

# Chapter 4

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In this chapter, we will work together to do the following:

- Distinguish hearing from listening
- Explore listening as a stance shaped by context, individual experience, and cultural expectations
- Explore listening as dialogic engagement
- Consider listening as a means of learning



# Compassionate Critical Listening

with Chris McRae

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Max and Stephanie exit the downtown movie theater and walk into the crisp fall air. On the sidewalk, Max stops and turns to Stephanie: "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" she replies.

"That's a saxophone. Let's go find out who's playing."

"I still don't hear what you're talking about, but OK."

Max points to his left, and they begin quickly walking down the sidewalk along the edge of the building. As they reach the intersection, a large semi-truck rumbles by, blocking their view of the park across the street. An ambulance, with sirens blaring, follows the truck. Max and Stephanie both turn their heads, placing their hands over their ears. Once the ambulance passes, the audible crosswalk signal begins to beep. Max and Stephanie cross the street, and the sounds from the saxophone grow louder.

"Do you hear that now?" Max asks.

"Yeah, it's coming from right over there," Stephanie points to a park bench. An African American man is sitting on the bench with an open instrument case at his feet, playing variations of *The Pink Panther* theme song on the tenor saxophone.

"Let's go listen!"

"I don't know. It's not really the kind of music I like," Stephanie says as she starts to back away.

"What do you mean? He sounds really good. Listen to that tone! It's so full and warm. And his phrasing is excellent, too," Max says, getting increasingly excited.

"I just don't feel comfortable. I'd rather listen to music at my house or at a concert."

"Let's stay and listen. There's nothing to be afraid of. It's just music!"

"I'm not afraid," Stephanie says. "I just don't feel comfortable."

"Well, can we stay and listen for just a little while?"

\* \* \*

We live in and are surrounded by sounds. When Max and Stephanie leave the theater, they enter a world of sound: traffic, music, and their own voices. Sometimes these sounds are taken for granted (like the audible signal at the crosswalk), and sometimes they are hard to ignore (like the ambulance roaring down the street). To explain what happens when we listen, we often make a distinction between **hearing** and **listening**.

Beyond Hearing: Listening as Stance

Dialogic Listening

Listening as Double Articulation

Public Advocacy: Listening to Learn

Dialogic Listening

➤ KEY IDEAS

➤ TOWARD PRACTICE



While hearing is a passive act, listening requires our active energy and focus.

In general, hearing is a physiological experience in which sound waves vibrate our eardrums. We usually ignore these sounds or take them for granted. We therefore take hearing to be a passive act, contrasted with the more active practice of *listening*. In this way, listening is a practice that requires our active attention and focus.

For example, you might go to the grocery store and *hear* the music playing as you focus your attention on what kind of bread you want. After leaving the store, you might not be able to identify, or even remember, any of the songs you heard while shopping. But when you get home and *listen* to your favorite artist on the radio, you might not *hear* your roommate ask you a question about your day. Often, these distinctions are made regarding speakers. Sometimes we *hear* somebody talking but we either aren't thinking deeply about what she or he is saying or aren't paying attention at all. If we *listen* to someone speaking, we believe ourselves to be engaging with and thinking carefully about the message.

At the surface level, this distinction between hearing and listening helps us sort out what, specifically, happens when we use the sensory capacities of our ears. Sometimes we passively encounter sounds (*hear*), and sometimes we actively engage with those sounds (*listen*). This differentiation often carries negative and positive connotations. For example, the passive act of hearing is not preferable to the more active and skillful act of listening when it comes to engaging and interacting with others. These distinctions function to simplify the practice of listening as *only* passive or active. This also works to frame and privilege active listening as a skill we can learn, practice, and refine with increasing degrees of effectiveness (Beall, Gill-Rosier, Tate, & Matten, 2008; Janusik, 2010; Thompson, Leintz, Nevers, & Witkowski, 2004).

The approach to listening as a skill we can learn carries certain limitations. In particular, this approach limits our discussion of listening to the development of strategies to listen better. It does not allow us to consider the ways our approaches or listening styles and goals might change depending on context, individual experience, and cultural expectations. It also does not allow us to consider the ways our positions as listeners in the world are constantly changing (Beard, 2009). The distinction between hearing and listening, and the approach to listening as a skill, also does not account for the ways those who do not hear (e.g., those who are deaf or hard of hearing) might actively engage in communication in alternate ways. In other words, the distinction between hearing and listening, and treatment of listening as a skill, does not account for the complexity of the practice of listening for people who might not use their ears to listen.

For example, when Max and Stephanie encounter the saxophone player in the city park, they have an opportunity to engage with the performance. They also have a chance to engage with each other regarding the performance. Max and Stephanie display different ways of responding to the saxophone player's music, and both reactions

are individually and culturally informed. Max wants to stay and listen to the performance, and Stephanie wants to leave. How they negotiate their differences depends on their relationship as friends, and this will also affect their relationship in the future.

In this chapter, we consider the complexity of listening as not simply a skill but a fully embodied way of being in the world. In doing so, we address the ways we might practice and develop our capacities as compassionate critical listeners. We begin with a definition of listening as a stance or way of engaging others that is shaped by context, individual experience, and cultural expectations. Next, we describe ethical listening in terms of dialogic engagement. Then, we illustrate how listening is a practice that both shapes and is shaped by culture. Finally, we invite you to consider how listening functions as a way for you to learn from others.



