

Researcher argues 'pretending to listen' OK, sometimes necessary in education

October 13 2011

Anyone who has ever been a student has been told to listen, perhaps even that like patience, listening is a virtue. A University of Kansas professor has published articles arguing that while listening is indeed a virtue, pretending to listen is acceptable, commonplace and sometimes even necessary.

Suzanne Rice, professor of educational leadership and policy studies, recently published “Listening: A Virtue Account” and “On Pretending to Listen” in Teachers College Record, along with co-author Nicholas C. Burbules of the University of Illinois. Rice studies educational phenomena from a philosophical perspective. In the recently published papers she examines the importance of listening.

“We expect students at all levels to do a tremendous amount of learning from listening,” Rice said. “Yet listening is incredibly underrepresented in research.”

Teachers, like many parents, often find themselves in a room of very vocal children. In such cases it’s almost impossible to pay attention to all voices simultaneously. Skilled educators, however, can divide their attention or “pretend to listen” and still be effective.

“A lot of people think good listening is this total engrossment. We argue that good listeners don’t necessarily do that all the time,” Rice said. “Sometimes for practical purposes it’s OK to only appear to be completely listening in the classroom. We need to be present enough that

our attention can be grabbed by a student if need be, but we also need to be aware of the many student voices overall.”

The key is being able to discern when to listen, with how much depth and intensity, and perhaps most importantly, when not to listen. Rice calls listening “the greatest gift we can give our students” and maintains it is important for teachers to listen to their students. Aristotle, the philosopher Rice bases much of her work on, maintained people develop most of their virtues and vices at an early age. Therefore it is imperative teachers provide an example of good listening to ensure students become good listeners themselves.

“There is a good reason why schools should promote better listening: Listening can be profoundly educative,” Rice and Burbules wrote. “It is one of the principal ways in which we learn about the world and its people, develop a sense of self, form relations with others, and expand our moral and intellectual capacities.”

Listening, Rice maintains, is not simply a technical skill, and much of it is not even done with the ears. Being open and receptive to another’s speech, or making gestures such as a nod, can all be part of it.

“There isn’t a recipe for good listening,” Rice said. “It has many, many forms, and one of those forms isn’t even listening. It’s pretending to listen.”

A person can be pretending to listen while performing other tasks, physically portraying to the speaker that he or she is listening, focusing on other things or stimuli or when misunderstanding — when people think they understand someone when in fact they do not.

“No one can listen all the time, to everything that is said, nor should one want to. In the very act of listening, we may be consciously portraying

ourselves as listening (eye contact, nodding our heads, etc), because showing one's self to be listening is both a stimulus to the other's speaking and a general act of concern or respect," Rice and Burbules wrote. "Such portrayals can be a good thing, we will argue, even when one is not, in fact, listening — they are not simply 'faking it' in a derogatory sense."

In a conversation, or many classroom or educational exchanges, it is in fact necessary to pretend to listen in order to think of what one will say next. "Listening and not listening, thus, are not opposites: They are phases in an ongoing process of listening in which the very fact that we are sometimes not listening can actually help us to listen better," the authors wrote.

Whether in the classroom or out, listening is indeed one of the primary methods through which people learn. Given its prominence it carries strong moral implications. The best listeners, Rice says, are those who are best at determining when to devote the most attention and when pretending to listen is all right, or even beneficial.

"If we're honest with ourselves, how many times do we find ourselves pretending to listen?" Rice asked. "Sometimes that's a bad thing. Sometimes it's appropriate."

Provided by University of Kansas

Citation: Researcher argues 'pretending to listen' OK, sometimes necessary in education (2011, October 13) retrieved 9 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-10-researcher-argues-pretending-to-listen.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.