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Editor: Erica J. Lamm

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## **Listening Education**

Editor

Erica J. Lamm

Concordia University-Nebraska

For more information on the International Listening Association, please e-mail our Executive Director, or call us at 1-952-594-5697 \*Outside US: +1-952-594-5697; Fax: 1-952-856-5100 \*Fax Outside US: +1-952-856-5100

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**Introduction to this Special Issue**  
**By: Erica Lamm**  
**Concordia University, Nebraska**

We are pleased to present this special issue of *Listening Education*, dedicated to the construction and teaching of the stand-alone listening course. The first article, by Laura Janusik, provides an impressive overview of the latest research in the field and offers a way of constructing a course around the Listening Quad. The second article, by Jim Baesler, takes an autoethnographic approach to the construction of his class, which he calls the SONG of Life. It incorporates a spiritual approach and asks students to bring a certain self-awareness to their inner lives by incorporating meditation and other activities into the classroom. Although each article and example is unique, both offer something worthwhile for the communication professor or trainer to consider when teaching listening, either as a course, or as part of a course or training program. In addition, each article has an impressive number of references from which readers can draw. We hope you find this helpful and informative in the creation of your listening classes!

# A Research Based Framework for Teaching Listening One Lesson at a Time

Laura A. Janusik

Department of Communication

326 Arrupe Hall

Rockhurst University

Kansas City, MO 64110-2561

Home Telephone 816-588-5788

[Laura.Janusik@Rockhurst.edu](mailto:Laura.Janusik@Rockhurst.edu)

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual conference of the International Listening Association, in Minneapolis, Minnesota in April 2005. This revision incorporates much of the research published on listening pedagogy through June 2017.

Laura A. Janusik (Ph.D., University of Maryland at College Park) is professor and the McGee Chair of Communication at Rockhurst University.

## Introduction

Listening accounts for half of the communication process; yet, communication educators spend a disproportionate amount of time on teaching speaking as opposed to teaching listening (Janusik & Wolvin, 2002, Perkins, 1994, Sprague, 1990). On average, students enrolled in a basic course spend about 7% of their semester studying listening, and if the majority of instruction comes from the basic course text, then the situation is worse, as most of the content in texts is not based on current research (Janusik & Wolvin, 2002). It is not known how much time is devoted to listening instruction in interpersonal or group courses, but if textbook coverage is any indication, students are receiving little, if any, listening instruction, and what is received often is not based on current listening scholarship (Janusik, 2007b).

A more recent and slightly different look at textbooks (Adams & Cox, 2010) indicates that textbooks have changed little. Though in the past it was believed that if one learned to speak, then one learned to listen (See Baurain, 2011; and Lewis & Nichols, 1965), there has also been an assumption in oral-based education that writing to address the reader was similar to speaking to address the listener (Adams & Cox, 2010), which is incorrect. In fact, Adams and Cox found that the pedagogy advanced in communication textbooks cordoned off listening, as opposed to integrated it into the act of communication, as well as often used the term “audience”, which assumed that listeners were nothing more than mere receivers.

Too, listening pedagogy often approaches listening as a means-to-an-end or the comprehension of the product of what the speaker says (Baurain, 2011). These views show a listener as being no more than a satellite receiver, as opposed to a human being with relational, moral, and ethical dimensions (Baurain, 2011; Lipari, 2009). As Bodie and Crick (2014) say, “Listening is an acquired art, not an inherited capacity” (p. 105). That is because listening is not one skill or single ability, rather it should be considered a broad field of study (Bostrom, 2011).

As a broad field of study (Bostrom, 2011), listening is a complex phenomenon. Within the context of relational communication, whether that be interpersonal or public speaking, the question of who judges effective listening, the self, the other, or a third party, was posed by Bentley (1997). It has been answered to be “the other” (Bodie, Jones, Vickery, Hatcher, & Cannava, 2014a; Itzchakov & Kluger; 2017; in press). This means that a listener’s role isn’t simply to receive and comprehend the information, as that cannot be seen. The listener must show some sort of listening response to be perceived to be effective. After all, listening is cognitive and behavioral.

Even though listening scholarship and pedagogy needs great improvement in basic communication and interpersonal textbooks, listening scholarship and pedagogy fare better in courses dedicated to listening. Currently, there are seven texts, of which the author is aware, available on the market through publishers that were intended for listening instruction at the university level (Brownell, 2015<sup>i</sup>, Kaufmann, 2015; Purdy & Borisoff, 1996; Ray, 1994; Stoltz, Sodowsky, & Cates, 2017; Wolvin, 2011, and Worthington & Fitch-Hauser, 2012<sup>ii</sup>)<sup>1</sup>.

If one is looking strictly for application material, then Kaufmann and Ray’s texts might be useful. The remainders of the texts offer a more theoretical perspective. Specifically, three texts are edited versions with different authors writing different chapters (Purdy & Borisoff, 1996; Stoltz et al., 2017; Wolvin, 2011). Of the three, the Stoltz et al. (2017) is more consistent with a traditional style textbook, much like Brownell (2015), and Worthington, and Fitch-Hauser (2012). These three texts have a more in-depth treatment of listening due to the beginning chapters focusing on the cognitive aspects of listening, including memory, then moving to the social functions of listening, and then looking at listening in contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> These texts are those designed to teach an overview of listening from a communication perspective and do not include books written for the general public or collections of essays. For the latter, see the Appendix A.



In terms of the essay-focused texts, two of these texts are aimed at the upper class and graduate student: Purdy & Borisoff's *Listening in Everyday Life: A Personal and Professional Approach*, (1996) and Wolvin's *Listening and Human Communication in the 21st Century* (2011). One is aimed at freshmen and sophomores, *Listening Across Lives* (Stoltz, et al., 2017), and because it is more similar to the others, it will be discussed below. All are excellent choices for a survey of listening at the undergraduate level.

There are currently three texts that are focused more towards developing cognitive and behavioural listening strategies and then moving to listening in context. They are Worthington and Fitch-Hauser's *Listening: Processes, Functions, and Competency* (2012), Brownell's *Listening: Attitudes, Principles, and Skills* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.), and Stoltz et al.'s *Listening in Everyday Lives* (2017). It is interesting to note that the first two texts, both targeted for upperclassmen, are now owned by the same publisher, Pearson, and both expect updated editions within the year, according to the publisher's website. Both texts are appropriate for the undergraduate listening class, with Worthington and Fitch-Hauser's (2012) consisting of the more updated listening research, as compared to Brownell's text (2015). Stoltz's et al. (2017) is the newest addition to the market, and it is geared towards freshmen and sophomores. As a first edition with chapters written by those knowledgeable in the area, the research is recent.

Thus, there are good choices of texts for those wishing to teach an entire course in listening. However, it has become clear that most texts for courses in basic communication, as well as interpersonal, group, business, and public speaking, do a poor job of integrating and covering what is really known about listening. This paper is meant to help the instructor teaching these courses to select materials that are research based and fit their needs. Though a comprehensive retrospective of teaching listening is available (Janusik, 2002, and updated in Janusik, 2010), it relays what *has been* done instead of what *should be* done. This paper seeks to offer ideas of what should be done to teach listening from a research-based approach.

This paper introduces the *listening quad*, an approach to teaching listening that is grounded in the general dimensions underlying the listening process (Halone, Cunconan, Coakley, & Wolvin, 1998). The listening quad reduces the five general dimensions (1) cognitive, (2) affective, (3) behavioral/verbal, (4) behavioral/nonverbal, and (5) behavioral/interactive terms to four perspectives: listening as affective, listening as cognitive, listening as behavioral, and listening as relational (See Appendix B). The Listening quad approach can support an entire semester listening course, or it can be customized to enhance the listening instruction in basic, interpersonal, group, public speaking, and business communication courses.