Listening is not limited to our ears.



## DISCUSSION

What do you consider to be good listening practices? What has or has not worked for you in the past?

## Beyond Hearing: Listening as Stance

We might begin to develop a more complex and inclusive understanding of listening if we think of it as a **stance**, or an approach to experience, rather than simply a matter of hearing or listening in ways that are passive or active, or as skills in need of development. First, if listening is a stance or orientation to the world and to others, then we can begin to account for the ways contexts, individual experiences, and cultural expectations might shape our listening. Second, if listening is a stance, then we can begin to move away from thinking of listening exclusively in terms of the physiological act of hearing and move toward thinking of listening as a way of fully engaging with others. As phenomenologist Don Ihde (2007) explains, “I do not merely hear with my *ears*, *I hear* with my whole body. My ears are at best the *focal* organs of hearing” (p. 44). Listening as a stance is a way for you to encounter the world and others as fully present, with your whole body.

When Max and Stephanie step out of the movie theater and onto the sidewalk, they are surrounded by multiple opportunities for listening: to each other, to the sounds of the city, and to the music of the saxophone player. Each of these listening opportunities could also function as an opportunity for Max and Stephanie to engage and take on a listening stance with the world around them.

To illustrate the way we might take on the stance of critical compassionate listeners, the idea of **modes of listening** can help us consider the ways context, personal experience, and cultural expectations might shape the way we engage as listeners. Musicologist Ola Stockfelt (1997, pp. 132–137) suggests that different musical genres invite us to listen in different ways and that, as listeners, we can work to develop different modes of listening for different musical styles, situations, or contexts. In other words, we can engage in and develop various modes of listening for various listening situations. The

function of our different modes of listening is to shape the way we might develop our relationships to and with others as listeners.

Another way to think of *modes of listening* is in terms of listening competencies or strategies we might develop to relate to specific listening situations. In the example of listening to music, you might think of the different strategies you have and use for listening to different styles or genres of music in a variety of locations. This is also true for other kinds of communicative interactions you might encounter. We use different modes of listening or engaging for different kinds of communication.

However, modes of listening are not simply strategies we develop and deploy on our own. They are shaped or constituted by a variety of social and cultural factors. Stockfelt (1997, p. 136) explains that social and cultural contexts are virtually inseparable from the modes of listening we might, as individuals, choose to use or develop. In other words, contextual factors such as location or environment might create expectations for which modes of listening are acceptable. For example, the modes of listening that might be socially and culturally appropriate at a punk rock concert would not be appropriate or acceptable at an opera house. Likewise, the modes of listening that are socially and culturally appropriate in a class lecture are not necessarily the same ones used when listening to your friends over lunch. In other words, the modes of listening we develop always emerge in relationship to the cultural and social expectations of specific genres. Genres invite specific modes of listening.

Thinking of modes of listening can help us better understand listening as a stance in at least three ways. First, we might develop a variety of ways of listening in various contexts. This is to say, we might take on different stances as listeners depending on the listening contexts in which we find ourselves. The second aspect of listening as a stance that modes of listening help us consider is the way our listening is shaped by individual experiences and knowledge. The third factor is the cultural expectations and guidelines always connected to our performance as listeners.

First, modes of listening help clarify the notion of listening as a stance by pointing to the ways our role as listeners is shaped by the context of the **listening situation**.



Modes of listening are shaped by a variety of contextual factors.

Stockfelt (1997) explains the contextual nature of listening to music in terms of genres and argues that there are multiple “genre-normative modes of listening” we might engage in (p. 137). Genre (e.g., blues, dubstep, or pop) is one way of identifying, categorizing, and marking specific contexts that carry particular expectations for engagement. For example, when Max and Stephanie encounter the saxophone player in the park, they have certain listening expectations connected to the kind of music he is playing and the location of his performance. Similarly, Max and Stephanie are also contextually positioned as listeners in relationship to each other. The context of their relationship and their location (in the city, after leaving a movie, etc.) contains factors that shape their expectations for the ways they might engage each other as listeners.

Contexts shape expectations of socially or culturally appropriate modes of listening. Therefore, rather than thinking of listening as either active or passive, it is important to remember that there are multiple appropriate modes of listening depending on our contextual position as listeners. Of course, this does not mean we can’t sometimes work to challenge or resist these expectations. However, it is important to remember and recognize that listening is a divergent activity that is always linked to context.

Second, modes of listening help clarify our understanding of listening as a stance by pointing to the effects of individual experience and knowledge on the act of listening. Our stance as listeners is always shaped by our individual **position as listeners**. Depending on the context, we may have varying degrees of expertise in or knowledge about the modes of listening we enact. For example, Max’s ability to engage with the improvisational playing of the saxophonist is related to his personal experiences as a musician who plays improvisational styles. Similarly, Stephanie’s reticence to engage with the saxophone player’s music is connected to her musical preferences and competencies.

