in pursuit of emerging purposes would erupt in chaotic, boisterous, and noisy activity that would bring learning to a halt. In response, didactic pedagogy positions teachers in the front of the room where they can observe, direct, and control students and keep a lid on their energies. The historians Larry Cuban and David Tyack (1995) identify a complex arrangement of didactic methods, preset objectives, text books, and exams as forming a “grammar” of teaching. Like the rules of grammar in a language that allow us to put nouns, verbs, and adjectives together efficiently to form meaningful sentences, this grammar of teaching allows teachers to put together activities—lectures, text readings, work sheets, quizzes, and exams—into a workable and efficient pattern that is well-adapted to crowded classrooms.

In short, didactic pedagogy persists because it works—not so much to help learners learn how to think but to prevent chaos so teachers can “cope.”

Shifting to the social context, Robert Dreeben (1968) added that didactic methods also work to prepare young people for life in society. Most of the roles in advanced industrial societies, he noted, don’t demand thinking or creative intelligence. Workers in industrial factories or corporate offices perform repetitive tasks under close supervision. Creative thinking is counterproductive

on the job. It is more likely to be crushed than rewarded. Citizens in these societies, moreover, are not expected or encouraged to take an active interest in political governance; other than voting every four years they are encouraged to leave governing to political leaders. The rules and habits that young people pick up from learning in classrooms structured by the standard grammar of teaching—passive listening, following rules, subjecting themselves to authority—actually prepare them well for life in existing society.

Nonetheless, as long as didactic pedagogy has been around, many educators have detested it and explored alternatives—pedagogies that can liberate the energies and intelligence of teachers and students while still keeping chaos at bay—pedagogies that can reduce the stress of teaching and make learning exciting and personally meaningful for students—pedagogies that can prepare learners for creative intelligence and democratic social life. Some of their most important findings are documented in this book.

These discoveries are more important today than ever before. The industrial period has long ended and we are living in a post-industrial knowledge and information society. Routine and repetitive jobs—the ones demanding passive obedience and routine—no longer exist. All young people who hope to succeed must acquire intellectual and practical capabilities that can be put to use in novel ways to solve poorly structured, unpredicted problems. So today there is an especially pressing need to get beyond didactic methods that are “hostile to thinking.” Nonetheless the recent efforts at school reform, with their preset “world class” learning objectives, “twenty-first-century skills” and “high stakes” tests have only dug us deeper and deeper into the didactic education trap.

Listening to Teach

The problem is not simply that teachers merely talk too much, or that learners listen passively; it lies in the didactic communication pattern—where teachers talk to “cover the material” and “convey the information,” and learners listen merely to “bank” it until their exams. In just about any conceivable pedagogy, teachers will do some talking and learners some listening for information. But the alternative pedagogies explored in this book establish patterns of speaking and listening more conducive of thinking and learning. They propose methods that guide teachers in constructing discussions and other “learning by doing” activities with rich built-in occasions for communication and action. This allows teachers to limit their talk so that they can pay more attention to students, observing their activities, documenting their observations, and building upon them in subsequent lessons and learning activities. They can move

beyond preset, uniform materials and objectives, learn about their students' interests, and adjust instruction to their "varying capacities and demands." They can teach through listening—hence the phrase "pedagogy of listening" in the Reggio Emilia project approach described by Winnie Hunsburger in chapter 1.

Listening in Observation, Discussion, and Facilitation

Listening to teach can take a number of quite different forms. In the Reggio Emilia approach, teacher listening takes place before, during, and after lessons. Teachers observe learners on the playgrounds, and even in their neighborhoods. Even before they begin with their lesson planning, they listen in when their young learners talk with one another, taking notes and forming hypotheses about their interests and the kinds of lessons that will help them grow. They share their observations with colleagues and even with their classes, listening for feedback and revising their hypotheses. This kind of listening—close observation and documentation of student speech and the formation of hypotheses about workable lessons—is also prescribed in Paolo Freire's approach to critical pedagogy with adults in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and in John Dewey's classic works *Sources of a Science of Education* and *Experience and Education*.

