

XIII Biennial Transformative Learning Conference

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**Building Transformative Community:
Exacting Possibility in Today's Times**

PROCEEDINGS

Marguerite Welch, Victoria Marsick, & Dyan Holt, *Editors*

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Appendix III: Transformative Listening Project

Introduction

The rapidly changing global environment is bringing people and cultures together in politics, work, learning, and other arenas - requiring us to effectively communicate with one another at levels not previously experienced. In an effort to meet the demands of globalization and responding to changes in our environment, we have created sophisticated technologies and computer-mediated systems of communications to support how we live, learn, and work. However, in our effort to be responsive, we may have lost the human connection and inadvertently transformed the ways in which we relate to and with one another (Schwab, 2016). The need for empathy, understanding, deep relationships, and human connection is critical in today's world (Schwab, 2016), and demands that we continue to educate ourselves at some level, each day, individually and collectively to comprehend the challenges that may prevent us from engaging with the other authentically, participating in holistic actions of social justice, conducting meaningful research, and embracing creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship (to name a few). We suggest that in order to reach understanding of the aforementioned challenges and connect with one another authentically requires us to engage in courageous conversations, and to engage in courageous conversations is only possible if we listen. Jacobs and Coghlan (2005) claimed, "by acknowledging the other through listening, the process of forming a joint identity within and through a conversation might be facilitated" (p. 122). Yet, in the current environment, where individualization, competition, and separation are dominant themes, we often listen to others only to await our opportunity to speak, share our point of view, or defend our perspectives, rather than pause to meet the "other" where they are, and open a space within ourselves for new understanding. Irigaray (2008) shared:

For a moment, the totality of the world is kept in suspense to welcome the other, the stranger with respect to my world. To this world I will never return unchanged: I will have gained a new freedom but lost the familiarity that I maintained with my own environment. Through the meeting with the other, what seemed to me close has become partly strange because I distanced myself from my world in order to open myself to the world of the other. (p. 89)

In the summer of 2017, a group of like-minded individuals, who are passionate about opening ourselves to the world of the other, began a journey together by asking the questions: How might we foster deeper connections, and facilitate transformative learning experiences with others? What role might listening play in fostering these deeper connections? This journey and collaboration later became known as the Transformative Listening Project.

In this paper we describe our journey to the Transformative Listening Project - How we began with an exploration of the notion of listening, created an initial concept for an International Day of Listening, and how this concept expanded from one day, or event, into the potential of how we might facilitate, and expand, the notion of transformative listening beyond the International Transformative Learning Conference 2018. Indeed, we will share how we ourselves experienced the transformative power of listening during, and across, the regularly scheduled meetings during which we engaged in collaborative conversations leading to the development of a listening protocol, listening cards, and an idea for a website platform.

The Transformation and Evolution of the Project

This committee formed in the summer of 2017 as a group of practitioners/educators attracted to transformative learning through the process of listening engaged in an initial conversation. Our interest came from deep concern for the current political and community discourse of disrespect and disregard for differences and the subsequent divisive conversations that we were witnessing in local and global arenas. We initially began exploring the idea of an International Day of Listening however realized that our work

was dynamic and fluid, and held greater potential, beyond one day of listening or the events that might take place during the upcoming International Transformative Learning Conference 2018. We wanted to create tools that could be used by anyone who may be interested in expanding their listening practice to include leaning in, and connecting in an effort to truly understand another.

The committee itself modeled the tenets of transformative listening, beginning each meeting with a few minutes of grounding and listening to self or spirit. Check-ins were also conducted at the opening of each meeting, providing space for each committee member to share how they were experiencing the world at that particular moment. Further check-ins were conducted at the conclusion of each meeting fostering individual and collective close to the conversation. This process helped to cultivate a virtual community, where people from diverse experiences and global locations were connected, and relationships were formed over a shared vision.

With respect for a participatory process, each member of the committee expressed their intentions, goals, and/or hopes for the project. Our overarching collective desire was to facilitate individual and collective transformation through listening. Our goal was to create a listening protocol that could be shared with a broader community that, when applied during conversations, would facilitate connection, acceptance, understanding, and collective transformation. Our hopes are that by engaging in the listening activity, participants will:

- Experience the wonder of being listened to, and of having listened with acceptance;
- Experience increased self-awareness around how they listened, and were listened to, prompting further reflection on how they usually listen - and possibly informing future positive listening experiences in conversations going forward;
- Have had a moment of paying closer attention to their own listening, and hold that act with a curious awareness, noticing any new wrinkles in the quality of the communication or connection due to this added awareness and curiosity;
- Have practiced a sensitive listening, paying attention both to the speech of others and to their body expressions, "what the body was talking about," at the same time paying attention to the messages that their own bodies transmitted in this interactive process;
- Remark to themselves how much more and how deeply their listening experience was by using these simple steps (which may be new to them) and hopefully consciously incorporate the steps into their listening approaches in the future;
- Feel an enhanced connection to self, another, their community or to spirit. Hopefully this connection will provide an opportunity for increased compassion and sense of care for themselves, others, and their communities;
- Become aware of distractions and choose to be in the moment:
- The listeners will become aware of emotions/feelings/reactions to what they are hearing and can learn to "store" (set aside for later reflection) rather than "ignore" them;
- The -storytellers will be able and willing to trust the listeners with their stories, and in the telling of the stories, this trust and vulnerability are supported by the listeners, so that after the exercise the storytellers feel more "known" and safe rather than feeling regret from having shared themselves;
- Consider the reciprocal relationship between listening and speaking.

Outcomes of the Project

It was important to us that this not be a project of academics claiming to be knowers imparting their wisdom, but as a participatory process where we could learn from an ongoing and iterative process of creating, developing and testing a listening protocol in diverse settings with participants, and use the feedback to make changes in the protocol from what we learned.

