

## CHAPTER 1

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# Shut Up and Listen...Actively

## Value the Voices of Others

The simple act of listening could shape your perspective on teaching. You, as an educator, person, parent, friend, sibling, etc., already have your own perspective, which likely won't change very much if you keep talking. Stephen King, American author and guru of science fiction and horror genres, once said that

the important question has nothing to do with whether the talk in your story is sacred or profane; the only question is how it rings on the page and in your ear. If you expect it to ring true, then you must talk yourself. Even more important, you must *shut up and listen* to others talk.

Stephen King's net worth is over nine figures, and most of us would agree that he is quite successful. He did not reach such a pinnacle by just telling others what he thought was important; rather, he was quiet at times and listened to the voices and needs of others. This rings true with even some of the most mundane types of human interaction. I know there have been many times in my life where in order for me to reach a level of self-understanding I had to listen rather than just be heard. But what about someone in a position of authority?



### LISTENING IS NOT JUST HEARING

How many times have you wanted to get your point across so badly that you found yourself talking over the other person? What mattered most to you was to be heard—not understood or valued—but *heard*. Imagine being in a place where you cannot

voice your opinion; instead, you must sit and take what someone forces on you with no argument. You are imagining a traditional classroom. In such classrooms children must sit and take what is doled out to them as the gospel truth, speak only when asked a question, speak only at a certain volume, direct their words to a particular audience, and make the words' subjects and verbs agree—rules that never seem to allow much wiggle room for natural communication. Your students crave the opportunity to be heard, even in your classroom.

Children's Healthcare of Atlanta is a nonprofit philanthropic organization geared toward providing outreach and healthcare services to urban families in the metro Atlanta area. Based in an area with a great need for persons seeking to address social disparities, this nonprofit group has pioneered a concerted effort to give parents and educators insight on kids' most basic requirements. According to the organization's website, it offers valuable insight on a child's need to be heard and what results when a child does not feel heard:

There's no question that the middle school and high school years are tough. Social challenges follow kids home on their phones; academic pressure can be intense; and scary issues such as gun violence are all over the news. You might talk with your child about their feelings—but are you really listening?

You may be surprised to know that a lot of middle schoolers don't confide in their parents—and they don't think their parents are listening when they do. One middle schooler in a Children's Healthcare of Atlanta focus group wished their parents would start "listening to my thoughts and feelings instead of interrupting and saying it's not that big of a deal." Another said, "I want them to listen to what I'm saying, not just tell me to suck it up and say 'you're fine.'"

When *our* perspective prevents us from shutting up and listening, we don't allow a child to open up verbally, emotionally, and cognitively. Children can sense when an adult shows up with a closed mind. In response, they won't openly share what they want to say, and nothing can enter their minds either. A barrier in communication can impede any potential for learning. Consequently, your perspective as an educator, including being willing to open up to what a student has to say to you, can make all the difference.

I remember working at one of the most impoverished middle schools in my state. I decided to compare notes with a colleague

who worked at one of the most disadvantaged high schools in the same state. He lamented that his school had the highest of everything negative and the lowest of everything positive. Highest drop out rate? Had it. Highest teen pregnancy rate? Had it. Highest retention rate? Had it. Highest number of overaged and undercredited students? Had it. Worst of all, they had the lowest graduation rate. Imagine being in a classroom where you are already labeled as “at risk” and have no say in what or how you are being taught. Listening to my colleague relate the conditions at his high school is when I realized that the young people in my middle school deserved to be heard. So I shut up and listened.

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*Silence is the language of God, all else is poor translation. — Rumi*

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Rumi, who is often referred to as the greatest mystical poet in the world, had a great understanding of connectedness. He spoke of not just a connection to God, but how we as people make a connection with others by having our own understanding of self and how we are connected by even the most practical things. He spoke of how we connect to the universe by connecting with the words and thoughts of others. He is well known for detailing some of the smallest of interactions with grace and respect. This general respect for living is seen in his poems and other works. The joyous love sonnets this Persian writer and spiritualist brought into the world over eight centuries ago are still held dear by a large number of educators and academicians alike. Rumi is frequently portrayed as a forward thinker, and his sonnets have been beloved readings at weddings and funerals for many years. Why? Because his knowledge of extending love is seen as most fitting at weddings and funerals—places where people are revered, doted upon, and, most importantly, loved.

