

The Art of Listening

By Kathy King-Dickman | Categories: Professional Learning

"The principal won't listen to me" | my dad never listens to me" | my friends aren't listening to me. Mrs. D., **YOU are NOT listening to**



me!" This was a frequent outburst during the 32 years I taught. Peter Brunn has a section in his *Lesson Planning Handbook* (2010) titled "Teaching on the Edge of Your Seat." What Peter is talking about is LISTENING. We must listen to our students as if what they have to say is the most important thing in our lives at that moment. One of the most frustrating issues for the young is that they often feel no one listens to them. So if we do as Peter says and actually sit on the edge of our seats, look directly at the student talking, ignore other distractions, and actually explore what students say (page 76), motivation and engagement is enhanced. It seems that in our hurry-up world, listening-and I mean truly listening in the manner Peter suggests-seems to be a lost art. People often are doing one of two things while someone talks: waiting for their own turn to talk or focusing on something other than the speaker. Peter shares how his wife taught him in their early days that "listening was different from hearing words. It did not mean nodding my head as I watched the Detroit Lions lose yet another football game." (page 77) When I first read these words, I wanted to call Peter's wife and tell her, "I married the same guy!" Peter learned that listening required total focus on the speaker. In many ways, listening is similar to close reading, where we read intently with the purpose of discovering what the author is saying. We must listen with this same "close" intent, in a manner in which we desperately try to discover what our students are attempting to share or explain. In my teacher's training, I was not taught to listen as much as talk to and direct my students. I worry that this trend continues. All humans have the need to be heard. Often the people we choose to spend time with are those who listen to us. Nothing feels better than when someone truly gets what we are saying. So when we listen to our students as if what they are saying is brilliant, valuable, and worth exploring, we are basically saying we care about them; that what they feel and believe actually

matters to us; and that we expect them to **think**. When we truly listen to each student, we model for the entire class how it looks and sounds to listen "closely." Peter considers listening a "critical teaching skill." When a student shares an interesting or even a confusing thought and we earnestly ask, "What made you think that? What in the text led you there? What do the rest of you think about what ___ just said?" we are asking students to listen, respond with ideas of their own, and **think**. When we say, "Do you agree more with what ___ said or with what ___ said?" we are showing that we truly listened to what each of those students had to say. We are



teaching students to **think** as well as communicate their thoughts. Along with sitting on the edge of our seats, Peter suggests other ways in which we can truly listen. One is to not have a set answer in mind when we ask questions. We need to ask rich open ended questions with no "preconceived notion" of how the students should or will answer. Another is to not assume we understand what a child means and do the summing up or explaining for her. Whether or not we understand what a child is saying, we need to let the child do the explaining for the rest of the class. We need to say to the child, "Can you share more of your thinking about this?" and not, "___ meant such and such." This is very hard for teachers to do. We often feel that we are in charge of what children need to think. We need to move from the stance of deciding what students should think to a stance of getting them to think. I often tell the teachers I coach, "Don't worry what the students think, worry whether or not they do think." One of the best ways to do this is to truly listen to all that they have to say. So let's scoot our butts to the edges of our seats and truly listen to our students talk. Their thinking will astound us.