#### Review of Literature

A general review of the principles of curriculum development will be introduced, followed by the details of the Listening quad.

#### *General Principles of Curriculum Development*

The term ‘curriculum’ is used in many ways because there are different beliefs about curriculum and its development. Some believe curriculum to be the textbook and reading assignments (Apple, 1986), a belief consistent with Tyler’s (1949) view of education. In essence, this type of instruction is the “banking model of education” where knowledge was viewed as a commodity that could be counted and measured (Friere, 1971). As such, it was the teacher’s responsibility to deposit the knowledge into the students’ heads, and it was the students’ responsibility to withdraw the knowledge in the same form. If you simply want students to know facts, then this perspective works. However, I view listening as both active and interactive, so the banking model does not work for me.

The antithesis of the banking model of education is one that defines curriculum as the center of all educational activity, including not only the material, but the way it is taught and the interaction of the teacher with the student (Beyer & Liston, 1996). Thus, “curriculum is not a concept, it is a cultural construction” (Grundy, 1987, p. 5) in which meaning is not something that is discovered, but something that is construed (Eisner, 1982). This belief is consistent with the Social Construction of Reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The teacher no longer is the banker who deposits information, but acts more like a midwife. The midwife is there to assist with the birth, but the midwife is clear that the baby belongs to the learner (Belenkey, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997). That is to say that students come to understand listening better when they are involved in the experience themselves, and each student will take away her or his understanding of listening.

The grounding of these dialectical views will set the stage for the material to come. The information is provided more as a framework from which to teach listening at the university level as opposed to being considered exactly what should be taught. The expectation is that communication instructors can be knowledgeable of the published listening research and easily locate it through library databases and Google Scholar. Most notably, the *International Journal of Listening* is devoted to listening research, but other journals often publish articles on listening research as well, though often communication journals uses the term “receiver” as opposed to listener (Burlison, et al., 2005; Janusik, 2007a; Rack, Burlison, Bodie, & Holmstrom, 2007; Levine, Asada, & Park, 2006; Merkin, 2005; Park & Levine, 2001; Pryor, Butler, Boyson, & Barfield (1999); Rains, 2007; Rains & Scott, 2007; Sellnow, et al., 2015; Wrench 2007; and Yokoyama & Daibo, 2012). This trend has begun to shift with

scholars like Bodie, Imhof, Jones, and others publishing in mainstream communication journals and using the term “listeners” as opposed to “receivers”.

To teach listening effectively in the college classroom, the focus must be in four areas: skills, knowledge, behaviors, and attitude (Wolvin & Coakley, 1994, 2000). Too often, instructors focus on skills and activities as opposed to content (Coakley & Wolvin, 1990). The correct attitude is important, because attitude determines intention. One must have the knowledge of the content, both theoretical and skills-based, for it is the knowledge plus the intention that will determine the communicator’s skill level. Additionally, long-term change will not occur unless the student’s underlying beliefs, values, and assumptions are consistent with the intent of the skill (Watzlavick, Weakland, J., & Fisch, 1974). Further, it is critical to address that communication skills strategically can be used to develop a win-win with others, but they also can be used manipulatively for the benefit of the self. Finally, skills practice is necessary for students to adopt new verbal and nonverbal behaviors, so time for practice, activities, and performance assignments should be allotted (Ferrari-Bridgers, Vogel, & Lynch, 2017; Janusik, 2001a, 2001b; Morreale, 2007; Norin, 2009; Rester; 2012; Simmons & Tenzek, 2016; Timm & Schroeder, 2000).

In fact, sometimes there might be only time for one quick lesson or activity, and when that’s the case, the theoretical perspective might be as important as the experience. However, the activity or lesson should be grounded in a research perspective. From a social scientific standpoint, knowledge is supported through research, and it is important for students to understand that. Because the construct of listening is multidimensional and complex (Baurain, 2011; Bostrom, 2011; Halone, Cunconan, Coakley, & Wolvin, 1998; Kirtley Johnston & Reed, 2017; Kluger, 2017;

Rhodes, Watson, & Barker, 1990; Witkin & Trochim, 1997; Wolvin & Cohen, 2012), the instruction in listening will be multidimensional as well.

For those that prefer to work by endorsed standards from the National Communication Association (NCA), there are communication and listening standards and competencies for college students (Morreale, Rubin, & Jones, 1998), as well as k-12 (NCA, 1998). The standards and competencies listed are valuable from the standpoint of program and course objectives. However, these competencies are almost 20 years old and in need of revision. The International Listening Association (ILA) offers no such endorsement. For those wishing to add to the competencies in listening, see Bodie, et al. (2015a).

### *The Listening Quad*

Listening is multidimensional, and listening models depict listening as a process; however, to date no empirical research has supported a process outside of one based strictly on perception (Brownell, 1985). Thus, teaching from a process model might send the message that research has determined how the process occurs. Listening should be taught in the framework of the research that supports it.<sup>iii</sup>

### *Determining the Research-Based Framework*

Prior to 2000, two empirical studies were conducted to determine dimensions of listening (Halone, et al., 1998; Witkin & Trochim, 1997). Both similarly used concepts from previous listening research, but then each took a unique methodological approach. Witkin and Trochim use multidimensional scaling and hierarchical cluster analysis, while Halone and colleagues utilized a confirmatory factor analysis. Neither study reported its power, a statistical construct that indicates the ability of the statistical test to detect or reject the null hypothesis (Salkind, 2004). In essence, the construct of power permits one to be confident in the results. In

general, power increases as the number of participants increase (Pagano, 1994), but other considerations, such as the number of factors, come into play as well. For example, participants numbering 300 or more are safer from which to draw conclusions, or one can have 3 times the participants as the number of variables (M. Imhof, personal communication, March 23, 2005). Using power as the guide, Witkin and Trochim used 19 participants with 98 variables, and identified 15 factors or clusters. Halone and colleagues used 131 participants with 105 variables, and identified five factors. Thus, neither is statistically sound; however, working with the available research, Halone and colleagues' research offers slightly more stability.

The five general dimensions of listening are Cognitive, Affective, Behavioral/Verbal, Behavioral/Nonverbal, and Behavioral/Interactive (Halone et al., 1998). After reviewing the literature that could support the dimensions, the Behavioral/Verbal and Behavioral/Nonverbal were collapsed into one perspective entitled Behavioral. This was done to emphasize that all human communication, including listening, is a combination of verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Additionally, the dimension Behavioral/Interactive was renamed Relational, which encompasses more meaning as a relationship than simply a series of interactions. Thus, the foundation of the listening quad is the four factors of affective, cognitive, behavioral, and relational (See Appendix B).

### *Teaching Listening Through the Listening Quad*

The following section will introduce the listening quad and how it can be utilized in the classroom. Each section will begin with a brief explanation, complete with sources. Few practical exercises will be included, not because they are unimportant, but because there are resources that can be consulted to find the best exercises for a specific classroom. For example, instructors can consider Coakley

and Wolvin's (1989) *Experiential Listening: Tools for Teachers & Trainers* or the *Swap Shop* collections of exercises from the International Listening Association conferences. Too, some Great Ideas for Teaching Speech (the GIFTS series from the NCA) address listening exercises.

In addition, the Urban Confessional: A Free Listening Movement is an interesting practical exercise in listening. Found on the internet under the same name, it is the organization that created the Free Listening movement where one takes a cardboard sign to the street and simply listens to those who pass by. Instructions can be found under the "Join Us" link. I have used this activity multiple times at the end of my semester in a listening class, and the students have very positive reactions to it and can tie it to much that was learned in class. However, the activity can easily be performed with no formal instruction but the partner guide, and it can act as a great springboard for talking about listening in any class.