A quite different emphasis is found in discussion-based pedagogies such as the Interpretive Discussion approach described in this volume by Elizabeth Meadows and Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon, and the Harkness Conference Method described by David Backer. In the former, teachers listen closely to learners in the course of lessons organized around texts to negotiate vital questions to be discussed. Then the teachers listen carefully to the contributions of each learner to the collaborative interpretation of the assigned text, and feed them back into the group for further elaboration or critical response by other learners as they move toward a consensus interpretation. In the Harkness method teachers may assist learners in getting the discussion moving, but then remove themselves from the center of attention and contribute primarily by their close listening as the students discuss subject matters on their own.

Still other methods of listening to teach are explored in the two chapters by Taylor, and Low and Sonntag on the Pedagogy of Discomfort. Here teachers place challenging, discomfiting material into play in order to stimulate responses from learners. These materials press against learner expectations and may reveal learner perspectives that play unwittingly into patterns of social injustice. In a sense, the learner statements themselves become subject matters to be studied. The challenge for teachers is to sensitively listen to learners as they express these perspectives so that they can be teased out, clarified, and placed on the table for discussion and reconsideration.

Still another approach is revealed in Waks's description of listening in experimental learning. Waks delineates no fewer than 11 distinct points within typical experiential learning episodes where teacher listening plays a key role in advancing the learning goals of the experiential activities. At each point, from the initial orientation to the experiential activity to the final debriefing, a distinct type of teacher listening is needed. Waks goes on to suggest that this careful delineation of moments of listening within structured lessons can serve as a model for classroom teachers.

Types of Listening

What then is listening itself? Listening is something we do as active creatures bringing our energies and learning histories into each situation as we act with purpose—to achieve our ends. Acts of listening already involve “trying to get.” We need to distinguish between different types of listening, because we listen in different ways in relation to different purposes. We listen to obtain information, to interpret texts, to learn how to do things, to sustain and improve our human relationships, to enjoy and appreciate, and to critically evaluate. No doubt many other ends require specific types of listening as well, but these are among the most important types. Listening in relation to each of these goals is something different, requiring different action steps and operations, and requiring specific skills.² Let's consider each briefly.

In *informative listening*, the aim is to obtain and understand information. To attain this goal through listening, we may take notes, make audio recordings, ask questions, ask speakers to talk more slowly or repeat or clarify what they have said, or internally rehearse speakers utterances *sub voce*. Informative listening can be improved by acquiring background knowledge, specialized vocabularies, skills of focus and concentration, note-taking, question-asking, and use of memory and organizational aids. Its success is measured by how accurately we can repeat and how well we understand. This is the primary kind of listening demanded of learners in didactic pedagogy.

A closely related kind of listening is interpretive. In *interpretive listening* the messages we confront are difficult, ambiguous, complex, or challenging. They may be vague and require clarification. They may contain multiple possible meanings that listeners need to disambiguate, or multiple levels of meaning that listeners have to disentangle and relate to one another in one complex whole. Literary, religious, and legal texts often require interpretation in these ways. Interpretive listening is the primary mode for both teachers and students

in Interpretive Discussion pedagogy as discussed by Elizabeth Meadows and Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon later in this book.

In *practical* listening the aim is to learn how to do something, to learn to do it better, or to understand procedures and practices. To attain this goal through listening, we may imitate the action sequences of those instructing us in *practica* or real action situations by “following the leader.” While acting we listen attentively for feedback and correction. Practical listening can be improved through attitudes of docility, willingness to trust and submit to guidance and emulate others, development of attentiveness and care, and repetition of lessons through drill and practice routines. Its success is measured by how well we perform. If, after instruction, the learner cannot perform the task or follow the procedure, he or she may be told “you didn’t listen.”

In *relational* listening we listen to sustain or improve our relationships. To attain this goal through listening we attend to both utterances and emotional resonances without critical judgment. Often our listening involves a quieting of our own minds and a silencing of our own speech. We listen for clues about the other’s situation and hopes, and for things we can do to assist. In *contemplative* listening in certain religious traditions listeners attend to the voice of God, and seek to deepen their relationship to Him, so this is akin to relational listening.³ In *therapeutic* listening, another subcategory of relational listening which also may contain elements of practical listening, the aim is to assist a speaker experiencing problems of living through establishment of a trusting relationship.

