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LISTENING FOR RECONCILIATION AND BEYOND

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Abstract

When Mi'kmaw Elder and scholar Marie Battiste visited MSVU in 2015, she reminded those in attendance to “listen with our hearts” when working with Indigenous people. In this paper, I discuss an Indigenous perspective on the importance of listening in teaching, maintaining relationships, and reconciliation. The idea of taking time to listen to students is a powerful guiding principle for advancing the quality of post-secondary educational instruction. This listening process takes time, but the rewards are significant. Whereas our society and institutions often encourage us to act efficiently, listening with one’s heart can serve as a radical disruption in the normativity of time-restricted interactions. More practically, listening to our students can help us develop positive relationships. It also serves as a way to make connections between course material and our students’ lives. Finally, feeling heard is perhaps the most humanizing experience a student can have, and for students who have been systematically oppressed and alienated by the education system, a teacher who listens with their heart is a gift unlike any other.

Keywords

small teaching; listening; reconciliation; Indigenous curriculum; Indigenous knowledges

Introduction

Small teaching is a beautifully simple idea: "an approach that seeks to spark positive change in higher education through small but powerful modifications to our course design and teaching practices" (Lang, 2016, p. 13). From an Indigenous perspective, it is intuitive that small changes generate a large impact. Indeed, many Indigenous scholars have articulated Indigenous worldviews as being marked by an appreciation for the interconnectedness of all living things (Cajete, 2000; Graveline, 1998; Wilson, 2008). Resulting from generations of direct observation of, and relationship with, the land (Cajete, 2000), the concept of interconnectedness became integrated into every aspect of our lives, from our spiritual philosophy to the way we interact with one another. In a word, our traditional knowledge systems, philosophies, ways of life, and ways of teaching were, and often still are, holistic (Burkhart, 2004). The holistic, interconnected, and circular nature of Indigenous knowledge, for me, has always pointed to the idea that our internal worlds and the external world are one. Thus, anything we change in our external world must come from our internal one, and vice versa. We exist in relationship with the natural world, the social world, the cosmos, and ourselves, and we cannot make changes in one relationship without making changes in *every* relationship (Stonechild, 2016; Wilson, 2008). For me, the notion of making small changes in our teaching practice is therefore impossible without first making changes within our relationship with ourselves. It is in this spirit that I consider "listening with your heart" to be a small teaching technique positioned, not in the Western empirical study of the brain as is often the case with small teaching practices (Lang, 2016), but rather in the Indigenous study of reality and the relationships therein.

¹ In this brief essay, I outline two aspects of an Indigenous view on listening, and contrast those aspects with the ways in which we often listen in Western higher education. I then conclude the paper by: 1) presenting several outcomes of listening with one's heart, and 2) linking my discussion to the current movement toward reconciliation.

Indigenous Listening

When Mi'kmaw Elder and scholar Marie Battiste visited Mount Saint Vincent University in the fall of 2015, one piece of wisdom she shared was that we ought to "listen with our heart" (Battiste, personal communication, October 14, 2015). In the context of the group conversation, she was referring to

1 A full discussion of the relationship between Western cognitive science and Indigenous science is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that from my perspective, the Indigenous worldview upon which my discussion is based is of equal validity to cognitive science in shaping the way we teach, work, and live (see Cajete, 2000; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Stonechild, 2016).

the necessity of such listening in working with Elders on research. Since that time, however, I have attempted to apply her wisdom in every part of my life: my research, my relationships, and my teaching. Here, I will attempt to unpack the world of educational philosophy embedded within the idea of listening with one's heart.

This notion of listening with your heart, or what I call an Indigenous view of listening, is a listening rooted in the philosophical traditions of non-judgment (Wilson, 2008), interconnectedness, and a respect for all life (Graveline, 1998), as well as specific tribal relationships with land (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). If you have ever sat in a talking circle, you have experienced one instance of Indigenous listening. A talking circle is a traditional form of communication and collective problem solving which comes from the Indigenous cultures of Turtle Island (i.e., North America). Usually in a talking circle, community members gather together and sit in a circle; a Talking Stick passes from person to person, and each participant speaks until they have nothing left to say. Once everyone has had a turn to speak, an Elder usually links together the various thoughts that have been expressed, and the process continues until no one has anything left to add. One guiding principle of a talking circle is that participants say whatever is in their heart without interruption. This kind of talk brings you closer to yourself and gives you the chance to speak truths you may not have consciously realized before. The others in the talking circle listen, not with the intent to judge, but as observers—witnesses to your thinking and the movement of your being; it is an honest acceptance of the other person in all of their complexity.

