

12 Practical Tips – Listening Skills

As teachers we often ask (or command!) our pupils to "listen". We recognise that without this skill, a child's ability to learn, communicate, collaborate and care about others is dramatically reduced. Indeed, a community of enquiry that can't listen is hardly a 'community' at all. So how, as facilitators, might we encourage improvements in this essential skill? Here are a dozen practical suggestions:

1) Check that pupils have reflected on what "listening" actually means! It's a simple verb, but actually it's a complex process. Try playing the 'odd one out' game with the words "listening", "hearing" and "noticing". Which is the odd one out, and why? Ask for a reason for each answer offered, and ask pupils to summarise their ideas in a "definition of listening".

2) Alternatively, use the Chinese symbol for listening and its translation to raise questions (see below). Why might the eyes be involved? What role could the heart play in listening? Pupils could then create their own symbol for listening, and display them on a "Wise skills" section of the classroom wall.

3) Ask pupils to draw facial expressions or masks of 'how it feels to be properly listened to / ignored / a good listener / a bad listener'. Cartoons, sketches or poems about these areas might also be explored.

4) Play the listening game where one pupil sits with his or her back to three others. The pupil is given an unusual shape on a piece of paper to describe to the others who have to reproduce that shape from that pupil's verbal instructions (no peeking!). Compare shapes at the end of the process to evaluate both articulation and listening skills.

5) Before an enquiry process begins, state that your special intention as a facilitator today is to look for good listening, and that the community will evaluate it at the end of the enquiry. Perhaps ask pupils to go and stand next to someone who listened really well, and explore why they chose that person.

6) Use facilitation roles. Ask for (or nominate) a participant to look out for 'how well we are listening', and invite them to give brief feedback during the enquiry, or summarise their observations at the end. Challenge the community to provide their own solutions to problems of not listening in their community.

7) Pause after the 'sharing reflections' stage of the enquiry process (after they have reflected on the initial stimulus), and ask "who listened to you best in your group, and how do you know they listened well?". Share the symptoms of a good listener as a community, and perhaps display them.

8) During the enquiry, ask pupils to begin their contribution with "I agree with" or "I disagree with". This technique both ensures that they are listening to each other, and build on each others' ideas.

9) Check that participants have equal and open visual contact with each other (where possible!).

10) Explore why listening is important. You might use Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that 'children have the right to have a voice in matters that affect them'. What would life be like if they were not listened to at all? What effect do they have on other people if they do not listen to them, or just pretend to? Perhaps they might create a drama or role play exercise that could be used for peer education, in assemblies, or as a class.

11) Give loud or dominating pupils roles which require them to be 'quietly but fully involved'. For example, ask one of them to be a 'scribe' where they chart the progress of the enquiry on the board, and ask them for feedback at the end of it. If several pupils talk a lot and exclude others from being listened to, give each participant three playing cards, lego pieces or similar. Each time they contribute, they use one, making them think more carefully before they 'spend their voice'!

12) Quiet or timid pupils might only speak in small friendship groups to begin with, so consider the grouping (in terms of size and how groups are chosen). Once their confidence starts to build, try enlarging the group sizes gradually so that they work towards making a contribution in front of the whole class if they wish.

Key Point:

As facilitator, reflect on the successes, learning points and effects of using these tactics. Some will work well with your particular community, and others may not. Why?

If you have any other suggestions, do email them in to me at willord@tiscali.co.uk . I'll add them into the next Newsletter!

Chinese Symbol for “Listen”

- the *left* section denotes the ‘ear’

There are 4 sections on the right:

- the top one says ‘you’
- next is ‘eyes’
- then ‘undivided attention’
- the last is the ‘heart’

Why do you think these are needed to “listen”?

