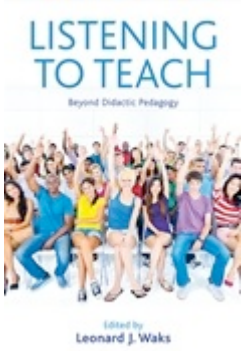

Listening to Teach: Beyond Didactic Pedagogy

Waks, Leonard J., ed.
SUNY Press, 2015

Book Review

Tags: learning environments | pedagogy of listening | student centered learning

Reviewed by: Cherice Bock, *Portland Seminary*
Date Reviewed: November 30, -0001

The title *Listening to Teach* caught my eye. When one imagines teaching, one might first think the student's job is to listen, while the teacher's job is to speak, or at least to organize activities geared toward a predetermined outcome. What does listening have to do with the role of teaching? Furthermore, for those teaching within the religious academy, what might a pedagogy of listening look like in the context of religious higher education? Although this book does not specifically target religion or higher education, undergraduate and seminary professors will find many ideas, which will inspire their classroom teaching. The various models of pedagogical listening presented in this text can also serve to challenge traditional teaching strategies that are still pervasive in many higher education classrooms: teacher-centered strategies that often rely on a banking model where content is transferred to passive students. Infusing religion classrooms with dialogical and student-centered approaches can create new forms of learning where students learn not only content, but also how to ask good questions and seek answers in ways that are personally and contextually relevant.

For many teachers this requires a shift in one's perceived role: rather than seeing the teacher as having all the information and students as receptacles for it, this approach recognizes that students enter the classroom with a wealth of experiences and perspectives the teacher may not share. Within listening pedagogy models, teachers serve as co-researchers, observers and documenters of classroom interactions, and interpreters who can help students grasp the meaning of the learning that has taken place. As teachers listen deeply to students and encourage them to learn the art of listening to one another, students are able to enter into the learning process in a way that holds their interest and results in learning that remains in place far beyond a content test.

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Part 1 sparks ideas for teaching strategies and discussion formats that, although predominantly geared toward children, would work at least as effectively in a classroom of college or seminary students. In these methodologies there are some strategies I have come to through trial and error, but like many teachers in higher education, I have no formal training in teaching. Therefore, learning educational theories and strategies others have found helpful provides a deeper level of intentionality in my teaching, and allows me to see how I might more holistically implement options other than didactic teaching. These brief chapters also provide lists of references that are useful for digging more deeply into any of the specific pedagogies outlined.

Part 2 contains ideas of particular relevance for higher education religion classrooms. Chapter 8 focuses on a "pedagogy of discomfort," which the author, Ashley Taylor, suggests as a way to approach teaching and learning about areas of injustice and oppression. Taylor draws together the cognitive and emotional aspects of learning, allowing learners to critically analyze their own emotional responses. A teacher's role, then, is to listen intently to student responses and create a safe space in which to acknowledge and examine areas outside of our comfort zones. This approach could be quite helpful in facilitating conversations regarding the approach people of faith should take in the face of today's many areas of social and economic inequity.

Chapter 9 suggests a pedagogical model a religion teacher might find useful: curation as listening. Thinking of a religion teacher as a curator of a faith tradition, with particular emphasis on the Latin word *curare*, "to take care of," what would it look like for religion professors to imagine our role as caring for the tradition and testimony of our spiritual forbears, closely listening to the voices (present and absent) in our tradition's history, and the ways those voices speak to our present context? In content-based religion courses such as Bible, history, and some theology courses, how might the professor's role shift by thinking of him or herself as a curator of the tradition rather than the all-knowing expert? How might the students' experience change if they see themselves as co-curators, creating meaning alongside the tradition and their curator-professor?

Other chapters also hold useful ideas, including the development of trust, the augmentation of uncertainty, and the ways that one transfers these listening pedagogies to an online format.

Similar to the struggle experienced by many K-12 teachers regarding "teaching to the test," many religion professors may wonder if students can learn an appropriate level of content based on these methodologies, and this is a valid critique. Engaging a pedagogy of listening invites academics to reimagine ways by which a discipline is passed on most effectively and meaningfully. For those recognizing the limitations of the banking model of education,

pedagogies of listening offer alternative models to advance lifelong student learning.

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