There is a stark contrast between this type of listening and the conversations that commonly occur in most of Western education. Often, when we listen to our students in Western education, it is with the expressed intent to assess whether or not they have understood the course material (e.g., in-class presentations or discussions); we thus project our judgment onto them (Kumar, 2013). In my experience, this constant stream of evaluation and judgement creates a dependency on external, teacher-imposed validation in successful students (e.g., grade entitlement) and disengagement among students who receive negative feedback (Dweck, 2016). Indigenous Elders, on the other hand, rarely speak in the negative; rather they encourage others and share stories, allowing their listeners to come to their own conclusions. In the Western world, when we are not listening with the intent to judge, we frequently listen intently for an opening into which we can interject our own ideas; we wait for our turn to speak. This, too, brings negativity into our classrooms, whether we realize it or not. Indigenous scholar Gregory Cajete writes, “Language is an expression of the sacred because it contains the power to express human thought and feeling and to emotionally affect others” (Cajete, 2000, p. 262), and further, that our oral language is a sort of prayer—an expression of the sacredness of our breath, the wind within us (Cajete, 2000). By bringing our wind into the

world, we change the world; there is sacredness to a person's speech that both transcends and alters the physical world (Cajete, 2000). Thus, to ignore what a person has put into the universe in favour of one's own thoughts seems not only profoundly selfish, but detrimental to the homeostasis of all four sacred relationships: with one's self, with other humans, with the natural world, and with the cosmos (Stonechild, 2016).

This leads into my second point: Indigenous listening values silence. Consider, for example, the act of hunting *tia'm* (moose). Hunting *tia'm* is a part of Mi'kmaw culture, and central to our skills as hunters is our ability to listen intently for subtle changes in Mother Earth. This requires a profound silence that can also carry over into conversation. When speech is viewed as sacred, there is a magnitude to it and, as a result, wasting words seems disrespectful—if something is not worth saying, we simply do not say it. In my PhD program at the University of New Brunswick, I sometimes find the pace of conversation dizzying. I am used to having time to think about what is being said before I am expected to comment on it, but in Western education we do not leave any gaps. You can call it social efficiency (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995), the language of learning (Biesta, 2006), or the factory or industrial model of education (Pinar, 2004), but regardless of the label you put on it, our education system runs on a tight schedule, and silence is often the first thing to go. I think the cacophony of modern education prevents us from being able to hear what is happening inside ourselves; we are distracted by the external and not given time to cultivate relationship with ourselves, nor see the interconnectedness of all living things (Graveline, 1998; Kumar, 2013).

Conclusion

Listening with your heart is a small and intuitive idea that emerges from an Indigenous worldview and has the potential to improve the quality of one's educational relationships. Here I have given some "big" philosophical points to think over, so I will close with three personal reflections on the value of listening in education. First, Western society, and in consequence the Western education system, tends not to listen. Young people, Indigenous folk, people of colour, people with disabilities, women, and LGBTQ people are particularly vulnerable to being silenced and unheard through systems of privilege (Johnson, 2006). Listening with open hearts is a first step toward challenging those systems of privilege. Second, listening humanizes. If our students feel like we are actually listening to them, they stop feeling like numbers and start to feel like human beings. If we are listening without the intent to judge, but simply to witness the beautiful complexity of our students' humanity, they will start to grow in new and exciting ways we cannot dream of under our current model (e.g., The Tylerian Rationale; see Pinar, 2004). Third, if we are truly listening with our hearts,

our beings and our teaching will start to change based on what we hear. As we open our hearts, we will discover how our students learn best, and we will be able to adapt our teaching methods accordingly. Listening with one's heart takes time, but in the end, it is time well spent.

My focus in this paper has been on listening to our students as a way of improving the quality of our instruction. Listening, however, is also key in the journey toward reconciliation—and, indeed, beyond: beyond the politics of recognition, which keeps Indigenous oppression frozen in the past (Coulthard, 2014); beyond damage-centred narratives in research, which perpetually paint Indigenous people solely as victims and ignore our resilience and complexity (Tuck, 2009); and beyond those visions of resurgence and reconciliation, which replicate and perpetuate heteropatriarchy, anti-blackness, ableism, and settler-colonial dispossession of Indigenous peoples from the land (Simpson, 2017). I have written elsewhere about the necessity of taking things slow and ensuring that we get things right in the process of reconciliation (Downey & Harkins, Forthcoming). I would add that if we want to move forward in reconciliation, we must be willing to listen to each other, not in the Western way of waiting for our turn to speak and searching for solutions, but in the Indigenous tradition of listening with our hearts and opening ourselves up to the possibility of being changed by what we hear.

M'sit No'kmaw.

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