

Focused Listening Practices

Listening Dyads and Triads

Grades K–12

Deep listening activities can be done in groups of two or three. Count off so that everyone is included in a dyad or triad. It is best not to ask students to find partners on their own, but rather to let them partner randomly. Let students know that the group is going to engage in a different kind of listening and speaking; it is not better or worse than any other kind of communication, but it offers another communication tool.

Students will take turns listening and speaking on a particular theme for a prescribed period of time (usually between 30 seconds and 2 minutes, depending on the age group and subject matter). Partner A will speak first on the theme for a prescribed period of time. During this time, partner B will simply listen without interruption or questions. Then the facilitator will give a signal that time is up, and partner A and B will switch so that partner B is speaking, while partner A simply listens without interruption or questions. The dyad/triad can experiment with eye contact. (This can be an opportunity to share that different cultures feel differently about eye contact.)

After partner A and B have each had a chance to speak and listen, take a few minutes to debrief the experience, asking students to share how it was for them to listen and speak during the exercise. You can then ask students to partner with another student and try this practice again a second time. If you do so, have students note how they feel the second time around.

This activity can also open up a rich discussion on communication and the benefits and challenges of engaging in focused listening and authentic speaking.

Wheel Within a Wheel

15–30 minutes, grades 3–12

Tell students that they will now explore the practice of focused listening with a variety of different people. Let them know that you are asking them to be self-scientists—to notice how they feel when asked to communicate in a new way with each other. Remind them that this is not a better way of communicating, just a different way. It is a skill they will build on throughout the year.

Ask students to count off by ones and twos. Ask the ones to form a circle of chairs in the middle of the room facing out and the twos to form an outer circle facing the inner circle. Keep the pairs of chairs close, but allow for as much space between the pairs of chairs as possible. Let students know that they will be partnered in a series of paired dyads with different people. Introduce the first theme, and let the inner circle know that in this round students will speak first and their partners second. Instruct students to speak quietly throughout this exercise.

As timekeeper, you will ring a bell or raise a hand to indicate that time is up (a timer with a beeper or buzzer is helpful). Explain to the listeners that they are to listen without giving a verbal response. After the time is up, ring the chime or give a hand signal to indicate that the first speaker's speaking time is up. Then ask the second person in the dyad to begin speaking on the same theme (say the theme again, so everyone is clear about the prompt). After both members of the dyad have had a turn to speak and listen, ask the students sitting in the outside circle to stand and move one chair to the left. For the next dyad round, the outer circle begins as speakers.

Decide ahead of time how many dyads will be part of your wheel within a wheel. We generally recommend four to seven rounds—each with a different question. At the end of the wheel activity, take some time to debrief. It is important to remind students that they can share about what they said, but not what their partner said, unless they have explicit permission.

After students have completed the wheel questions, ask them to bring their chairs back into a circle. Facilitate a dialogue with questions like:

- What was it like to listen without interrupting? To speak without interruption?
- What were the hardest and best parts about this activity?
- What did you learn about yourself? About your dyad partners? (This is a chance to share process, not content.)
- What other questions would you have liked to talk about?

This activity can be used for personal sharing and storytelling, to prepare for a quiz or test, to make connections to a novel or text, or to invite students to share their thoughts about the content area. For example, if you are teaching the book *Seedfolks* by Paul Fleischman, you might ask students to share which character they most appreciate and why, or what the underlying lessons of the book are. If you are studying a period of history, you might construct a series of questions related to the time period.

Before you begin the activity, spend some time going over what it looks like to be a respectful listener (not interrupting, not making faces, not making fun of the speaker in any way, and so on). Taking the time to do this before you begin will help you in future activities, when students are in other sharing situations. Talk about body language and facial expressions—students are free to nod or smile, as long as they don't talk. They may experiment with making and not making eye contact.