Ingrid Monson (2007) introduces the concept of **perceptual agency** as a way of thinking about the ways our sensory experiences are, in part, shaped by our individual practices. She defines perceptual agency as “the conscious focusing of sensory attention that can yield differing experiences of the same event” (p. S37). In other words, our ability to shift focus when we engage as listeners can create the possibility for multiple and differing experiences (p. S39). For example, if Max pays attention to the saxophone player’s musical phrasing and, at the same time, Stephanie focuses on the fading sirens of the ambulance, they will have different experiences.

You could do this right now by focusing on background sounds, such as the hum of the electric lights, the whir of the air conditioner, or even the rhythm of your own breathing. You can then switch your focus to foreground sounds, such as music or nearby conversations. This perceptual focus can happen visually, too, as you shift from looking at your phone or computer screen to looking up and out into the room. Both perspectives are in your range of vision, but depending on how you choose to focus your attention, your experience of the world around you will vary. Our ability to shift the focus of our perceptions as listeners is a combination of individual motivations (what we want to attend to) and skills (what we learn to attend to) within specific social and cultural contexts.

**“I do not merely hear with my ears, I hear with my whole body. My ears are at best the focal organs of hearing.”**

**—Don Ihde**

This leads us to the third way modes of listening can help clarify the idea of listening as a stance. Our listening stance is informed by context and our individual practices, but it is also linked to the ways our individual listening practices are always influenced by questions of culture and cultural expectations. Or as Monson (2007) explains regarding agency, “It is what people choose to do given the particular structural and discursive configurations in which they live” (p. S38). How we might listen or the agency we have as listeners is always filtered through and influenced by our cultural locations.

For example, the mode of listening and engagement you choose to use in the classroom is one you've learned and developed to navigate your classes in ways you find meaningful. You might choose, as a student, to listen and engage in the classroom in a way you understand as good student listening. You might take notes, ask questions, and try to consider ways the class lessons are applicable to your own experiences. However, whatever mode of listening you choose and understand as "good student listening" is also a mode shaped by the social and cultural expectations that create classrooms and define "good" and "successful" student performances. This includes everything from positive reinforcement received from teachers throughout your educational experiences to representations of "good" and "bad" student practices in movies and television shows. Your choices as a listener in the classroom, and in other contexts, are always marked by larger social and cultural expectations.

Modes of listening help us start to define and understand what it means to take on the stance of compassionate critical listeners by drawing our attention to the roles context, individual experience, and cultural expectations play in the process and performance of listening (McRae, 2012, p. 337). Understanding listening as a stance also requires us to move away from thinking of listening exclusively as a way of *hearing*. Instead, a listening stance is *a way of engaging* with others. Framing listening as a stance is also an attempt at understanding the performance of listening as more than a matter of the exclusive practice of hearing. This is important because privileging the physiological process of hearing does not account for the experiences of people who are deaf or hard of hearing but still work to engage others in communicative interactions. In other words, framing listening as a stance functions to expand listening to include more than just a way of hearing and encompasses all the ways we might approach or encounter others in communication.

One way to begin clarifying this way of engaging is by framing the act of listening in terms of the practices we engage in as audience members at a performance. Pelias and VanOosting (1987) suggest there are four levels of audience participation along a continuum of possible audience participation, and these levels offer a way of defining how audience members might engage with performances. The levels on this continuum of audience engagement and response include inactive, active, interactive, and proactive (p. 226). This continuum recognizes and names the multiple ways an audience might engage with a performance and also helps clarify the different functions of our stance as listeners.

On the inactive end of the continuum, the audience response, or level of participation in the performance event, is based on conventions and set cultural expectations (Pelias & VanOosting, 1987, p. 226). An inactive audience response takes place when audience members witness a performance and are "bound by conventions that encourage the passive reception of performance stimuli" (p. 226). In other words, at the inactive level of audience response, an audience member does not interact with a performance in any way that might add to or change the performance. For example, if you attend a traditional theater play, your role as audience member includes specific and culturally determined responses, such as waiting to applaud until the end of the show.

The next point along the continuum of response is the active level of audience engagement. This occurs when an audience engages with a performance in such a way that they are actively making meanings and connections during the performance. The active audience response is generally invited by the performance or performers and therefore still structured by set expectations. The third point along the continuum of



## DISCUSSION

What are different modes of listening you use in your everyday communication? What different contexts do you encounter as a listener? How do you navigate these contexts?

audience response is the interactive level of audience response. Pelias and VanOosting (1987) explain, “At this point, both performers and audience are seen as coproducers, each contributing to the artistic event” (pp. 226–227). The interactive level of audience response begins to position the audience as part of the creative performance process.

Finally, on the opposite end of the continuum, at the level of proactive audience response, the distinction between audience and performer is blurred, and the performance is created in the relationship between performer and audience (Pelias & VanOosting, 1987, p. 227). This continuum of audience response is helpful in thinking about listening as a stance because it demonstrates how the ways we position ourselves in relationship to others as listeners can generate different levels of response.

The specific stance of critical compassionate listening is one that works for a particular kind of response and emphasizes our responsibility as listeners in developing relationships with others in communication. How we choose to engage and participate as listeners is always linked to context, personal experiences, and cultural expectations; however, the stance or position we take as listeners will shape our experience and relationship to those we engage with. In the following section, we consider strategies we might employ in working to enact the stance of compassionate critical listener.



