



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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LISTENING: EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY

Few educators would argue with the idea that listening skills are imperative to student success. However, not only do students need to listen well, but faculty and administrators have much to gain from listening to those we purport to serve.

Listening is our most used, yet least taught, communicative skill. We cannot expect students to listen with a high degree of effectiveness when they have not been provided appropriate or adequate training to do so. Acquiring listening skills is an ongoing process and an essential skill to be taught and developed in a learning-centered community college. By serving as listening role models, we can nurture students' listening proficiency.

Good Listening Practices

Forge a bond of mutual respect and trust. Students are far more likely to respect educators who listen to them; and as a consequence, we are more likely to teach them. We all listen more closely to those we hold in high esteem and who treat us with respect.

Increase a student's self-worth. When we are attentive to students, we communicate that we value them. Listening is one of the best "pats on the back" we can provide.

Increase another's willingness to listen. When educators listen, students are more likely to listen, too. Listening is reciprocal; we are more likely to listen to someone who has listened to us.

Provide relief from the continual onslaught of competitors vying for a student's time. An empathetic ear can reduce the stress of numerous and overlapping responsibilities that students experience with spouses, parents, children, and employers.

Learn more from listening than from speaking. I am amazed by how much I learn from my students if I simply resist the tendency to dominate conversations. Be quiet, be patient, and listen.

Adopt several behavioral guidelines and employ various methods to make the environment more conducive to listening.

Slow the pace. Packing as much as you can into every class does little for an exhausted student's ability to absorb the information—let alone retain it.

Listen first; react later. Allowing emotional responses to words or ideas to interfere with a message does not permit a receiver to understand fully the speaker's intended meaning.

Don't argue mentally. People listen faster than the average person speaks; use the extra time to expand on what the speaker is saying. We often allow our minds to wander rather than stay focused on the message.

Avoid labeling a student's message or appearance. Everyone has biases and pet peeves that can create barriers to listening. Recognizing your biases can help you perceive another person, message, or environment in an open-minded fashion.

Practice empathy. Attempt to understand students' concerns that are in conflict with their desires for an education; plan a curriculum and implement teaching strategies that best suit students.

Eliminate possible distractions. Simply closing the classroom door to eliminate exterior noise or opening the door to add additional ventilation can increase students' physical and mental alertness. Arrange favorable contextual conditions when possible.

The Challenges

Improving classroom listening proficiency is a challenge. Getting students' attention and maintaining it requires talent in the art of persuasion. Mark Twain's character, Tom Sawyer, would have been far less effective at persuading his contemporaries that whitewashing the fence was an enjoyable experience had they not first perceived that he was enjoying it himself. If we demonstrate that listening is neither a burden nor a cumbersome task, but rather a highly rewarding and enjoyable behavior, it becomes something worth striving for. Successful persuasion is influenced strongly by perception.

The harder we work to listen to our students, the better we will lend our ears to and focus our attention on everyone—on our students, our loved ones, and coworkers, as well. The more we strive to listen well in



challenging situations, the easier it becomes in all communicative transactions. What begins as an awkward and tedious process can become more natural over time and ultimately produce positive outcomes.

We are educating the whole student. A community college can become a safe and welcoming haven. Listen attentively; then sit back and watch students aspire to achieve their fullest potential.

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