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The Future of Institutional Listening: Conversation in the Cracks of the University

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Abstract

Listening to students is not only often a deficiency in educational theory, but also for educational leaders, policy-makers, teachers, parents, and educational actors in society more broadly. This article outlines this problem while suggesting that educational conversations that occur "within" the context of institutions can afford particular benefits to their participants and the institutions themselves. Topics of interest specific to the institutional experience of individuals, including those that are highly critical of them, can be developed in non-linear and non-efficiency-orientated directions, in a manner that is both individualised and pluralistic.

Keywords: higher education; online education; conversation; listening.

Students have long been accused of not being able to listen. The figure of the student who won't pay attention or follow instruction is a familiar one in educational rhetoric. Even supposedly "radical" educational theorists, such as Jacques Rancière — through his reading of Jacob Jacotot in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991, p. 31) — focus on the student's attention to the teacher's imposed means of education as singularly significant.

A more sophisticated approach to this perceived problem was developed by Raymond Murray Schafer, for whom, "listening is important in all educational experiences, whenever verbal or aural messages are exchanged" (Schafer, 1992, p. 7). In the introduction to his text *A Sound Education: 100 Exercises in Listening and Sound-Making*, he claims that

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> Listening goes on continuously whether we like it or not, but the possession of ears does not guarantee its effectiveness. In fact, many teachers have told me they detect an increasing deficiency in the listening abilities of their students. This is serious; nothing is so basic as the education of the senses, and of these, hearing is among the most important (Schafer, 1992, p. 7).

Despite the somewhat patronizing tone of his anecdotally informed educational nostalgia, Schafer at least provides an important contribution by, in the main body of his text, substantially broadening the palate of what can be conceived of, and even practiced, as educational listening experiences. However, by supplying further evidence in support of the perception that the problem with students is their inability to, or deficiency in, listening, Schafer adds himself to the large number of educators and educational theorists who tend to locate educational problems, and their solution, in the (responsibility of the) student. Of course, his text, like much educational theory, is, in effect, an education for teachers in new modes of approach, implicitly critiquing their current practice, these theories very rarely (for an exception see Veck, 2009) seem to attend to one substantial vector in the travails of educational listening: listening to students.

Listening to students is not only often a deficiency in educational theory, but also for educational leaders, policy-makers, teachers, parents, and educational actors in society more broadly. Historically, it is institutions, rather than their students, that have a listening problem. There are, of course, numerous formal means through which students, especially university students can be "listened to", through asking questions in class, representations on committees and working groups, or through students' unions. However, the remit, scope, influence, and accountability of these processes tend to be set, in a relatively non-negotiable manner, by institutions themselves. Equally, "after the fact" surveys of student experience provide data that is primarily useful at the macro level for future changes, where the specifics of how a "problem" is to be "solved" lies only or primarily with the institution. These are all significant means of potentially positive institutional transformation but are nonetheless (and perhaps necessarily) limited and unbalanced forms of listening to students. These modes of purportedly "democratic" listening are not those most affected by the move online, as their means and ends can be relatively easily transposed to digital communication spaces.

Beyond the limits of process-driven institutional listening, there are more relational modes of listening that can develop between students and between students and teachers/administrators. These considerably more individualizable and often helpfully "casual" relations are a noteworthy counterpart to the end-oriented and often lumbering attempts at institutional listening. The interactions that arise at the edges or in the cracks of institutionally assured efficiency have the potential to be less dialectical and more conversational, meaning that they enable or enhance plural listening and its associated responsiveness. These forms of interaction are among those that institutions do not tend to actively promote or enforce (which is perhaps one of the reasons why they are able to be conversational rather than dialectical relations), even if space is sometimes, often unintentionally, made available for them. While conversation is a feature of online interaction more generally, for institutions who have been able to take for granted conversation finding its way into its spaces without its own efforts, a mass move online poses significant problems to its sustenance and growth. The foremost difficulty being that these interactions tend to be incidental, so any form of specific enticement to conversation changes its characteristic dynamics.

Educational conversation, though, does not require institutions. Conversation is a significant contributor to educational experience both in and outside of institutions (Bojesen, 2019).

However, the conversations that occur "within" the context of institutions can afford particular benefits to their participants and the institutions themselves. Topics of interest specific to the institutional experience of individuals, including those that are highly critical of them, can be developed in non-linear and non-efficiency-orientated directions, in a manner that is both individualized and pluralistic. The personalities and voices of interlocutors can be attended to more directly, meaning that conversational space is also, necessarily, a listening space. Quite how much is lost from the sudden evaporation of these spaces due to the move online is, no doubt, unquantifiable but can include a significant change to a "sense of connection" (Ragusa & Crampton, 2018) and greater alienation accompanied by a perceived loss of agency (Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013). And no fast-paced efforts to provide online equivalents through chat groups or informal one-to-ones can capture the complex (yet often "relaxed") dynamics of conversational space. The loss of conversational space is, then, also the loss of important listening spaces.

Online educational tools are designed for maximum efficiency, counterposing them to the conversational and listening space available in physical environments. The closest equivalent online might be chat rooms in large scale computer games, where players can speak in a manner not necessarily, or tangentially and inefficiently, related to the game being played (Internet Matters, 2019). Another would be text messages sent between students during a physical or online lecture. However, this latter form of conversation only tends to be possible for those who have already established relations. The combination, though, of perhaps not knowing one's fellow students, and yet also not being sufficiently "anonymous", like in a large online computer game, poses problems for the development of these para-institutional forms of conversation, especially for new students, and for student-teacher conversation.

On the one hand, it might be possible to celebrate this sudden breach between the experiences of educational conversation and the university's efficiency-oriented education. The student (and teacher) is now subjected primarily to that which has a relatively clear purpose, and they are left to have conversations in spaces unframed by institutional logic and its exigencies. From this perspective, the university might shed some of its gloss as an experientially grounded (and hierarchically conceived) cultural enhancer and is able to be perceived more in terms of subject-specific educational ends. The institution's physical and psychic footprint on its teachers and students is potentially, although by no mean definitely, reduced.

On the other hand, if these spaces are desired, or actually rather than only perceivably necessary to institutional education, they will be created. Perhaps not immediately for everyone, and perhaps in a manner that is led by technological use or innovation disconnected from the institutions themselves, perhaps initiated ad hoc by students and teachers rather than administrators. In fact, it could be suggested that if these spaces are to be made available then their formation absolutely cannot be led centrally by the institutions themselves, for fear of reducing them to their logic, and thereby sterilizing them. If funding, encouragement, expertise, and time can be provided without orientational control or "strings attached", institutions can, nonetheless, assist in the manifestation and development of these spaces without directing them.

This, perhaps, as I suggested is common to educational theory, puts the responsibility for a solution to an educational problem on students themselves. However, this "problem" is not conceived of as a deficit in students, nor does its solution impose institutional logic onto them, supposedly for their own benefit. Listening to students means giving them space to come up with their own modes of communication and engagement, taking them seriously, and respecting that these might be substantially different from those which institutions have come to expect. Institutions do not always have to provide and impose the answers, they sometimes just

need to listen out for them.

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