Most Americans appreciate the need to be quiet at weddings and funerals because the attendees are encouraged to reflect and, at times, even genuflect. Now ask yourself why such a degree of respect and attentiveness is rarely directed at the children who inhabit our classrooms? Particularly when working to educate children who may not see school as a loving space, one must be quiet to find out how these students feel. Listen to what students have to say; get their perspective on education and the world around them. When I permitted myself to listen, I was stunned to discover that students I worked with who had been labeled as “at risk” or “unreachable”—or, even worse, “stupid”—actually were extremely thoughtful, savvy, and loving. They had just never had anyone take the time to shut up and listen to *them* rather than forcing opinions on them. Once I permitted

myself to shut up and listen, I was able to value my students for just coming to class. During a professional development workshop I gave at a high school, I ran into a colleague who wanted to share an intriguing story about the powerful insights she had gained from listening to one of her students:

I had one student, a single mother of two in the twelfth grade. She missed a lot of class, frequently fell asleep, and was on her phone quite a bit. I became frustrated when I asked her to repeat something that seemed so small to me from the textbook and was faced with her looking up at me like a deer in headlights. I then asked her to step outside the class with me as I launched the rest of the class into their lesson. I didn't have to say anything; I just listened. I knew she was a teen mom, but it was at that moment that she began to tell me stories of how her oldest child suffered from a rare disorder that kept him up at night; thus, she was up with him. His medication was quite expensive, and she worked two part-time jobs to afford it. As soon as she left school each day at 1:00 p.m., she went straight to work until 8:00 p.m., got her children from her grandmother's house, and stayed with them until they fell asleep around 10:00 p.m. She then would leave them with her younger sister at home because her mother also worked nights. She clocked in at her night job at a fast food restaurant at 11:00 p.m. and worked there until 4:00 a.m. She had just enough time to go back home, shower, and sleep a few hours before she did it all over again. This young lady was a survivor, and once I listened I valued her presence even more. She knew her education was important, and she was determined to graduate no matter what. And she did, with honors. Once I shut up and listened, I no longer let my frustration about a lesson get in the way of the truer and deeper connection that I was beginning to develop with my students.



## **LIKE MOMMA USED TO SAY, “CLOSE YOUR MOUTH AND OPEN YOUR EARS.”**

Researchers discuss the benefit of what is called *active listening*, which is a skill that puts the onus on you as the recipient of a message in a conversation. When practicing active listening, the recipient of a message is quiet and takes time to take in what the other person is saying. Active listening is a skill that can be perfected through many methods, and in the case of

educators, active listening allows the person speaking to clearly communicate his or her message to the recipient in order for a conversation to grow deeper, into a realm of understanding.



## BECOME AN ACTIVE LISTENER

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In the 2007 article “Learning to Listen: Teaching an Active Listening Strategy to Preservice Education Professionals,” the authors delve into how the skill of listening allows persons to come across as being more trustworthy. The authors state that

the goal in active listening is to develop a clear understanding of the speaker’s concern and also to **clearly communicate the listener’s interest in the speaker’s message**. Recognition of the importance of active listening has resulted in systematic investigation of the use of active listening skills in other helping professions. In a study examining the communication skills of nurses as they worked with families experiencing a medical emergency, Duhamel and Talbot (2004) reported that the use of active listening skills helped nurses to establish a trusting relationship with family participants. Mansfield (1991) used supervised roleplays to teach active listening skills to medical students; based on a videotape analysis of their pre- and post-instruction performances, the medical students who had received training were judged to be more skilled in their use of active listening skills and in developing appropriate management plans for their patients. (p. 224)

Bedside manner is used in hospitals to soothe nervous or frantic patients. The key trait the participants in the Mansfield study displayed was an ability to show the patient with whom they were speaking that the patient’s message was valid and, most of all, valuable. The study also elaborated on how, by practicing active listening, these participants earned more respect from their patients than medical professionals who had double the experience in the field. They were able to build trust and also make a connection just through active listening. Now let’s equate that to teaching.