Another practical approach is offered by Kai Degner's videotaped lessons from a free course he offered previously. While the videos are not accessible through his website (<http://kaidegner.com/>), they can be found on Youtube by searching "Kai Degner Fix Bad Listening Session." Each of the eight videos is less than 10 minutes. My personal favorites are session one: Listening is Boring and session six: Powerful Paraphrases.

Though neither of these are based in research, I can attest that they are solid pedagogical tools.

For listening based on research, the strength of the listening quad and the accompanying exercises is that they are based on empirical research.

*Introduction to Listening and the Listening Quad*

The first lesson on listening sets the stage for the future learning, so one can review the various models of communication (linear, interactional, and transactional) and understand that the listener is always depicted as 50% of the communication process. Various definitions of listening can be reviewed (Glenn, 1989), including the ILA definition of listening (ILA, 1995) as well as the five factors most found in listening definitions (Glenn, 1989). Students should be made aware of the controversies of whether the listening response should be overt or covert and if one can really listen to nonverbal behaviors (for a complete discussion, see Janusik, 2004).

There are three approaches to establish the need for effective listening. First, listening is the communication activity humans engage in most on a daily basis (Barker, Edwards, Gaines, Gladney, & Holley, 1980; Janusik & Wolvin, 2009; Rankin, 1930; Werner, 1975). Second, listening is one of the top skills employers seek in entry-level employees as well as those being promoted (AICPA, 2005; Goby & Lewis, 2000; Hynes, & Bhatia, 1996; James, 1992; Keyton, et al., 2013; Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997; Waner, 1995; Winsor, Curtis, & Stephens, 1997). Finally, listening is tied to effective leadership (Bechler & Johnson, 1995; Castro, Lloyd, Anseel, & Kluger, 2016; Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017; and Johnson & Bechler, 1998).

Listening should be introduced as a multidimensional concept, and this can be accomplished through a preview of the Listening quad. According to schema development and WM capacity theories, previewing will assist students in making meaning and understanding the basic concepts (Fitch-Hauser, 1990; Just & Carpenter, 1992). A visual representation of the Listening quad also assists students in retaining the basic framework (See appendix B). Instructors can then select the most important parts of the Listening quad to highlight, determined by which aspect is most important to their class: affective, cognitive, behavioral, or relational.



## *Listening as Affective*

Listening as affective includes how one feels about listening and how one feels when listening. The former is an overall schema, and the latter occurs in the interaction. However, it is one's verbal and nonverbal behaviors, driven by one's affections and intentions, which will determine one's listening competence.

Competent behaviors need not be conscious, but a general hierarchical structure (Howell, 1982) exists for those seeking to improve their listening skills and strategies. The first level is Unconscious Incompetence, when one is listening ineffectively but is not aware of it. Others may recognize the listener's incompetence, but the listener is unaware. The addition of awareness would move one to Conscious Incompetence, where the listener understands that s/he is ineffective, but s/he does not know how to change. When one becomes aware of what to do to be effective and consciously does so, then he moves to the third level, Conscious Competence. Effective listening, like any other skill, is learned through practice. Thus, students must understand the basis of the skill and then consciously enact it. In the final stage, Unconscious Competence, the habits of effective listening are enacted naturally. This is the level for which we strive, but the level is rarely achieved without the prior levels.

To become unconsciously competent, other affective factors influence one's progress. For example, does one have a desire or Willingness to Listen? Effective listening takes energy, attention, and time (Wolvin, 1989). Effective listening requires concentration or attention, and this takes energy and desire. The Willingness to Listen scale (Roberts & Vinson, 1998) offers students a glimpse of their willingness to listen in different contexts. For a broader lens, the National Communication Association offers *Assessing Motivation to Communicate: Willingness to*

*Communicate and Personal Report of Communication Apprehension* (Morreale, 2007).

There are two strategies that students can use to develop a better willingness to listen. The first strategy is preparation. One can prepare for a listening event by making certain that one has had adequate sleep and food. Many studies demonstrate that those with a lack of sleep have reduced energy levels and difficulty concentrating (Heuer, Kohlisch, & Klein, 2005; Kelly, Kelly, Clanton, 2001; Pilcher, & Walters, 1997). Additionally, certain foods, such as those with sugars, can increase listening comprehension (Morris & Sarll, 2001; Smith, Riby, van Eekelen, & Foster, 2011). Glucose fuels the brain functions, but glucose cannot be stored in the brain; it occurs in the bloodstream. If glucose is not prevalent in the bloodstream, then brain functioning is impaired. Thus, one can prepare for a listening event by making certain that one has had adequate rest and food. I make this a practical application by bringing in baked treats on days my students are taking a test.

The second strategy for affective listening is remembering that honesty is usually the best policy. If one does not have the time or energy to listen effectively, and one has the opportunity to listen later, then it is advisable to be honest. The other communicator often is appreciative, as it is known that one has a true desire to understand. This strategy also incorporates the hallmark of being other-centered (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2005).

Because the affective elements of listening are the *emotional* elements in other-centered listening, one truly has value for the other's unique values, ideas, and interests (Beebe, et al., 2005). In fact, scholars argue that one must listen morally and ethically while listening therapeutically (Baurain 2011; Lipari, 2009; Purdy, Loffredo Roca, Halley, Holmes, & Christy, 2017; Shotter, 2009). One cares for the

other. In short, if one does not feel that listening to others is important, then one cannot listen effectively.

An individual would choose to listen, and be listened to, for a number of reasons. Among these are listening to feel good and listening to feel human. When one feels understood, then one is more likely to feel safe enough to self-disclose. If the rule of reciprocity is enacted, then reciprocal self-disclosure may lead to trust (Bodie, 2012; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2000; Lloyd, Boer, Kluger, & Voelpel, 2015). However, to be involved in the reciprocal self-disclosure, one must have time, attention, and willingness. As Purdy (1991) declares, "We cannot fill a full cup." If we have no desire or willingness to listen to another, then we are filled with our own thoughts and feelings and have no room for those of the other.

Another aspect of affective listening appears to be an internal orientation known as Self-Monitoring (Brownell, 2002; Snyder, 1974). Self-monitoring is an awareness of how one affects another in the context of communicating as well as how willing one is to adjust one's verbal and nonverbal behavior(s) for the other(s). Snyder's (1974) Self-Monitoring instrument has been used in a variety of psychological and communication studies (Beers & Lassiter, 1997; Boster & Mayer, 1984; DeTurck, Kalbfleisch, & Miller, 1983; Douglas, 1983; Duran & Spitzberg, 1995; Gangestad & Snyder, 2000; Mill, 1984) and results suggest that high self-monitors are concerned with social appropriateness, adjust to others, and remember more details, while low self-monitors use their own values and judgments as a guide and adjust to the other less.

I like using this instrument in class, as when students complete it, they are often shocked to not receive a high score. Students should be cautioned not to think of high self-monitors as "good" and low self-monitors as "bad." Those who are too

high may be perceived to have no backbone, while those who are too low may be perceived not to care about others. Rather than labeling the dialectic, it is helpful to consider the type of professions that both high and low self-monitors would be best suited. In addition, students can brainstorm strategies that might be used when one realizes that one is in a conversation with a high or low self-monitor.