## DISCUSSION

What stance do you take as a listener in the classroom? What are your individual tendencies as a listener in the classroom? How are these informed by your own cultural expectations?

## Dialogic Listening

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The saxophone player finishes the song, and Max begins to applaud.

“That was great!”

“Thanks,” the musician replies.

“What’s your name?” Max asks.

“I’m Vincent, but everyone usually just calls me Pops.”

“I’m Max, and this is my friend Stephanie.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Pops says.

“You know, I play the saxophone, too,” Max says. “I’m actually taking private music lessons over at the university, and I’m learning to improvise and play some jazz, too.”

“Really? Well, tell me what you think of this one.” Pops adjusts the neck strap on his saxophone and begins to play a new song.

Stephanie turns to Max, “Can we go now? I still feel really uncomfortable, and I don’t have any money for this guy or anything.”

“Don’t worry about it, Stephanie. I have some cash.”

“Yeah, but we don’t know how he’s going to use that money, and like I said before, I don’t really like this music.”

“What!? Look, I just want to enjoy his music. If you want to leave, go ahead.”

\* \* \*

Max and Stephanie’s introduction to Pops and their own conversation about staying to listen to the music points to the complicated nature of taking on the stance of compassionate critical listener. From Max’s fascination and appreciation for the music to his seeming disregard for Stephanie’s discomfort and concerns, his stance as a listener raises questions about what it means to engage compassionately and critically. Similarly, Stephanie’s self-proclaimed dislike for the music Pops is playing and her discomfort with the context of this particular performance also raise questions



about what it means to engage as a compassionate critical listener. Both Max's and Stephanie's listening provide us with a good starting place for explaining the underlying goals of a critical compassionate listening stance.

This approach to listening is characterized by a focus and emphasis on dialogue and dialogic communication. What does listening as an act of dialogue entail? Performance scholar Dwight Conquergood (1985) argues that dialogic performance is "one path to genuine understanding of others" (p. 9). Critical compassionate listening is a stance or way of relating to others that is informed by this commitment to working toward genuine understanding. Conquergood explains,

This performative stance struggles to bring together different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another. The aim of dialogical performance is to bring self and other together so that they can question, debate, and challenge one another. (p. 9)

The concept of dialogic performance is important for developing a stance of critical compassionate listening because these are both approaches to creating and maintaining relationships across differences in communication.

Conquergood's (1985) notion of dialogic performance is, in part, defined through his literal mapping of four major dangers a performer might encounter in attempting to engage with others across difference. Dialogic performance falls in the center of the map and is a point of balance between identity and difference, detachment and commitment. To perform at the center of this map, we should be aware of and try to avoid four ethical pitfalls. We can apply Conquergood's map of these four pitfalls to our discussion of the critical compassionate listening stance. This stance is a performance we might enact in an attempt to achieve dialogic engagement. We should also be aware of and work to avoid Conquergood's four pitfalls in our performances as listeners.

The first pitfall, or ethical danger, is the **Custodian's Rip-Off**. The danger represented by this pitfall is engaging with the other for selfish reasons (Conquergood, 1985, p. 5). Rather than trying to engage and understand others, the performer who falls into this trap, or takes this stance, is more interested in how she or he might personally benefit from engaging with the other. This closes down the opportunity for dialogic performance because the performer is not sincerely considering the perspectives and differences of others. Instead, this stance focuses on the self at the exclusion of others.

In terms of listening, the Custodian's Rip-Off is characterized by our attempts to hear others only as a means of benefiting ourselves. This is a way of listening that is motivated only by incentives for personal gain. You might also think of this as selective listening, or those times when you tune in only because you know you will get some benefit from your act of engagement. This kind of selfish listening or way of engaging with others inhibits genuine conversation because we are focusing on and attending to only the communication that might directly benefit us. This is a kind of listening that does not generally consider the context or experiences of the speaker.

Max might, for example, be dangerously close to this selfish stance in his desire to listen to the music Pops is playing. If Max chooses to engage with the music only because he enjoys it and does not work to consider Pops's experience as a musician, then Max is missing out on the opportunity to genuinely engage with Pops. We often listen, or engage with others, to benefit ourselves. You might, for example, listen in class only to find out what will be on the test. Listening selectively in this way is not always or necessarily bad. What is important to remember, though,

**"We are all born listeners. The listening newcomer emerges into an environment formed by (and quite literally, under) the voices of others."**

**—Lenore Langsdorf**

is that this way of listening can work to prevent you from engaging dialogically, or in genuine conversation, with others.

The second pitfall, or ethical danger, Conquergood (1985) described is the **Enthusiast's Infatuation**. The danger of this stance is that the differences of the other are superficially oversimplified or ignored (p. 6). As Conquergood explained, "This performative stance is unethical because it trivializes the other. The distinctiveness of the other is glossed over by a glaze of generalities" (p. 6). Falling into this pitfall as a performer works to prevent dialogic performance by creating an incomplete understanding of the complexities of others. Instead of trying to understand the multiple differences of others, performers who engage in this stance attend only to their similarities.