Relational listening is improved through close attention, empathy, and the suspension of ingrained habits of speaking. Like informational listening, relational listening may require asking questions or entering into discussion. But the best strategy is often silent apophatic listening—taking in the other and his or her utterances and silences and allowing them to fill the listener’s psyche. Relational listening can be improved through lessons and workshops in active listening, through interpersonal feedback, meditation, and therapy. Its success is measured in the sustenance or improvement of relationship bonds. Relational listening is important in all effective teaching, since learners will draw upon deeper resources and allow themselves to be more vulnerable in their expressions, if they feel supported and cared for by their teachers. Good relational listeners bring out the best in all of us.

In *appreciative* listening, we listen to appreciate or enjoy. While we listen appreciatively primarily to literature (drama, poetry, and fiction—via electronic media or in live readings) and music, we also listen appreciatively to other people—listening just to enjoy them and their company. In this way, appreciative

listening can be an important adjunct of relational listening, though the end is distinct. As with relational listening, appreciative listening requires us to quiet our mind and still our unrelated action schema. While critical attitudes have their proper place in listening to music or poetry, that place is not to be found in appreciation; when we engage in an interior critical dialogue with an object of our listening, e.g., a musical performance, we are not listening *appreciatively*. Like relational listening, appreciative listening is important in all forms of teaching, as appreciation of the unique value of learners and their creative expressions, however naïve, brings forth hidden powers of supportive response.

In *critical* listening the aim is to come to a sound evaluation—of an utterance or argument or action or person or work of art or other object. Critical listening depends upon a background of norms or standards of soundness. Critical listening generally depends on analysis of objects into their component parts. For example, evaluation of oral arguments depends on analysis into their component terms, premises, inference procedures, and conclusions. Critical listening to a musical performance depends on analysis into movements and segments, and of their pace, intonation, and other standards. In interpretive discussion, listening to the statements of participants as they attempt to arrive at a sound interpretation of a text is a kind of critical listening in that, in Haroutunian-Gordon's words, listeners "reason—and draw inferences about what is heard" in relation to questions they are trying to resolve. Critical listening is improved through training in evaluative arts such as logic and rhetoric, and in critical discourses related to objects under evaluation such as literature, art, and music. Critical listening is essential in teaching, as we can only assist learners in attaining high standards if we can note errors and shortcomings. A critical attitude, however, can be a detriment if it conveys uncaring or even hostile feelings. Criticism of student acts and works in teaching is only useful when contained within the bounds of a respectful and caring relationship with learners.

We can now return to Dewey's discussion of the "listening attitude." Didactic teaching is based on teachers' conveyance of information for passive informational listening. Meanwhile, teachers' listening is tightly circumscribed to critical listening in the narrowest sense—listening for the right (or wrong) answer, the correctly (or incorrectly) solved problem—when they are not listening to trouble brewing at the back of the room. In pedagogies that emphasize teacher listening, that listening spans all of the above categories—listening to observe and hypothesize about, and to interpret, learners' interests and capabilities, to build relationships with them and care about them, to appreciate and value them, and to form creative practical ideas—about lessons and activities that will engage their learners as individuals and as a group and help them

grow. And learner listening will move from passive absorption to active intellectual and practical engagement involving all types of listening.

Listening and Social Justice

Many of the teaching practices described in this book are motivated by ideals of social justice. In the classical world, city-states were dominated by male citizens who had reached puberty—hence the *public*. Most of the residents of these societies were females, aliens, or slaves. Male citizens didn't concern themselves with justice—fair distribution of goods, opportunities and privileges—for these “others.” In the Christian era, however, our conception of justice has been extended to all humans, each of whom we conceive as possessing a dignity and unique value.

In the wake of the industrial revolution, with its noxious urban environments and crushing burdens on workers and their families, philosophers and religious thinkers began to reconceive justice in *social* terms, as demanding at least minimal *material* conditions for living for all—adequate food and shelter, clean air and water, health care and old age benefits—as well as social and political rights. The demand for social justice has also come to include the right to be *recognized*, to be accorded dignity, to be heard, to participate fully in community life. Recognition is considered a necessary element of justice, whether as an independent right or as a necessary condition for the social and political realization of basic economic rights.