As educators, if you shut up and listen to your students, not only will you learn something and gain a new perspective but you will be able to build your relationship with the student at the same time. This is why it’s important to listen. In the Mansfield study, the medical students found success with their patients and in their field by showing how much they cared, and that began with listening. They were able to build trust with their

patients, and through this trust they were able to make a lasting impression. It takes asking the right questions to make such a connection.

## **MAKE A CONNECTION BY ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS**

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The goal in the chapter is to allow you, the reader, to have a better appreciation for the art of silence and to get to know students with different experiences than you so you can begin to recognize and understand their perspectives. Once you are able to be quiet and listen, you must allow your curiosity to be piqued—although not in a nosy next-door neighbor type of way. Rather, you want to be seen as one who can be trusted by making an empathetic connection. In order to ask the right questions after you have listened, try to put yourself in the student’s shoes and look at their world through their perspective. You do not have to come from the same part of town to make a connection; with a little probing, you most certainly can make a connection with students that have even the most disparate backgrounds and interests.

Making a connection by asking questions about a student’s food and music preferences can be a great icebreaker, but asking questions such as “How do you feel today?” “Did you eat breakfast?” “How’s your family doing?” or “What makes you most excited about the upcoming school year?” can make a connection that is deeper and more substantial.

## **HOW CAN YOU FULLY TEACH SOMEBODY YOU DON’T KNOW?**

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In the situation mentioned earlier involving my colleague and her student who was a single teen mother of two, it might seem that the two women probably did not have much in common. However, once my colleague was able to be quiet and listen to her student, she asked the one question that allowed them to connect: “What do you need from me to make you the most successful?” Not only was the student taken aback by that, she felt that her teacher genuinely cared for her, her children, and her mental well-being—not just her grades. My colleague was able to connect with her even more by sharing a time in school when she did not have a teacher who was able to allow her to just exist without feeling singled out. She also told her student that she could empathize with working two jobs. Even though she did not have to do that as a teen parent, my colleague knew

how hard it was for her as an adult, and she told her student she would assist in making accommodations to assignments when possible. The empathy and vulnerability that was expressed allowed them to make a genuine connection, and my colleague was able to see her student thrive instead of just survive.

## USE YOUR SERVICE-MINDEDNESS TO HELP SHAPE YOUR PERSPECTIVE

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As most of us know, teaching is a service, and in the article “Improving Classroom Management Issues by Building Connections with Families” (Robison 2020), the author details how making yourself vulnerable will allow you to make a deeper connection with your students:

Coming from a place of service is a mind-set that will guide one’s words and actions. In short, it is to simply realize that a general...teacher’s job is to serve all students and their families, much like other public servants or even members of the clergy. As...teachers, we are unique in our role of serving all students, not just those that self-select into performing...While there are limitations to this mind-set, such as setting reasonable boundaries for your time and not catering to every whim of every family, coming from a place of service can help in communicating potentially tense issues with family members. (p. 39)

Applying such a service mindset needn’t be restricted to your interactions with family members. It can also work in the interest of making an empathetic connection with your students—a connection that can offer more success than you can imagine. There is one proviso, however: You have to be open enough to shut up and listen to them. When you are curious about a student’s world and ask questions to understand things, you are automatically expanding both your perspective and your horizons. Take this time to access both your own and the student’s perspective so you can come up with innovative ways to shift both.

## HOW TO LISTEN

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Active listening requires patience and practice, but those who take the time to engage in it will strengthen their connections with students in powerful ways. Moreover, if we strengthen these relationships with cultural awareness and relevance (a subject that is explored in more depth later in this book), our

connections will be even stronger. For now, there are two general principles to keep in mind:

- Learn the culture of the student's community where you work.
- Center your efforts around gaining a perspective that is conducive for reaching all students, beginning with a reflection on your own biases.

## **CHECK YOUR BIASES AT THE DOOR**

A prerequisite to shutting up and listening is checking your own biases and prejudgments at the door. For example, when you begin to engage in a conversation with a student, stop thinking about how you think the conversation will go. Even if you have tried to engage with this student before on many other occasions, you must not prejudge how you think the conversation is going to go *this time*. Since you are now approaching the conversation with new knowledge, insights, and clarity, you should clear everything from past interactions out of your mind.