In terms of listening, the Enthusiast's Infatuation is characterized by a listening stance in which we hear only the similarities we share with others. This is a way of listening that ignores differences or oversimplifies the perspectives and positions of others. This might also be thought of as "hearing what you want to hear." However, this is an act of engaging only with what you perceive to be commonalities shared with the other. This uncomplicated approach to listening is exclusionary and makes genuine conversation impossible because the fullness of the other person's perspective is ignored or oversimplified.

We can also begin to see Max engaging in listening that might take on the characteristics of the Enthusiast's Infatuation. Stephanie repeatedly tells Max that she is uncomfortable listening to Pops play the saxophone, but Max insists they stay. In his response to Stephanie, he does not fully consider or acknowledge her feelings or position. Instead, Max ignores or deflects the differences Stephanie attempts to express.

In addition to ignoring differences, the Enthusiast's Infatuation is a stance that tends to celebrate similarities at the exclusion of recognizing differences. For example, when Max shares with Pops that he also plays the saxophone, we begin to hear the ways Max feels he is similar to Pops. Later, Pops shares that he learned to play the saxophone by playing in a band at various clubs in the city with his dad. He also shares that he never had enough money to pay for private music lessons. When Max responds by again celebrating the fact that they are both jazz musicians and saxophone players, he is demonstrating the danger of the Enthusiast's Infatuation by not fully considering the ways Pops's life experiences are different from his own. Again, in terms of dialogic engagement, the danger of this stance is that it ignores and oversimplifies complexity and difference. This prevents us from even beginning to understand others and definitely obstructs genuine conversation.

The third pitfall, or ethical danger, Conquergood (1985) described is the **Curator's Exhibitionism**. Unlike the Enthusiast's Infatuation, this stance focuses almost exclusively on the differences of others. In this stance, differences are exotic and strange, and the performer puts them on display, not unlike pieces in a museum exhibition, for the purpose of entertainment and amusement. Conquergood explained, "The manifest sin of this quadrant is Sensationalism, and it is an immoral stance because it dehumanizes the other" (p. 7). The danger of this stance for dialogic performance or engagement with the other is that it works to define and display the other only in terms of her or his differences.

As listeners, we might enact the stance of the Curator's Exhibitionism when we listen exclusively for the differences of others. Unlike the Enthusiast's Infatuation, which focuses almost completely on similarities, the kind of listening the Curator's Exhibitionism encourages is characterized by a failure to recognize any similarities across difference. This stance shuts down the possibility for dialogue by marking the other person as so utterly different that genuine conversation is impossible. In other

**“I would rather make mistakes in kindness and compassion than work miracles in unkindness and hardness.”**

**—Mother Teresa of Calcutta**

words, this stance of listening does not hear the other person as someone who could ever be engaged in any meaningful way.

Listeners may engage in the Curator’s Exhibitionism unreflectively and without meaning harm. For example, when a student with a Jamaican accent gives a presentation in class and several students ask him to “say something else” so they can hear his “beautiful accent,” they risk fetishizing the speaker’s accent. The emphasis the students place on their peer’s accent works to highlight and put on display this difference and fails to acknowledge the content or nuance of his presentation. We might also enact Curator’s Exhibitionism when we hear someone sharing a different perspective than ours and we mark that person as ridiculous or not worth engaging. This approach to listening clearly keeps us from engaging in dialogue with others, because it regards difference as an obstruction to communication.

The fourth and final pitfall Conquergood (1985) described is the **Skeptic’s Cop-Out**. Like the Curator’s Exhibitionism, this stance focuses on the differences of others. However, instead of displaying or objectifying differences, those who fall into the pitfall of the Skeptic’s Cop-Out refuse to engage in any way with those who are different. Instead, this stance is characterized by avoidance. As Conquergood explained, “Refusal to take a moral stand is itself a powerful statement of one’s moral position” (p. 8). The ethical danger of this stance for dialogic performance or engagement is that no interaction across difference is possible.

In terms of listening, the Skeptic’s Cop-Out is a stance of refusing to engage or hear others because they are different. As soon as you hear or encounter a perspective not in line with your way of thinking, you simply stop listening. The logic of this stance is characterized by the phrase, “I don’t have to hear this,” or “I don’t have to listen to you.” Genuine conversation becomes impossible because the choice not to listen keeps the communicative interaction from moving forward. Though this stance may seem passive, the choice to ignore somebody because he or she is different is always political.

To some extent, Stephanie demonstrates the possibility of falling into this pitfall with her continued assertion of not wanting to listen to the music Pops is playing. We don’t know why she doesn’t want to listen, but this refusal to engage with the music also works to shut down the possibility of any further interaction with Pops. Another common example of listening that falls into the trap of the Skeptic’s Cop-Out occurs during political campaigns or discussions about elections and policies. Refusal to engage with someone simply because she or he holds different political values prevents dialogic engagement. Such a stance also works to silence other people and does not allow room for personal growth.