Many other affective listening influencers exist including culture, gender, age, hemispheric specialization, physical and psychological states, attitudes, interest, locus of control, self-concept, one's willingness to listen, receiver apprehension, and listening preference (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996). What is known about these influencers is that they affect the way in which one comprehends, but how the affect works is not understood well. For example, it is known that individuals have different brain hemispheric preferences despite similarities in brain functioning. What is known is that the auditory cortex, where oral language is processed, is on the left side of the brain (Gazzaniga, Ivery, & Mangun, 2002). Additionally, the left side of the brain contains the language processing center, sometimes referred to as Broca's area, where the brain is activated when both listening to language as well as speaking it (Buchsbaum, Hickok, & Humphries, 2001; Just, Carpenter, & Keller, 1996; Posner & Raichle, 1994). Though the activation point for speaking is somewhat different from the activation for listening, the areas overlap. However, the channel by which the message is received also plays a role in which area is activated. For example, passively viewing words or reading words stimulates a different brain area than listening to language (Posner & Raichle, 1994), and Broca's area is not activated with covert reading (Sakurai, et al., 2001).

In terms of brain hemispheric differences, formerly it was believed that men process primarily on the left side of their brain while the women process equally on

both. This belief was based on an earlier study where 10 men and 10 women listened to a passage from a Grisham novel (Phillips, Lowe, Lurito, Dzemic, & Matthews, 2001). However, a larger study consisting of 50 men and 50 women that utilized an fMRI technique showed that men and woman do not have substantive differences in lateralization of brain activity or brain activation patterns during a listening task. In fact, both had strong left-lateralized activations in the prefrontal and temporal lobes (Frost, et al., 1999; Wager, Phan, Liberzon, & Taylor, 2003). Neither study had a large enough sample to offer generalizability, which suggests that further research is required.

Another affective element is one's attitude about listening. Three instruments exist that measure one's attitudes in terms of listening preferences (Barker & Watson, 2000; Watson, Barker & Weaver, 1995), willingness to listen (Roberts & Vinson, 1998), and apprehension about listening (Wheless, 1975). The Listening Preference Profile (Barker & Watson, 2000; Watson et al., 1995) achieved popularity in the academic and professional worlds; however, recent research indicates instability in the factors (Worthington, 2005b) as well as its dependence on context (Imhof, 2004), so it's recommended that the updated version be used (Bodie, Worthington, & Gearhart, 2013c). One study has linked at least two of these instruments in that those with a high people-orientation have a low apprehension for receiving information (Bodie & Villaume, 2003). Additionally, verbal aggressiveness has an inverse relationship with people and content listeners (Worthington, 2005a).

An activity to practice different listening strategies and help students understand how listening can indeed be an act of love is available (Simmons & Tenzek, 2016). This activity is based on Story Corps, which can be found on the Internet.

Thus, the section on listening as affective concludes with little empirical certainty; however, most students recognize that the more they are aware of their listening influencers, the more they can take control of them. Most students are unaware that they can control their listening processes before, during, or after a listening event (Imhof, 1998).

The reader might note that many listening instruments were cited in this section, and others will follow. For those that are interested in instruments that assess listening from a number of perspectives, a new book is available from Wiley-Blackwell publishers. Edited by Debra Worthington and Graham Bodie (2017), *The Sourcebook of Listening Research: Methodology and Measures* contains over 600 pages dedicated to listening instruments and their critiques by various listening scholars.

### *Listening as Cognitive*

Mirroring listening as affective, the listening as cognitive part of the quad brings the construct into the rational realm. This is the primary area where listening research could benefit greatly from advances made in cognitive psychology research because much of listening research is built upon unsupported attention and memory research (Janusik, 2004). Thus, this area covers how we think about listening and how we think when we listen. It includes both the unsupported and supported research, so students can become more critical consumers of what they read.

My major criticism of much listening research is that it does not build upon working memory theory (Baddeley, 1986, 2001, 2003; Baddeley & Hitch, 1974), the dominant paradigm of attention and memory research. This lacuna is serious, as all listening models are built, implicitly or explicitly, on linear models of attention and memory research (Janusik, 2004, 2005c, 2007a). Psychological linear models were

replaced by 1980 in favor of the working memory model; however, listening researchers and theorists never incorporated this shift into models or research until recently (Janusik, 2004, 2005c, 2007a). In addition, all of Bodie's and Imhof's work is based on the updated attention and memory research. Thus, the listening as cognitive section is critical, as it will contradict information found in communication texts and research. Previously, some listening researchers have attempted to combine cognitive psychology with listening (Bentley, 1993; Bostrom, 1990; Fitch-Hauser & Hughes, 1988), but their work was still based on the unsupported linear models of attention and memory.

Students can gain an understanding of the complexities of cognitions by introducing the unit with the Stroop test (Experience Dynamics, 2004). This test is a series of words, each word the name of a color, with different ink representing different words. For example, the color "red" might be written in blue ink. Students must say aloud the *color* of the word as opposed to saying the word. Students' inability to do so quickly demonstrates the two areas of the brain that are affected: the right side, which deals with color, and the left side, which deals with words (Gazzaniga, et al., 2002).

Cognitive listening represents both how one thinks about listening and how one thinks during the listening process. There is much research to support that the term "listening" is perceived differently by different people. For example, young children often equate effective listening with nonverbal behaviors, such as eye contact (Coakley, 1998; Imhof, 2002), while the term "listening" is synonymous with "following directions" in the business world (Lewis, & Reinsch, 1988). Additionally, the term means different things to different cultures (Imhof, 2001; Imhof & Janusik, 2006). For example, using the Listening Concepts Inventory (LCI) (Imhof & Janusik,

2006), German university students, more than U.S. American university students, perceived listening more as a relationship building activity, while the U.S. students placed more emphasis than the German students on listening as a means to integrate and organize information and critically think (Imhof & Janusik, 2006). German students also professed little knowledge of listening strategies (Imhof, 1998), as they show little preparation for a listening event and they have difficulty paying attention when they dislike the speaker. In addition, Japanese students show a greater aptitude to shift conceptualizations as compared to US American and European students (Janusik & Imhof, 2017). The initial LCI instrument (Imhof & Janusik, 2006), the revised instrument (Bodie, 2011b), and the intercultural concepts instrument (Janusik & Imhof, 2017) are open source. Beyond the classroom, there is evidence to suggest that one's perception of listening effectiveness and responsibility shifts across the lifespan (Wolvin, Coakley, & Halone, 1995).

The next important component is an introduction to the cognitive models of listening (Bostrom, 1990, Wolff, Marsnik, Tracey, & Nichols, 1983). These models are distinct because they posit listening as purely a cognitive process with no behavioral component. Inherent in these models are the elements of attention and perception, and it is specifically these two elements where listening scholars have not kept abreast of the appropriate attention and memory research (Janusik, 2004).

A brief historical overview of attention and memory models is important for students' understanding of the cognitive processes that underlie the listening process. Psychological research in this area began in earnest in the 1950's with the introduction of Broadbent's (1958) linear model of Sensory Register - Short-Term Memory – Long-Term Memory. This model was altered slightly by Treisman (1960) and Deutsch and Deutsch (1963), but did not change significantly until Kahneman



(1973) introduced the notion of attention as an allocated resource. This was an important shift, as it began to move attention and memory from two distinct systems to a unitary system. More importantly, it began to move the attention and memory process from a linear nature to a more transactional and dynamic nature, which is intuitive when one considers the thinking process. Working memory (WM) theory was introduced by Baddeley and Hitch (1974), which consisted of a unitary and dynamic attention and memory system. WM theory posits that one system has allocated resources for both attention and memory processes. What resources are not used for attention are available for memory. Thus, the longer it takes to understand and create meaning, the less likely that the meaning will be retained. When one develops more of a schema, then one can process more efficiently, thus leaving more resources available for storage. An easy way for students to understand this is by asking them to consider their first university course in their major. After the first semester, most students admit they felt like they learned (i.e. retained or stored) little. However, subsequent courses became easier because they were building their schema and had more resources available for storage. By their senior year, most students feel that they can remember more in courses.