## **CHECK YOUR BODY LANGUAGE**

Body language can tell a person everything. And in many cases, *uncaring* body language will make recipients shut down because they believe you have already formulated an outcome before an interaction has even happened. Believe it or not, our body language can change an entire conversation before it has begun. Reflect on your own interpersonal interactions: What is the message you receive from folded arms and a head cocked to the side? Refrain from any body language that shows you are not interested because your student will instantly become defensive and not open up. Part of shutting up and listening is learning to relax.

## **CHECK AND RELEASE PAST INTERACTIONS**

You may miss an opportunity to really connect with your students when they are opening up and allowing themselves to vent if you are sitting on the sidelines and anxiously waiting for a specific outcome. You will be pleasantly surprised when, instead of forming judgments based on past experiences, you use this time to relax your mind and body language to be open to what the students has to tell you. Sadly enough, you do not know it all, especially when it comes to the hearts, minds, and experiences of students. For this reason, particularly in the early stages of engaging with your students, open *your heart and mind!*



# Dos and Don'ts

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We close each chapter with a summary list of Dos and Don'ts, followed by a reflection. Use this space and time to prepare yourself as you begin this new journey as an educator with a more enlightened perspective.

## DO:

- Present your body language in a relaxed and open stance.
- Make eye contact with your students as they are talking.
- Give students adequate space to feel comfortable, but be close enough for them to know you are engaging in a conversation (approximately two to three feet apart).
- Respond using a caring voice, being careful to avoid inflections on words that may be perceived as accusatory.
- Have an open mind in response to what your students have to say.
- Listen from a place of understanding.
- Allow your students to be heard without judgment.
- Close your mouth more and open your ears.

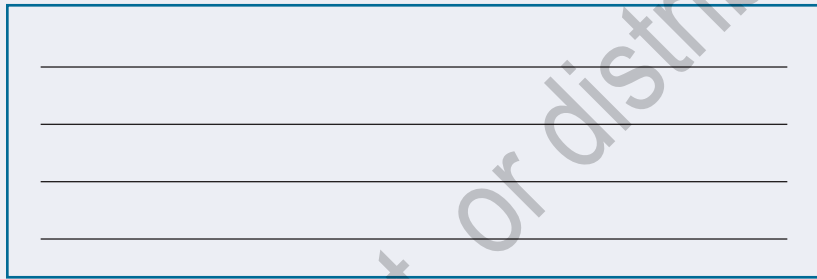
## DON'T:

- Form an answer in your head—i.e., form your own hypothesis—before you get a response. This not only works against active listening but leads to judging the student before hearing what the student has to say.
- Make facial expressions that can unconsciously express a bias.
- Use or make gestures while your student is talking—for example, no hands thrown in the air, hands on your hips, or any sarcastic gesture that will make a child shut down.
- Assume the negative immediately.
- Force your opinion of learning on your student.
- Overtalk your student for the sake of exerting your authority.
- Go another day without reflecting on how you have affected others by not being responsive to what they are saying.

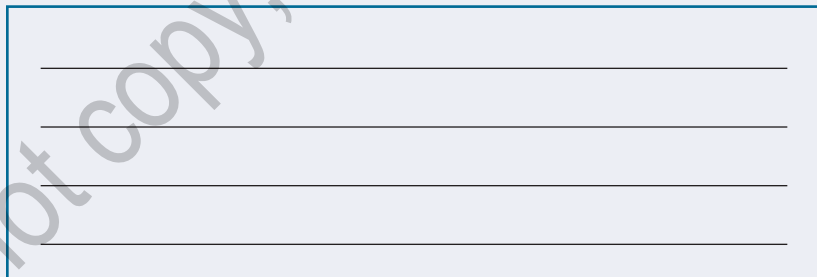
# Chapter Reflection

This chapter has emphasized the importance of silence and also the benefit that comes from active listening. The end of each chapter offers a space for work and reflection. Workshops can be very useful and inspiring, but in the absence of teacher reflection, they are unlikely to have much influence on improving your craft. Now is the time for us to think and to write.

*Think and write about a time when you made a connection with a student that was meaningful. Think and reflect on what made that connection meaningful and also what could have made it even more significant.*



*Think of a time when you missed an opportunity to connect with a student through active listening. Did you spend too much time talking when you could have been quiet? What questions could you have asked that student?*



*How do you think you can make a connection with a student in the future? Take the time to plan a specific time to make this connection and think deeply about your response.*

