

Listening to Teach: Connecting With Students Across Differences

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The remarkable increase in immigrant students in local communities and school classrooms and the national emphasis on high stakes testing and accountability have increased the challenges teachers face. One such challenge is connecting with students' contexts when students are arriving from backgrounds beyond the experience of the teacher. To address this, scripted lessons and prescriptive teaching models have been introduced and are increasing in both number and use. It is in this context that Katherine Schultz enters, proposing that a basic tool be reconsidered as key to effectively teaching across differences – the tool of listening. It is this efficacious tool that Schultz brings to the forefront in her book, *Listening: A Framework for Teaching Across Differences*. Published in 2003 by Teachers College Press, this book constructs a framework of “listening to teach” which provides the necessary tools to connect teachers with diverse student contexts and worlds beyond the school walls.

Through the lens of her rich research experiences spanning the range of young children to adults, Schultz explores the definition and form listening takes within diverse classroom settings. Her writing style provides the reader with the opportunity to *listen* to her as she reflects on her years of both observing and listening to classrooms and teachers and her participation in action research with teachers in an urban setting.

Schultz's research has been driven by the question, “How can listening to students and documenting their perspective and practices inform understanding of schooling, especially in relation to what teachers need to know to teach

in urban public schools?” (p. 6). She sets forth her inquiry framed in the socio-cultural theories of literacy and critical race theory.

Looking at learning across the literature, Schultz grounds her work in the sociocultural situated learning concepts of Vygotsky and the democratic learning community concept of Dewey. As she listens for the situated meanings constructed by both teachers and students in their classrooms and the resulting attempt at intersubjectivity, she does not hesitate to ask the pressing questions that arise concerning agency and identity of diverse learners. In her pursuant phenomenological exploration of classroom interactions, the work of such researchers as Ladson-Billings (1997) and Delpit (1995) inform her observations. Keeping consistent with her inquiry approach, Schultz allows questions about power and race to be raised but does not pursue extensive analysis related to these questions. Instead, her questions continue to challenge the listener to hear the students’ voices as they bring their worlds into the classroom.

What makes this book remarkable is how Schultz masterfully centers listening as the masterpiece of teaching while effectively addressing the challenging issue of defining and addressing culture in the classroom. Similar to González, Moll, and Amanti (2005) in their “funds of knowledge” work, Schultz conceptualizes culture not as a set of static characteristics but as a set of inquiries. She effectively questions the role of school and the present trend of scripted and prescriptive teaching and institutional adoptions. This dynamic conceptual approach introduces a conversation on culturally responsive pedagogy that, although limited, provides a backdrop for adding to her understanding of her classroom observations and expands the concept of school, moving it beyond classroom interactions to include the diverse mosaic of local and cultural communities.

The research settings upon which she draws include elementary, middle, and high schools, as well as work places and adult literacy programs. The book is conceptually framed by four key themes that emerged from her research: (1) listening to know particular students; (2) listening to the rhythm and balance of the classroom; (3) listening to the social, cultural, and community contexts of students’ lives; and (4) listening for silence and acts of silence. Each chapter provides vignettes of classrooms that set the stage for the reader to follow Schultz’s inquiry process.

In Chapter 2, Schultz traces the learning process of two teachers as they worked to understand and facilitate the learning of students from cultural backgrounds different from their own. This, as Schultz noted, required these experienced teachers to carefully and purposefully listen to the “particularities each student brought to the context” (p. 33). Thus, these teachers were challenged to become aware of their own limitations of perspective and to spend

time building relationships with the students and community to enhance their understanding of how to best facilitate each student's learning in the classroom. This description of these teachers' journey provides a rich picture of how culturally responsive pedagogy goes beyond specific activities and the walls of the school and embraces the community.

In Chapter 3, Schultz relates the story of one teacher's struggle to promote effective dialog in her second-grade classroom during a school year. Through this story, the concept of promoting participation in the classroom as a democratic community emerges. This chapter is particularly poignant as both the successes and failures of the teacher to promote this type of participation illustrate the critical issues of student agency and identity development.

Chapter 4 challenges the common understanding of culture that confines a person's cultural background to a group of static characteristics by broadening the readers' understanding of learning contexts outside of school through listening to students' writing. Through her research in an urban comprehensive high school situated between African American and Latino neighborhoods, Schultz relates how bringing the writing styles and content of the "outside world" of the students into the classroom and listening to these created "openings in their classrooms so that students can bring their lives, cultures, passions, and wonderings into the classroom" (p. 106). Schultz, however, is clear to caution teachers that bringing the students' worlds into the classroom is valuable as a tool not for *listening in* to students, thus making listening a surveillance tool, but *listening for* understanding.