The WM system is a distinct system from long-term memory (LTM), yet LTM can only be activated through WM. Thus, the WM system is integral to the listening process, as it is the means by which comprehension occurs, regardless of the channel by which the stimuli are received. WM theory became the dominant paradigm of attention and memory research by 1980, just 6 years after its introduction, and it remains that dominant paradigm today (Baddeley, 2000, 2003; 2012; Gathercole, 1997; Miyake, & Shah, 1999). Working memory often is tested through span tests, a measure that has proven to be very reliable (Daneman, 1991;

Daneman & Carpenter, 1980, 1983; Daneman & Green, 1986; Daneman & Merikle, 1996).

An extension of WM theory is the capacity theory (Just & Carpenter, 1992). The capacity theory, supported through a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) study (Just et al., 1996), documents that an individual's WM system is capacity-restricted. This means that each individual has a unique capacity for processing and storage functions. The combination of processing plus storage equals one's WM capacity. Capacities cannot increase; however, one can learn to process more efficiently, which would free more capacity for memory. For example, an individual with a capacity of 80 units could attend to stimuli quickly (20 units), which would leave 60 units available for storage; or an individual could take more time for attention (60 units), which would leave less capacity (20 units) available for storage. The key to increasing long-term memory is to increase the processing function.

An exercise in class that helps students understand the concept of allocated attention is called the punctuated lecture (Angelo & Cross, 1993). Students are told that the instructor will say "stop" intermittently during the day's activity. At that point, each student is to write 1) where his/her attention was, 2) if it was on or off task; and 3) a justification for on-task, if necessary. Students submit the forms anonymously, and results are compiled and announced the next day. The exercise shows students how attention is allocated, how quickly attention goes off task, and how schemas are developed. It also reiterates the importance of repetition for learning.

This section would not be complete without including the concept of multitasking. While students believe they can multitask, a fairly convincing demonstration of an individual's inability to listen and do other word-based activities

simultaneously (i.e. reading a text, watching TV, searching the Internet, etc.) can be found in the Internet by searching “The Myth of Multitasking Test (NEW).”

It would be remiss to not mention a new and exciting area of teaching listening in the classroom by teaching metacognitive listening strategies. These strategies help students assess if they are listening effectively and then identifying what can be done to rectify the situation. Though the area is well established in listening in a second language literature, especially by the introduction of the Metacognitive Listening Awareness Questionnaire (Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal, & Tafaghodtari, 2006), it is in its infancy in listening to one’s first language (Janusik & Keaton, 2011, 2015).

Another aspect that interests students in listening as cognitive is the effect of brain differences, particularly in the area of gender. Earlier research is mixed about gender differences in terms of hemispheric use while listening. One study found that men primarily used the left side of their brain, while women used both sides (Phillips et al., 2001), but a larger study (Frost et al., 1999) showed no significant differences. What is known is that men have more gray matter in the left hemisphere than women (Gur, et al., 1999), men have more neurons in their cerebral cortex, but women have more connections between the neurons (Rabinowicz, Dean, Petetot, & de Courten-Myers, 1999), and both men and women primarily process language in the left hemisphere; however, women also have an active processing center in the right hemisphere (Sousa, 2001). What is important about these studies is that they were conducted with sophisticated instrumentation to measure internal processes. Research by listening scholars has not utilized this instrumentation yet; but, some listening researchers have studied gender differences with respect to brain functioning.

For example, Janusik (2005b) found that men and women have no significant differences in terms of conversational listening capacity, the number of items that one can hold active and respond to in the course of a conversation. However, men are significantly better at remembering and recalling in a linear listening test, even though women are still perceived to be better communicators. Likewise, women historically have been perceived to be better listeners (Emmert, Emmert, & Brandt, 1993; Purdy & Newman, 2000; Sargent & Weaver, 2003), but more recent research (Janusik, 2005a; Sawyer, Gayle, Topa, & Powers, 2014; and Zampini, Suttora, D'Odorico, & Zanchi, 2013) did not find gender differences, with the exception that women possess a greater ability and a greater motivation to process information about support situations and messages (Burleson, et al., 2009).

Additionally, schema was shown to be a better predictor of listening style than gender (Johnson, Weaver, Watson, & Barker, 2000). That is, people-oriented listeners were those with a communal schema, who were represented as being selfless, open, caring, affectionate, kind, helpful, sympathetic, and with a strong desire to be with others. Those with an agentic schema were goal-oriented, assertive, protective, self-activated, with an urge to master, and they were less likely to be people-oriented listeners. Though women were more likely to have agentic schemas, schema was a better predictor of listening style than gender.

To provide students with an introduction to the perceived differences, there is a simple assignment that targets perceived listening differences in gender (See Norin, 2009).

Therefore, the listening as cognitive section helps students identify how the biology of the brain affects how we think, and how we think affects how we listen.

Perhaps more important in the communication context is how we behave when we listen.

### *Listening as Behavioral*

Listening behaviors include how we act as we listen as well as how those actions are interpreted. Listening is primarily a cognitive activity that is perceived behaviorally (Witkin, 1990), so it is critical for students to understand that actions speak louder than words. This section addresses how we act, both verbally and nonverbally, when we listen and the effects of those actions.

Since cognitions and behaviors are not always congruent, behaviors are not a foolproof way to assess if one is listening. However, behaviors often are used to perceive listening effectiveness.

Two behavioral listening models ground this section. The first is the SIER model (Steil, Barker, & Watson, 1983) that depicts listening as the process of Sensing, Interpretation, Evaluation, and Reaction. This model was based more on the researchers' experiences, and they offer no validation for it. The second model is the HURIER model (Brownell, 2002). Brownell did use an exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis to validate her model; however, it is important to stress that her method only validates how individuals *perceive* the listening process to work because her data was gained through self-report (Janusik, 2004). Based on working memory theory; it is highly unlikely that her model represents the actual process, though it is likely that most of the components are part of the process. The primary distinction between cognitive and behavioral listening models is that the theorists take a stance on whether a response is necessary for the listening process to occur. This question generally fuels a terrific classroom discussion with most men agreeing that a response is not necessary and most women agreeing that a response is

necessary. As I tell my students, it is a moot point, as we make meaning from the lack of the other's response, and that meaning is rarely positive.

### *Communication competence and listening competence*

The importance of communicative competence has been recognized for thousands of years and studied extensively in the communication discipline (McCroskey, 1984). Competence is context-dependent (Wolvin, 1989), and includes the two factors of appropriateness and effectiveness (Rubin, 1990). Appropriate communication is that which is socially sanctioned, meaning following society's rules and norms for any given situation (Rubin & Morreale, 1996; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984), which may change with the lifespan (Halone, Wolvin, & Coakley, 1997). Effective communication is commonly defined in terms of goals met (Infante, Rancer, & Womack, 1997; Rubin & Morreale, 1996) and/or relational satisfaction as an interdependent or transactional process (Cooper & Husband, 1993; Rhodes, 1993; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Some scholars do explicate listening as part of competence, because the communicator, when listening, must recognize how to adapt to be effective in the interdependent process (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Rhodes, 1993).

Listening competence, as communication competence, includes attitudes, knowledge, skills, and willingness to engage as a listener (Cooper & Husband, 1993; Wolvin & Coakley, 1994). After having the correct attitude and the willingness to communicate, one must know what to do in the moment, and one must be able to execute it. Listening competence is located subordinately to communicative competence (Bodie, et al., 2015a), with the "Big Five" factors of being a good listener identified as Attentive, Friendly, Responsive, Conversational Flow, and Understanding (Bodie, St. Cyr, Pence, Rold, & Honeycutt, 2012b). Even more

specifically, this research was able to identify the top behaviors, both verbal and nonverbal, that are perceived to be excellent listening behaviors. Many of these behaviors can be found in the self-report instrument developed by Cooper and Buchanan (2010).