Each of these four ethical pitfalls can be easy to enact as we take the stance of listeners. There are many situations where we might listen for selfish reasons, listen in ways that focus exclusively on similarities or differences, or refuse to listen because of differences we encounter. However, cultivating our awareness of these pitfalls, and our tendencies as listeners, is important as we work to take on the stance of critical compassionate listener. Learning to listen in ways that acknowledge and recognize our differences and similarities with others can help us work toward dialogic engagement with others.

Some questions we might ask as we listen and strive for dialogic engagement include the following:

- Am I listening to this person only for my own personal gain?
- Am I considering the context or personal experience of the other person?

- Am I hearing only what I want to hear?
- Am I listening only for the similarities I share with this person?
- Am I listening in a way that oversimplifies what this person is saying?
- Am I listening only to the ways this person is different from me?
- Am I listening in a way that does not take this person or her or his ideas and perspectives seriously?
- Am I refusing to listen to this person because she or he is different from me or because I disagree with her or his perspectives?

These questions are a starting place for developing our ability to take on the stance of critical compassionate listener. In the next section, we consider the ways our ability to take a listening stance is already shaped or constituted by larger social and cultural structures.



## DISCUSSION

In what ways do you fall into the four ethical pitfalls as a listener? In what ways do you avoid these pitfalls?

## Listening as Double Articulation

A local radio station recently switched to a new programming format. The slogan for the station was “Today’s best hits, without the rap.” Radio stations are generally organized or formatted around specific genres or styles of music. Some stations are dedicated to playing country music, hip hop, rock ’n’ roll, oldies, classical, and a variety of news and talk shows. These categories or genres help us, as listeners, make decisions about what stations we might find desirable or appropriate. These genres also shape the ways we make sense of music as cultural forms. The construction of these genres is always purposeful and informed by particular ideologies or beliefs and values. Simon Frith (1996) explained that genres are “used to organize music making, music listening, and music selling” (p. 88). For example, radio stations follow certain formats based on musical genres to attract specific audiences and to sell specific kinds of advertisement.

The radio station that played “today’s best hits, without the rap” made an explicit statement about the kind of music it would not play. The station’s slogan acknowledges that rap music might fall into the category of “today’s best hits”; however, the station decided to exclude or do without “today’s best hits” that fell into the category of rap music. This attempt at separating, or segregating, “today’s best hits” into music that is either rap or not rap is an example of the ways genres work to constitute specific listening experiences by creating clear boundaries. This particular distinction carries with it certain racial undertones that mirror the marking of African American music in the 20th century as “race music.” Rap music is not exclusively an African American genre; however, it is marked by its cultural and historical connections to African American communities. Therefore, this particular radio station’s programming format necessarily participated in the practice of marking and structuring music according to cultural markers such as race.

Music is always a cultural form, and radio stations work to structure and organize these forms into genres. Our evaluation and preference of certain musical styles and genres are therefore shaped by the way our listening experiences are structured. In other words, the radio station that plays “today’s best hits, without the rap” is working to

structure and shape what might count as “best hits.” This, of course, does not determine what counts as the best music; it doesn’t even mean that this station’s commitment to playing certain genres is bad. However, this is an example of how our listening is always connected to and shaped by larger social structures. In other words, our listening is always linked to and shaped by a variety of cultural values.

Stephanie’s feelings of discomfort when she encounters Pops are also connected to larger cultural structures. The fact that Stephanie does not like or regularly listen to improvisational instrumental music is connected, in part, to the fact that this is not a commercially popular form of music. Likewise, her discomfort with Pops’s performance is connected to the cultural value of musical performances occurring within specific institutional contexts. In other words, street performances have a different value than musical performances that occur within concert halls and other formal venues.

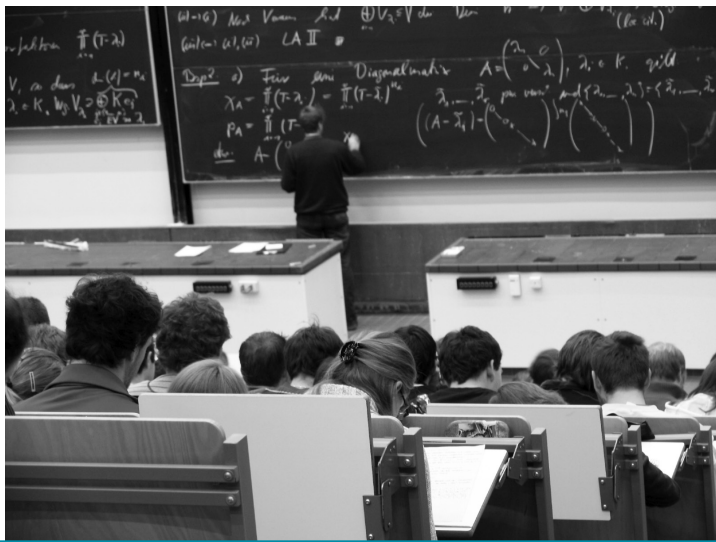
Our practice as listeners is often shaped or structured in even more concrete ways than musical genres. Sometimes our listening can be shaped by physical structures and locations. For example, musicologist Christopher Small (1998) explained how concert halls function to establish certain social expectations for audiences and performers of classical music. He said, “Before a note of music has been played, the building and its mode of organization have created among those present a set of relationships, which are a microcosm of those of the larger industrial society outside its walls” (p. 36). Spaces from concert halls to classrooms are purposefully designed to enable certain kinds of relationships and modes of interaction. A concert hall creates a clear distinction between performers and audience members, and oftentimes clear distinctions of status mark the places where people sit.