A book on listening would not be complete without addressing the role of silence. Recounting a National Junior Honor Society induction activity in a middle school, Schultz opens Chapter 5 by challenging school routines and normative events that become "acts of silencing" students of diverse backgrounds. Linking to her previous themes, she explores the patterns of silencing that emerge in schools and classrooms. Schultz proposes that to listen to each student means that one must be aware of those events and routines at an institution, as well as at a classroom level, which work to silence these students. She particularly targets the silencing effect of the color-blind orientation she encountered. She also notes how interactions are silenced through individuals – both students and teachers – who shut down conversations that are uncomfortable or unfamiliar. This critical piece of what it means to "do school" with students of various backgrounds provokes the reader to consider taking a new look at one's own institutional routines and traditions that may have a silencing effect on diverse student populations, thus disconnecting the classroom from the larger context. All of these silencing patterns, as noted by Schultz, are to be listened to and acted upon.

The final chapter is the capstone in which Schultz relates all that she has recounted about listening to her work with student teachers. As she describes her interactions with student teachers, she artfully traces the efficacy of the key themes of listening she has previously pointed out in the book. She ends this book with the clear message that in the seeming cacophony in diverse classrooms, listening is the essential tool to effectively connect with students across differences, connecting all student contexts.

This book is for teachers and administrators in all educational settings. Schultz's descriptions of her various research projects, from which this book emerged, are an invaluable component of this book. These research descriptions that cross the span of ages and time clearly illustrate each point, thus providing the credibility that appears lacking in many books of this genre. It is one thing to state a point, it is quite another to carefully and effectively glean the point from research – research that has been done in the context of the classrooms that represent students from kindergarten through adults. In light of the recent focus on early childhood, however, additional illustrations relating the skill of listening across differences at the preschool level would have enhanced this work.

The rich classroom illustrations provided in this book are also invaluable to provoke thought and discussion with teachers. This work is applicable to student teachers as well as practicing teachers. As the present value of connecting with students' worlds outside of school is held in high regard, this provocative work has a place in both our undergraduate and graduate education classes. It may also be noted that this framework is ripe to encourage action research among the fortunate ones who listen to Schultz through the vignettes related in this book.

In this present context in which teachers seek to find the right script or steps to effectively cross differences in the classroom, this book may be a frustration to some. Schultz clearly steers away from addressing specific differences in the classroom. Keeping consistent with her theme of listening to teach, she provides the broad strokes of the teaching process without addressing any specific "how-to." This approach does not address such issues as listening when English proficiency is an issue or listening for understanding when documented learning difficulties are present.

Although her message is clearly stated and supported, there is a missing piece that appears to weaken this work. Schultz limits her recommendations (and examples) to listening to students. She does not present any research which included the voice of the parents and community. As has been noted by researchers (Li, 2005; Nistler & Maiers, 2000; Russo & Cooper, 1999), the inclusion of diverse parent and community voices, although essential to

understanding the student, are often missing or silenced. Although her work of listening across contexts is helpful, this additional piece would have strengthened her voice.

This book does, however, provide a refreshing response to addressing the challenge of connecting with students across differences. This framework of listening embraces the sociocultural perspective of learning that values the interaction and relationship between teacher and student, the ecological approach that values intentionally connecting the students' outside-of-school worlds with that of the classroom, and the critical theory approach that does not ignore the sociopolitical issues of power and democracy in the classroom. Thus, Schultz provides what could be seen as a multi-dimensional look at classroom interactions across differences, clearly valuing the connection between school and the students' contexts.

This framework, unlike the common response of creating scripted models that address a static understanding of cultural contexts, effectively acknowledges the dynamic cultural environment of our times and the interconnectedness of the community and classroom. As Luk and Lin (2007) conclude in their recent work, *Classroom Interactions as Cross-Cultural Encounters*, to teach across differences requires "a pedagogy of connecting" which does not restrict teachers' understanding of students' learning to the walls of the classroom but opens up the learning environment to the larger context providing opportunities for students to construct meaning, identity, and agency as learners (p. 185). The work of Katherine Schultz provides a valuable and pragmatic framework that teachers can readily use to provide this "pedagogy of connecting."

References

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Additional Note: Schultz has put her work into practice training new teachers in Indonesia over the past years to assist in replacing teachers lost in the 2004 tsunami. Her recent paper (see <http://www.urbanedjournal.org/notes/notes0024.html>) on her journey through this process cross-culturally is worthy of attention.

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