A relatively new area of study within the realm of listening as behavioural is that of paraphrasing. Though it has been highly recognized that paraphrasing makes for an effective listener to show the speaker she is listening, there are some types of paraphrasing that are better than others (Bodie, Cannava, & Vickery, 2016; Weger, Castle, & Emmett, 2010; Weger, Castle Bell, Minei, & Robison, 2014). See Rester (2012) for an exercise to practice different types of paraphrasing.

As with communication competence, it is important to consider who is the judge of listening competence (Bentley, 1997; Rubin 1990). Should it be the self, the other conversational partner, or a third-party observer? Research suggests that inter-rater reliability is strongest for poor and moderate listeners, but not as strong for competent listeners (Cooper & Buchanan, 2003). The question of how one evaluates competence becomes more difficult to address if listening is broken into cognitions and behaviors because cognitions are known only to the listener. In communicative interactions, competence can be perceived as what an effective listener “looks” like. Though more current research suggests that listening is assessed holistically (Itzchakov & Kluger, in press), with little agreement between the self, the other, and the third party doing the assessing (Bodie et al., 2014), research has indicated that for all practical purposes, it is the other’s assessment of one’s listening that counts the most in relationships (Bodie, et al., 2014a; Itzchakov & Kluger; 2017; in press).

Equally important is how other types of behaviors are interpreted by others.

### *Nonverbal communication*

Although much research has been conducted in nonverbal communication, and much of it is transferable to listening behaviors, particularly that of turn-taking behaviors, there have been a few studies that have specifically studied nonverbal behaviors and listening (Alexander, Penley, Jernigan, 1992; Janusik, 2005c; O’Heren, & Arnold, 1991; Ostermeier, 1993; Thomas, & Levine, 1994; Timm & Schroeder, 2000). What is known is that in business, managers with more effective listening comprehension are better at interpreting nonverbal communication behaviors and listening while distracted (Alexander et al., 1992). In addition, in a student sample, those who demonstrated more attending behaviors, like eye contact, forward leaning, and head nodding, also had higher listening comprehension scores (O’Heren & Arnold, 1991). However, Thomas and Levine (1994) found that the relationship of listening comprehension and head nods was curvilinear. That is, those with higher comprehension scores either nodded very little or a lot. Their findings also supported O’Heren & Arnold’s (1991) findings in terms of the correlation of comprehension and eye contact. Finally, a combination of listening and nonverbal communication training can affect multicultural sensitivity (Timm & Schroeder, 2000).

In terms of practical application, students can easily understand the distinction between nonverbal listening skills and verbal listening skills. Nonverbal listening skills include the head nods, eye contact, and body leans, while verbal listening skills include things like asking questions for further clarification, paraphrasing, and constructive criticism. Because competence requires both knowing what is appropriate and using the skills, listening competence can be assessed through a group discussion (Janusik 2001a, 2001b).

The other element of listening as nonverbal is being able to decode the face and body elements of the other and “listen between the lines”, so to speak. There are



three valid tests that students can use to identify their prowess in decoding others.

#### The Eyes in the Mind Test

(Vellante, et al., 2013) is available freely on line, as is the Profile of Nonverbal Sensitivity (PONS) test (Rosenthal, Hall, DiMatteo, Rogers, & Archer, 2013). Both tests can be administered in class easily, or students may complete on their own and bring their scores to class. While students often complain that the tests are not fair, they do have a high level of reliability and validity to them.

Students can be reminded that Brownell's (2002) Law of Listening is that Listening requires *willingness* as well as *ability*, but Janusik's Law of Listening is that *knowing* how to do something no longer is good enough, but *doing* it is what counts. For, it is in the doing of listening that we build relationships.

#### *Listening as Relational*

The final part of the listening quad, listening as relational, incorporates the other parts of the listening quad into the human communication process. Listening as relational is how we interact as we listen. Our interactions are a collection of our feelings, cognitions, and verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Truly, the sum is greater than its parts, and the sum can be greater in either a positive or a negative way. The more positive factors that are contributed to the mix in the appropriate amounts are what determine the quality of the relationship. In essence, listening as relational IS the essence of communication.

Two relational listening models exists (Pecchioni & Halone, 2000; Thompson, Leintz, Nevers, & Witkowski, 2004). The first, Pecchioni and Halone's, was established through grounded theory. It is not a process model, but a model of assumptions of what is important in the listening act with differing partners. The researchers investigated the macro level of listening, or the time of the interaction

(before, during, after) as well as the micro level, or what happens during each of those parts and how it can be characterized as cognitive, behavioral, verbal, nonverbal, or interactive. They also studied the interaction of the macro and micro levels in relationship to the other in the communicative event. Ultimately, the model and its study provide support for the idea that we listen differently with different people.

The second relational model, The Integrative Listening Model (Thompson et al., 2004) is much different. This is an integrative model to teach and learn listening across the curriculum. It has been used to develop a curriculum plan for accounting students (Stone, Lightbody, & Whait, 2013) to fostering and assessing critical listening in the basic communication course (Ferrari-Bridgers, et al., 2017).

One of the defining areas of relational communication, particularly in intimate relationships, is empathy. Much research exists in the communication discipline in areas such as comforting and supporting messages, providing support (Bodie et al., 2011b; Bodie & Burleson, 2008; Bodie, Burleson, & Jones, 2012a; Bodie, Vickery, Cannava, & Jones, 2015b; Bodie, Vickery, & Gearhart, 2013; Burleson & Feng, 2005; Burleson, Holmstrom, Bodie, & Rack, 2007; Burleson, et al, 2005), and active empathic listening (Aggarwal, Castleberry, Ridnour, & Shepherd, 2005; Bodie, 2011a, Bodie, Gearhart, Denham, & Vickery, 2013a; Comer & Drollinger, 1999; Gearhart & Bodie, 2011; Pence & Vickery, 2012; Vickery, Keaton, & Bodie, 2015). However, there is little literature supporting listening and empathy (Bommelje, Houston, & Smither, 2003; Walker, 1997). This might be because a relationship is dynamic, and it is more difficult for researchers to investigate patterns and determine cause and effect without holding a variable constant. Still, works such as Gibb (1961) supportive and defensive climates and Brownell's (1992) and Purdy's (1991) views

on empathy can be informative, as well as the finding that improving both listening and self-awareness may lead to improving one's empathy (Haley, et al., 2017).

Other work on relationships, particularly from other disciplines, also can be enlightening (Cole & Cole, 1999; Gottman 1994; Pasupathi, Cartensen, Levenson, & Gottman, 1999; Wilbur, Wilbur, Garrett, & Yuhas, 2001).

Relationships cannot be constituted outside of a context, so addressing some of the contextual studies is important, particularly because it is where listening researchers have some of the most solid empirical work. For example, in listening across the lifespan studies it was determined that our need to listen, and how we listen, varies by age (Coakley, Halone, & Wolvin, 1996; Halone, Wolvin, & Coakley, 1997). Additionally, Imhof (2002) investigated how children listen. Other contextualized studies include listening in the classroom (Ford, Wolvin, & Chung, 2000; Imhof, 1998; 2001) listening in the workplace (Brownell, 1985, 1994; Cooper & Husband, 1993; Gilchrest & Van Hoeven, 1994; Lobdell, Sonoda, & Arnold, 1993; Stine, Thompson, & Cusella, 1995), and listening in marriage (Doohan, 2007), and more recently, Listening in the Professional Context (Ala-Koretmaa, 2015), which looks at professional listening competence within the interpersonal, organizational, and cultural contexts.