Similarly, classrooms are organized to facilitate certain kinds of relationships and interactions. For example, large lecture halls with fixed seating position the teacher as

an authority at the front of the room. The teacher is marked by height and location in the room as the only person who deserves to speak. Other classroom spaces might allow for reconfigured seating arrangements. In these rooms, the teacher’s position is not as central and the environment opens up the possibility for students to listen to multiple perspectives shared in the class. However, classrooms are also marked by a variety of cultural and social histories that shape how students and teachers might listen and engage one another. Changing the way seats are arranged does not necessarily account for the ways educational systems historically privilege the voices and perspectives of teachers and institutional curricula over the perspectives and experiences of students.

Examples of how musical genres and physical locations might structure listening function as a reminder that the stance we take as listeners is always structured socially, culturally, and historically. The ways we can begin to engage as listeners are always, to a certain extent, enabled and constrained by larger structures.

However, our practices as listeners can also begin to produce or constitute, and even change, existing structures.



Classrooms are organized to facilitate certain kinds of relationships and interactions.

Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1985) called this process **double articulation**. He explained,

By “double articulation” I mean that the structure—the given conditions of existence, the structure of determinations in any situation—can also be understood from another point of view, as simply the result of previous practices. We may say that a structure is what previously structured practices have produced as a result. (p. 95)

The structures that might constrain or even determine the ways we engage as listeners are made over time and through specific practices. In other words, these are not naturally occurring structures we can never alter. Rather, these structures come to be through specific practices, or ways of engaging and acting.

For example, the library is a common physical structure on college campuses. Activities that take place in this structure might include individual studying or small-group meetings. Part of what designates this structure, the library, as a place for studying or small-group work is that people continue to use the library to study and work on small-group projects. The structure will gradually change as people engage in different activities and practices in the space. One example of this is the common practice of bringing one’s laptop computer to the library to study or work on assignments. Many libraries are gradually making changes that provide wireless Internet access and more electrical outlets. Even 10 years ago, this would have been an uncommon structural feature in a library.

All this is to say that while our practices as listeners may be constrained by certain structures, they can begin to change gradually and shape these structures in turn. Therefore, taking the stance of compassionate critical listener is an opportunity to enact change. Though we may not immediately know or recognize the structural change our practices as listeners enact, we can take on the stance of compassionate critical listener with a specific goal in mind: listening to others as if we might learn something.



## DISCUSSION

How does your classroom invite or encourage you to listen? How does it discourage you from listening? How could you listen differently in this space?

## Public Advocacy: Listening to Learn

\* \* \*

As Stephanie begins to leave, Pops stops playing, “Are you really going to let your friend walk away?”

“If she doesn’t want to listen, it’s her loss,” Max says.

“It might be your loss, too,” replies Pops.

Max sighs and turns to follow Stephanie. He calls her name, and she stops and turns.

“What?”

“I don’t understand why you won’t stay and listen to Pops with me.”

“I don’t know. I told you, I don’t like the music, and I don’t feel . . . comfortable.”

“Well, why don’t you feel comfortable?”

“I guess I don’t really feel safe. I mean, it’s late and dark out, and I don’t know this guy,”

Stephanie explains.

“I hadn’t thought of it that way. I just thought it might be fun to listen to the music for a little while. I mean, that guy is a really good musician, and how often do we get to hear live music anyway?”

“Well, can we at least stand somewhere that has a little better lighting?”

“Yes.”

“And then you can explain to me why this is such great music on our way back to the car.”

“It’s a deal.”

\* \* \*

If we strive for dialogic engagement in our listening, our opportunities for learning increase, and, by listening to learn, we can begin to enact change in the world and our relationships with others. Paulo Freire (2000) explained that dialogue changes the relationship between students and teachers. If dialogue is achieved, “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (p. 80). If we work to engage in a stance of listening informed by a commitment to avoiding the pitfalls outlined by Conquergood (1985), then we create the possibility to learn from others. This is similar to the relational process that communication theorist John Stewart (1983) called interpretive listening, or “the co-constituting of understanding in talk” (p. 383). In other words, listening is an essential part of the meaning-making process.

Listening to learn from others requires an awareness of your position in the world. It also requires an orientation to the other that is open and receptive to different beliefs, values, and perspectives. Developing an awareness of your position in the world as a listener is an ongoing process. Nancy C. Cornwell and Mark P. Orbe (1999, pp. 88–90) explained that dialogic listening requires an awareness of the impact of culture, privilege, and power on our communicative interactions. Cultivating our awareness of the pitfalls outlined earlier in this chapter is one way we can begin to recognize our cultural position as listeners. We can also work for an awareness of the ways our culture and positions of privilege shape our listening by questioning the things we take for granted as listeners.