It is important that both the speaker and the listener are on the same level physically (both sitting in the same kinds of chairs or both sitting on the floor). Never allow members of groups to have higher or lower physical positions from one another. This can imply power status, and is inappropriate for peers sharing from the heart. Share this reasoning with students.

It is important that the teacher witness and facilitate the activity and not participate in it (unless you have two facilitators, in which case one person could participate). From the position of facilitator, you can watch and ensure that students are respectfully listening and speaking and not interrupting each other. If you see any disrespectful behaviors occurring, it is essential to step in and investigate what is occurring, reminding students of the guidelines of the activity.

Use a timer to keep time. In general, give students 30 seconds each to respond to each prompt. If you have a particularly mature or trusting group, you may be able to extend this time to a minute or 90 seconds.

Choose four to seven questions and adapt them for your age group. Some examples are as follows:

- What kind of music, movies, or books do you like?
- What is your favorite game? What do you like about it?
- What is a favorite place of yours? What does it look like? Feel like? What do you appreciate about it?
- What was something memorable that happened during the summer or your last school year?
- What are some of your interests inside and outside of school?
- What classes do you like and dislike so far?
- Who is one person in your life or in the world that you admire and why?
- What holidays do you enjoy? What do you like to do during those holidays?
- If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go and why?
- What is something you really enjoyed in elementary school—a teacher, a friend, or an experience?
- If you could have any superpower, what would it be and why?

- What is a story you can tell about a life lesson you learned in the last year?
- If money was no issue, what would you do with your life?
- What is one issue in the world that is important to you? Why?

Sharing Circles or Community Circles

Grades K–12

Sharing circles or community circles bring focused listening and authentic speaking into a circle format so that the whole community is engaged. In this practice, the teacher or facilitator introduces a theme, and each student and teacher is then invited to share about this theme. It is essential that adults are not simply creating the space for this circle, but fully participating. (It can be helpful for a teacher to speak first to set the tone.) As soon as the theme is set, each person in the circle speaks, one at a time, without interruption. If a student is not ready to speak or does not wish to speak, he or she can pass to the next person.

After the whole circle has had a first opportunity to speak, students who have not spoken can be given a second chance to speak, but this is always invitational. Generally, because of time constraints in the classroom, keeping time is essential. One to 2 minutes per student is often sufficient. If you have 45 minutes and twenty students, each student will have no more than 2 minutes, though he or she need not take the full time. You can use a timepiece and a chime or hand signal to note when a student has 15 seconds remaining, so he or she can wrap up the sharing. Some communities opt to use a talking piece of some kind to indicate who is speaking. This talking piece can be a stone, shell, stick, or stuffed animal—whatever is meaningful to the community.

Council

Adapted from Joe Provisor (personal communication, February 7, 2012), MFT Advisor, Los Angeles Unified School District Council in Schools Office Director, Ojai Foundation's Council in Schools Initiative.

Council is a practice that encourages deep and honest communication. In schools in the United States and around the world, it is integrated into classrooms, counseling offices, and faculty, parent, and community meetings. Based on indigenous, worldwide “cultural dialogic” practices, including Native American traditions, council is a formal, structured, circle-based process that includes “sitting” in a circle and passing a “talking piece” in response to a prompt. In a broader sense, council is also about a heightened awareness of self, other, and the natural world. Classroom council practice can include play, movement, rhythm, mindfulness, visual arts, technology, and spontaneous improvisation, as well as fundamental listening and speaking skills. Council is practiced to convey content, to develop social-emotional competencies, and to elicit what students *themselves* want to understand. Teachers and students may decide to determine their own guidelines for the circles or use the “four intentions” of council, as developed through the Ojai Foundation and *The Way of Council* by Jack Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle:

1. To listen from the heart—practicing the “art of receptivity”: suspending judgment, reaction, and opinion
2. To speak from the heart and with heart—learning to “speak into the listening”
3. To speak spontaneously without planning and only when holding a “talking piece”
4. To “keep it lean,” to the “heart of the matter,” so everyone has time to participate