The concept of social justice was initially shaped by nineteenth-century Roman Catholic teachings, and continues to draw upon two central tenets of Catholic social thought, the inherent dignity of each individual human being, and the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. Together, these teachings enjoin all of us consciously to work toward the participation of all people in social and cultural life, and above all, those who are most disadvantaged and have the greatest barriers to social and cultural participation. Social justice in this sense is now widely recognized as a value by all of the world's major religions, and as an important social goal by socialist, liberal, and centrist political parties throughout the world. It is embodied in the United Nations Declaration of Rights.

In education, young people live in small classroom and school communities and acquire there the habits that will shape their lives in the broader local, national, and global communities. Justice as an educational ideal demands more than the fair distribution of pedagogical, curricular, and technological resources, safe and clean buildings, and school lunch. It also demands individual

recognition and respect, the space to speak and be heard, and for one's concerns to be considered in school practices. In this sense, didactic teaching is unjust. It proceeds without consideration of learners' needs and concerns. It does not bring out the voices of the young, or bring their contributions into play in the design and implementation of lessons or activities. Those least likely to be heard, the poor, the alien, the shy, the psychologically and mentally disadvantaged, are often neglected or "left behind."

In listening to teach, the voices of all young learners, and especially of those least likely to raise their voices forcefully and clearly, are given pride of place. The chapters of this book make this clear. The pedagogy of listening of Reggio Emilia, described below by Winnie Hunsburger, developed as a response to the needs of traumatized poor children in post-war Italy—it is a method for listening to the "thousand voices" of children and building lessons on the basis of what children express. The critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, described by Suzanne Rice, is a parallel response to the poor peasants of Latin America and shows how spaces for their voices can be created so they can "name the world" in their own terms rather than the hegemonic terms of the dominant classes. The conference method of Phillips-Exeter Academy described by David Backer was dedicated to removing the barriers to participation of shy young men. The pedagogy of trust developed by Katherine Schultz breaks down barriers built into hierarchical cultures so that those undergoing teacher training can express their concerns instead of being covered by their superiors. In the pedagogy of discomfort as detailed by Ashley Taylor, and in somewhat different terms by Bronwen Low and Emmanuelle Sonntag, spaces are opened for voicing uncomfortable experiences and truths, so that all learners can reconsider assumptions and attitudes which sustain injustice and impede the growth and participation of all.

What This Book is about and How to Use It

This book details a dozen pedagogies featuring the active listening of teachers and learners. Each chapter accounts for a specific pedagogy, offering a brief explanation of the background against which it developed, the problems it aims to resolve, the educators who have pioneered it, and its treatment of listening. The chapters conclude with ideas and suggestions drawn from these pedagogies that may be useful to classroom teachers in familiar schools and classrooms. They include sidebars with memorable quotations from the pedagogy's founders, and a brief bibliography of useful readings.

While this book contains a lot of information about alternative pedagogies, it is not intended to serve merely as an inert textbook *about* active listening or active teaching methods. You cannot become a better teacher merely by learning

about teaching strategies, or a better listener by learning *about* listening. You have to translate them into tools for your own use. As you read these chapters and the suggested readings, you can think actively about how they apply in your own teaching and learning situations. It may help to keep your observations, reflections, and notes in a journal; conduct thought experiments; and design sample lesson plans. It will help even more to talk about these teaching methods with other teachers and even with thoughtful students. The best approach is to form a personal learning network where you can try out your ideas, document lessons in videos for critical discussion, and work toward online video demonstration lessons that can help fellow teachers all around the world.

It is one thing to learn *about* creative ideas, and another thing entirely to see living proof that these ideas can work in classrooms. Don't hide your work under a bushel basket. If we hope to move beyond the boredom and alienation of didactic teaching, to recover from "narrative sickness" and liberate the energies and thinking potential of our students, and to breathe new life into our democratic societies, all of us will have to contribute. Take a few risks. Try some new methods. Share your successes with colleagues. Let's get started!

Notes

1. *The School and Society* hereinafter identified as *SS*, John Dewey, *Collected Works*, mw1. 21.
2. My treatment of these distinctions owes much to John Kline (2002).
3. Following theological usage, I refer to this kind of quiet listening as *apophatic*, from *apo* (away from) and *phasis* (speech). See (2010).

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