Another relatively new listening concept is that of Team Listening Environment (LTE), introduced by Johnston, Reed, and Lawrence (2011). The simple 5-item scale was used to show how the perception of team listening effects the bottom line in business (Kirtley Johnston, & Reed, 2017), as well as the concept of team coordination (Cardon & Marshall, 2014). Of interest was that teams with high coordination identified unscheduled meetings as the greatest contributor to their team coordination.

Thus, listening as relational is the final component of the listening quad, a research-based approach to teaching listening.

### *The Future of Listening Research*

With the listening quad, students are exposed to the research that supports the field of listening. This approach represents research primarily from the last 35 years, which is approximately the time span that listening has been taught in the classroom (Janusik, 2002). However, listening research in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is beginning to explore other areas as well, including listening fidelity (Fitch Hauser & Powers, 2005; Mulanax & Powers, 2001; Powers & Bodie, 2003), a construct that measures the degree of message similarity between the sender and the receiver. Additionally, the conversational listening span (CLS) (Janusik, 2004, 2007a), is the first measure of listening capacity grounded in working memory theory. The construct is normally distributed in both English and Finnish samples (Valikoski, Ilomaki, Maki, & Janusik, 2005) as well as a Chinese sample (Janusik & Zhang, 2003). The CLS is significantly correlated with perceived communicative competence (Janusik, 2004).

For those teaching business communication, I would highly recommend the work of Ala-Kortesmaa (2016). She developed a model of professional listening competence through grounded theory, and this model has great scientific significance, as it will allow other researchers to develop testable hypotheses and build upon her work.

Finally, I would be remiss to not mention that I believe the greatest contributor to listening research in the last decade has been Graham Bodie. He and colleagues have contributed much to the listening research mostly through their research in supportive communication (Bodie et al., 2011b; Bodie et al., 2013b; Bodie, 2016; Bodie, Keaton & Jones, 2016; Bodie & Crick, 2014; Bodie et al., 2014; Bodie et al.,

2015b; Bodie, et al., 2013). Most significantly, much of his work contributed to the development the first listening theory, the Dual-Process Theory of Supportive Communication (Bodie et al., 2011a).

### Conclusion

Thus, the Listening quad is an approach to teaching listening that is grounded in the general dimensions underlying the listening process. The foundation of the Listening quad is grounded in research. As such, it would be appropriate for use in any communication course, but particularly in the basic course, interpersonal course, or group course. The Listening quad permits the instructor to select the parts most relevant for his particular classroom to customize the student learning experience. It is the author's sincere hope that textbook authors will pay heed to the Listening quad and revise textbooks that better reflect listening research.

## Appendix A

The following books are not designed to teach an overview of listening; however, they could be considered supplementary materials and/or books to teach listening from a different perspective.

Barker, L., & Watson, K. (2000). *Listen up. How to improve relationships, reduce stress, and be more productive by using the power of listening*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Barker and Watson's book was designed to help individuals communicate better at home, at work and in social situations. This book introduced their Listening Preference Profile to the lay audience.

Brady, M. (Ed.) (2003). *The wisdom of listening*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications.

Brady offers a collection of essays devoted to listening from spiritual and mindful perspectives.

Shafir, R. Z. (2003). *Zen and the art of listening. Mindful communications in the age of distractions*. Naperville, IL: Quest Books.

Shafir offers specific tips and strategies to slow down and become more mindful in daily life.

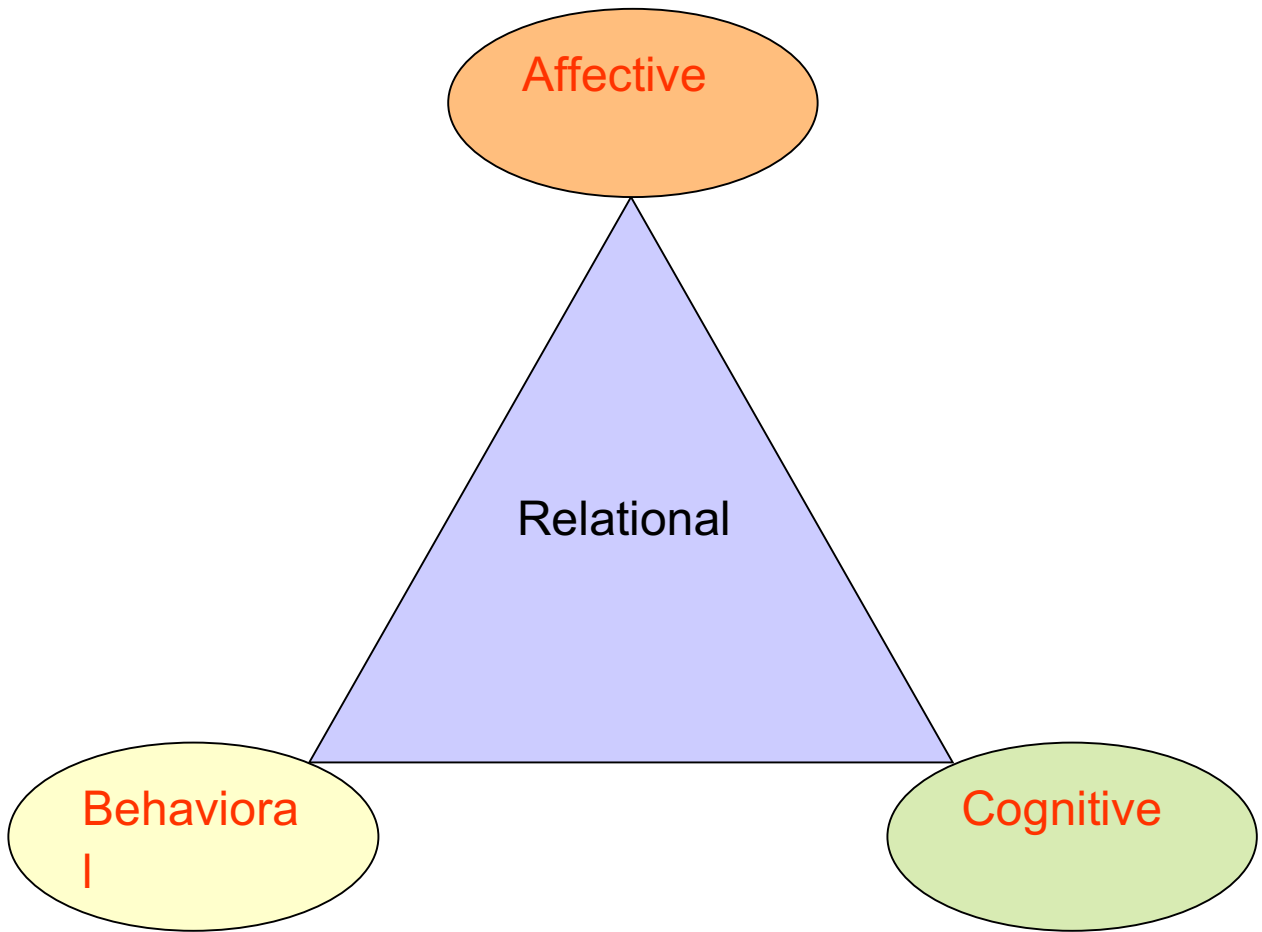
Steil, L.K., & Bommelje, R.K. (2004). *Listening leaders. The ten golden rules to listen, lead and succeed*. Edina, MN.

Steil and Bommelje offer preparation, principles, and practices of effective leaders. It is geared towards experienced and inexperienced leaders in an effort to build listening organizations.

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Appendix B

The Listening Quad



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<sup>i</sup> According to the website, the sixth edition of Brownell's text will be introduced some time in 2017; however, it was not available when this paper was written.