The process of developing a meaningful listening protocol was a collaborative approach where all were welcome and invited to contribute to its evolution. Each committee member was invited to test each iteration of the protocol outside of the monthly Zoom meetings among his/her communities of interest. In addition to developing the protocol, a Facilitator's Guide with guidance on how to conduct a listening activity was also penned with input from committee members. The first prototype of the protocol was tested within the committee where members listened in dyads to each other. The initial feedback indicated that the protocol needed better structure with a specific goal in mind. There was also confusion regarding the objectives for the listening activity about whether it was primarily focused on effective listening skills or also on gathering and sharing stories. Further discussion affirmed the focus was to be on the listening process. In addition, some members stated that it was important to keep the instructions specific and easy to follow while also ensuring that the facilitator was offering sufficient support and directions for those participating. The guide and activity were reworked in light of the feedback.

For the second prototype, specific activity cards were developed to clarify and simplify the instructions for both the facilitator and participant. Committee members were asked to run the prototype with others outside of the committee to gain additional feedback from those not involved in the planning process. One of the prototypes was tested in Milan, Italy at an ESREA (European Society for Research on the Education of Adults) conference. An open invitation was given to all participants to participate in a listening activity which was led by 2 facilitators and included 4 conference attendees. After an extended and uncomfortable period of silence, a few members shared brief stories. One story resonated deeply with some group members that in turn resulted in a vulnerable and transparent time of sharing and finding commonality among similar struggles. The experience was so meaningful that several mentioned it was the highlight of the conference.

A takeaway from this prototype was that this experience has incredible power to bring people together through active listening and interaction with felt commonalities. Feedback and suggestions for the protocol then moved from developing the activity to addressing challenges in facilitating a listening activity. These challenges included the facilitator's role in keeping confidentiality, maintaining equality in the group by giving everyone equal space, being sensitive to those who are processing trauma or pain, and also not dominating the group or discussion. The facilitators guide and listening activity cards were updated with input from this meeting.

The third and final iteration of the prototype was completed and re-tested prior to the ITLC conference in November. Committee members were encouraged to test the latest iteration in a variety of settings. One listening activity, using the cards, was held during social justice class in a university, and another member used this activity in a family setting. Facilitators were asked to respond to the following three questions upon completion of the third prototype;

- What did you Like?
- What do you Wish?, and
- What do you Wonder?

The final recommendations included improvements to listening activity card design, and improvements to the language and instructions in both the listening activity cards and facilitators guide. A further, and unexpected outcome of the iterative collaborations and testing of the prototypes was a shift or transformation of the committee's understanding of our work and learning together. It became clear that our original name of The International Day of Listening no longer fully captured the essence of what we were doing and the generative nature of our efforts. As a result, a new name of the "Transformative Listening Project" emerged.

Our intention was to create a sustainable transformative listening project with clear and simple guidelines and accessible tools. We created detailed guidelines for the project for those who want to go more in

depth into the process and listening activity cards for those needing a quick simple resource tool for listening. The guidelines and cards are accessible on the [Transformative Listening Project Facebook page](#).

Transformative Listening Activities Embedded in the Conference

Further to the listening activity guidelines and cards, the committee also identified the opportunity to engage participants attending the 2018 International Transformative Learning Conference in the following transformative listening activities:

1. *The Preliminary Session* - facilitated by Mina Wilson, Alessandra Romano and Debbie Kramlich will be a preview of what is to come in the conference as well as an experiential experience of listening.
2. *Throughout the Conference*- We encourage participants to engage in a listening process that focuses on attentive listening to presentations rather than what one will say or do in response to the presentation. We offer the following three questions to ponder after each session:
 - a) Was I present to the speaker?
 - b) Was I engaged with listening to the speaker?
 - c) What am I aware of as a result of listening attentively to the speaker?
3. *Listening Space*- Rosy Ramirez will facilitate the learning in the TLP corner in the Everett Lounge for listening activities. There will be clear self-directed activities in this space or people from the TLP in the space to facilitate activities.
4. *Capturing Listening* - Katie Ross and Debbie Kramlich are exploring a way to have people record their experiences with listening, share research interests, and connect with others in the transformative learning community using their cell phones and then uploading the information to our website using a scan function embedded in the cards. A YouTube Channel has been launched by the International Transformative Learning Association and the ITLC 2018 will be a place to record additional video. Video will not be used to gather or store the stories of those participating in this activity. Video will be used to reflect on the process of facilitating or participating in a listening activity. The YouTube Channel is a place for the ITLA to connect with each other through shared research interests and to learn more about others and their involvement with transformative learning. Another possibility being explored is the development of a video for facilitators detailing how to lead a listening activity either with an audio explanation or by recording a detailed PowerPoint with no audio. Once completed, the video may be posted on the TLP Facebook page as a pinned post, on a future website, and on the YouTube channel.
5. *Quiet Reflecting Listening Space* - There will be a quiet reflective listening opportunity in the chapel where there is an event with classical music all weekend long. The space provides comfortable spaces to sit and pillows for further comfort. Instruments will also be made available for those who wish to participate in music making activities.
6. *Creative Spaces* - The Art in Transformative Learning Committee will be embedding the arts into the conference providing art supplies to those interested in participating in creating art.
7. *Perspective taking session*- Laurie Anderson Sathe and Anne Liisa Longmore will facilitate a reflective session on Saturday morning to explore participants' experiences of listening throughout the conference. This will be an interactive session where we will have various activities with listening dyads or circles and grounding activities.

After the Conference

All resources and materials will be available on the [Transformative Listening Facebook page](#). Please follow this page to follow the projects evolution and to learn more about how to engage in this project moving forward.

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