

Listening with Understanding and Empathy By Karen Boyes

Listening is the beginning of understanding. Stephen Covey, in his book, *7 Habits For Highly Effective People*, states "highly effective people spend an inordinate amount of time and energy listening."

It is estimated that we spend 55% of our time listening yet it is one of the least taught skills in school. Some psychologists believe to empathise with and understand a person's point of view is one of the highest forms of intelligent behaviour. Good listeners put aside their own thoughts to listen to the ideas of others and try to understand what other people are saying. They are often regarded as respectful, focused, tuned in, caring and attentive. They are not rehearsing what they want to say next, day dreaming or thinking of the advice they are going to give.

A common listening sequence is to pause, paraphrase and probe. Pausing means using 'wait time' after asking questions and giving people time to respond. It means allowing processing time, rather than expecting an answer straight away. Paraphrasing lets others know that you are listening, that you understand or are trying to understand them and that you care. Probing is asking clarifying questions to help to gain a deeper insight or to refine understanding, terminology and interpretations.

Glenn Capelli gives a fabulous definition of empathy. He says "you don't have to agree with the score, just understand how they got to that score." You may not see eye to eye with a person, you just need to understand where they are coming from and why they think the way they do. It does not mean you have to agree with them. Voltaire said "I may disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Showing empathy is being able to assume someone's position and is about overcoming egocentrism. Again to do this you must be able to suspend your own thoughts and ideas. Someone who is demonstrating empathy would be able to paraphrase accurately, ask clarifying questions, build on ideas and give relevant examples.

Being able to listen with understanding and empathy requires the

ability to set your own thoughts, prejudices and values aside and to devote mental energy to attending and listening to the person. You may see a person leaning forward, nodding their head and making appropriate eye contact. Art Costa quote a child whom stated " you would only see one pair of lips move at a time." A great example of excellent listening.

As a teacher you may hear yourself saying, "before you give your opinion Jack, please paraphrase what you heard Jean say." Another phrase you might use is "if you were (x) what would you do?" Modeling good listening is also important. Take time to listen to students, so you can understand them and they can feel what being really listened to is like.

Books that may be useful to introduce this concept of listening with understanding and empathy include; Rainbow Fish by M Pfister. The True Story Of The Three Pigs by Jon Scieszka Charlottes Webb by EB White The Animal Farm by George Orwell The Diary Of Anne Frank by Frances Goodrich

A quote to conclude... "Nature gave us one tongue and two ears, so we could listen twice as much as speak."

References: Art Costa and Bena Kallick: Discovering & Exploring the Habits Of Mind
Karen Boyes: Creating An Effective Learning Environment