If, for instance, you find that you tune out or cannot engage with someone who does not share your political values, this act is not separate from a larger cultural system that tends to position differing political views as irreconcilable or in perpetual conflict. Refusing to engage with someone based on different political perspectives is also an act of privilege. Listening or engaging only when it is comfortable for you is not a privilege or position everyone shares.

For example, a friend was upset that his university wanted to eliminate use of the word *freshmen* in favor of the more gender-inclusive label *first-year students*. This friend did not want to engage with, or hear, the reasoning behind this shift in language. However, part of his refusal to consider the value in this shift is deeply connected to his privilege as a man. The label *freshmen* was, for him, never an exclusive category. His act of listening, or his inability to hear this shift as meaningful, is not separate from cultural systems of power that continue to privilege the experience and position of men.

Julia Eklund Koza (2008) makes a similar argument regarding the kinds of racial privilege embedded in vocal auditions for



Refusing to engage with someone based on different political perspectives is an act of privilege.

schools of music. Though these voice auditions are blind (the judges never see the musicians), the kinds of music and skill that are privileged or accepted as “good” tend to reflect performance styles and experiences marked by racial and class privilege (p. 146). For example, these auditions privilege singers whose skill level and training are marked by years of private lessons, an advantage usually achieved by those with certain amounts of money (p. 148). These auditions also, not surprisingly, privilege European and American musical styles, at the exclusion of other cultural musical forms (pp. 148–149). Recognizing our positions as listeners within systems of culture and privilege can be challenging; however, if we engage in this kind of reflexivity about ourselves as listeners, we can begin to understand or at least learn from people who do not share our position in the world.

In addition to developing an awareness of our position as listeners, listening to learn from others requires an awareness and recognition of others’ cultural positions and differences. As Lisbeth Lipari (2009) explains, the challenge and difficulty of engaging ethically with someone else is in the primary act of listening or taking the time to “attend, observe, attune—and in doing so receive the otherness of the other” (p. 47). To engage in communication with someone else, our act of listening must precede any other response. The awareness that we develop through this stance of listening does not, and cannot, entail a full and complete understanding of the other person. Rather, it is an act of recognizing and appreciating our infinite difference from others. As Lipari explains, “It means that I listen for and make space for the difficult, the different, and the radically strange” (p. 57). When we listen to learn from the other, we are presented with an opportunity for discovery that is always grounded in the different perspectives, values, and cultural locations of the other.

Listening to learn from the other is a way of enacting change in our relationships and positions in the world. This stance requires that we reflect on our own positions and those of others, and this can be a difficult process. However, the possibility for change and growth enabled by our listening to learn also has the potential to be pleasurable. Encountering the sounds and stories of another person from the stance of listening compassionately and critically is also enjoyable and productive. Navigating ethical pitfalls is just one way of creating strategies for critically and compassionately engaging with difference in our performance as listeners. However, as performance scholar Elizabeth Bell (1995, pp. 99–100) reminds us, performance is and can be an act of pleasure. As we work to engage in a stance of compassionate critical listening, it is helpful and important to remember that despite the difficulties and challenges of listening and engaging across difference, this act has the possibility to be productive and enjoyable.

We are constantly listening and engaging with others. Recognizing the ways we do so can be challenging because the practice of listening is so easily taken for granted. However, if we can account for the ways our modes of listening may fall short of dialogic engagement, then we might begin to change our individual practices, as well as the larger structures that affect our listening. For example, how might you change your listening, or way of engaging with others, in your communication classroom? And how might this new way of listening change your class?

Consider the mode of listening you enact as a student in your communication class. First, what are the distinctive characteristics of your classroom context? How are you positioned in the classroom as a listener? Or, in other words, how are you invited to engage? Second, what are your own individual tendencies as a listener? How do you choose to focus your attention? What motivates you and what challenges you as a listener? Finally, what expectations are placed on you in the class regarding your level of engagement? What kind of engagement is valued?



After considering your mode of listening, think about the ways you might fall short of dialogic engagement as a listener and student in the classroom. When do you listen for personal gain? When do you engage in ways that oversimplify the perspectives and ideas of others? When do you fail to take others seriously? When do you refuse to listen? Now that you have begun to account for the ways you engage in your classroom, what are strategies you might individually enact to engage dialogically? Similarly, how might you work with others in your class to alter the structure of your classroom (the space, relationships among the students, level of participation) to encourage and accommodate more dialogic engagement and critical compassionate listening?

## KEY IDEAS

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Curator's Exhibitionism	71	listening situation	66
Custodian's Rip-Off	70	modes of listening	65
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## TOWARD PRAXIS

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1. *Reflection:* Choose a particular recent moment when you listened to something or someone. How did listening as a stance—as influenced by the listening situation, your position as listener, and your cultural locations—take effect in this particular instance?
2. *Discussion:* How will you and your classmates prepare yourselves to listen both critically and compassionately in class? Will you develop guidelines for a supportive learning environment? How will you gently, but firmly, challenge someone who doesn't seem to be listening effectively?
3. *Action:* The next time someone approaches you—outside the grocery store, on the street, at your front door—try listening to her or him in a critical and compassionate way. Think carefully about this person's decision to speak with you, and ask questions that show you take her or him seriously. How did she or he respond? How did it make you feel?



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