<sup>ii</sup> During 2016, Fitch-Hauser and Worthington's text was moved from Allyn & Bacon/Pearson publishing to Taylor and Francis. The 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, due out in 2017, is not yet available and could not be reviewed.

<sup>iii</sup> The closest empirically supported model in listening is the dual-process model for supportive communication (Bodie, 2013; Bodie, Burlison & Jones, 2012; Bodie, Keaton, & Jones, 2016; and Bodie, Burlison, Holmstrom, McCullough, Rack, Hanasono, & Rosier 2011).

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Listening to the SONG of Life:  
An Autoethnographic Account of Teaching an Undergraduate Listening Course

E. James Baesler

Old Dominion University

Norfolk, VA 23529

[jbaesler@odu.edu](mailto:jbaesler@odu.edu)

757.683.4866

Author Notes:

(1) The author gratefully acknowledges the life experiences and sharing of students in the first undergraduate listening course at Old Dominion University—and the sample of students that assisted in validating the reconstructed student voices which comprise the heart of this story.

(2) A previous version of this manuscript was presented in 2015 at the *International Listening Association*, Virginia Beach, VA.

**Abstract**

A new approach to teaching the listening course at the undergraduate level provides opportunities for students to experience the *SONG of life*. SONG is an acronym for listening to the whole of life in the contexts of Self (e.g., discerning inner wisdom), Others (e.g., connecting with feelings and needs), Nature (beholding the beauty of nature), and God (e.g., discovering and connecting with the divine). A rationale and description of the new listening course is provided followed by a chronological autoethnographic account of teaching/learning the *SONG of life* using the four contexts as verses of the SONG with twenty undergraduate students during the fall semester of 2014. Ideas for future research address validity issues and assessment of student learning.

**Keywords:** listening, teaching, learning, autoethnography, SONG of life

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### **Listening to the SONG of Life**

There was no undergraduate listening course in the Department of Communication and Theatre Arts at an eastern U.S. university of higher education during the 24 years that I have been a faculty member; and, I knew we needed one. This is the story of one teachers attempt to fill that need. The story is an autoethnographic account of how I conceived, created, and taught “listening to the SONG of life.”

I developed and taught the first undergraduate listening course at my home institution during the fall semester of 2014. The flyer for this new topics course depicted a pink conch shell on a sandy Caribbean beach with the following phrases written in big bold letters: “Discern inner wisdom, Connect with feelings and needs, Behold the beauty of nature, and Discover the deep divine in all...Listen with Dr. [name omitted] this Fall in Communication 495: Listening to Self, Others, Nature, and the Divine.” The *SONG of Life* is an acronym that represents listening to the whole of life in the contexts of Self (discern inner wisdom), Others (connect with feelings and needs), Nature (behold the beauty of nature), and God (the divine)(discover the deep divine in all).<sup>1</sup> In the next sections, I: (a) demonstrate the need for this new type of listening course by briefly reviewing literature in listening pedagogy, (b) develop specific learning goals for the course, and (c) discuss one method of assessment for “listening to the SONG of life.”

A review of listening pedagogy indicates that my home institution is typical of many institutions of higher education in the U.S. that relegate the teaching of listening to a “listening unit” in an undergraduate survey or interpersonal communication course (Janusik, 2002; Ifert Johnson & Long, 2008). Data from 1995

(Wacker & Hawkins) show that only 5 per cent of 800 institutions examined had a 72  
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specific listening course. Ten years later, two convenience samples of institutions of higher education in the U.S. ( $n$ 's = 36, 20), report an improvement in the number of listening courses in that just less than half of the institutions (39 % and 45%, respectively) surveyed have an entire course devoted to listening (Janusik, 2005; Fitch-Hauser, 2005). While a decade has passed since these two research studies, my limited personal network of colleagues indicates *that there is still a considerable gap in the development of listening curricula in many communication departments in the U.S.*<sup>2</sup> Why is there such a gap in the development of listening curricula when most communication educators would probably agree with arguments supporting the necessity of developing a listening course(s) in the undergraduate curriculum (see Janusik, 2002 for arguments in support of listening pedagogy)? There are probably many reasons for the gap in the development of listening curricula such as: lack of faculty that specialize in listening pedagogy, high faculty workloads, lack of institutional funding for the development of new listening courses, competing curricular agendas, and so forth.

For those U.S. institutions of higher education that have at least one listening course in the undergraduate curriculum, many of these courses are centered on learning about listening knowledge and skills in a traditional lecture-discussion format (Worthington, 2005). Knowing about listening knowledge and skills is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a comprehensive listening education. The missing component in most listening courses is, "...*how to teach listening so that students could not only comprehend, but also apply effective listening skills*" (Janusik, 2010, p. 202). Simply put: *Knowing about* listening is experientially distinct from *engaging in* listening. For example, defining the concept of empathy, and listing steps for displaying empathy, is a phenomenologically different experience than empathizing

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with a real person in a face to face dialogue. The lack of emphasis on engagement in many listening courses is a shortcoming I address in this autoethnography by suggesting an alternative *approach that teaches students to listen to the SONG of life*.

The acronym SONG stands for the first letter in each of the following words: Self, Others, Nature, and God.<sup>3</sup> SONG represents four conceptually distinct but related contexts of the life-world. I developed this acronym from a number of sources: (a) research in the peace literature (Baesler & Lauricella, 2013) emphasizing intrapersonal (Self), and interpersonal/group (Others) peace-making, (b) contexts from the theistic spiritual outcome survey (Richards & Bergin, 2005) measuring three types of love: Self, Others, and God, and (c) a system's perspective (Von Bertalanffy, 1969) of relationships which, for the SONG of life, I interpret to mean four interrelated ways of being in the world, each higher level subsuming the previous level(s) in a manner similar to the holarchical networks of communication described by Wilber (2006).

My intention is for students to discover and cultivate their listening skills by exploring the four interrelated contexts in SONG, for example: attending to their true self (Self), empathizing with others (Others), experiencing the wonders of nature (Nature), and discovering divine interconnections (God or the divine). Course learning goals are described on the first page of the syllabus (a complete copy of the syllabus is available from the Author upon request):

This course introduces students to Listening to the SONG (Self, Others, Nature, God/Divine) of Life through: a) Practices in exploring and developing listening competencies, b) Theoretical perspectives and models of listening, and c) Research

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about listening. All three areas—practice, theory, and research—are applicable across the contexts of Self, Others, Nature, and the Divine.

For *theoretical* models of listening, we review cognitive (Bostrom, 1990), behavioral (Brownell, 2006), and relational (Pecchioni & Halone, 2000) models. For *research* about listening, we use Janusik’s (n.d.) on-line document that organizes listening research claims and evidence for fifteen different listening categories (e.g., meaning, memory, leadership, barriers, styles, and so forth). For the listening *practices*, experiential learning activities are the primary mode of inquiry. To increase their self-awareness of their listening strengths/weaknesses, students engage in a variety of listening practices (in and outside of class) and then design, execute, and reflect on ways to improve their listening competencies in each of the four listening domains of self, others, nature, and the divine. Traditional listening theories and research are “tested in mini-experiments” and findings are recorded in “learning journals.” In addition, for “home study” each week, students are presented with a list of resources related to one of the listening contexts in the SONG of life and asked to *explore* the resources, *record* what they have learned in their learning journals, and *share* these learnings in small groups the following class period. To assist students in home study, the following criteria, posed as questions, are used to guide their journal writing:

1) What areas among the course resources for the week interested you the most and why?

2) What did you meditate on, and what insights/learnings resulted from your meditation?

3) What questions popped up, and what answer did you find for one of the questions?

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4) What experiential learning activity did you engage in this week; what did you learn?

5) What kinds of feelings did your learning experiences elicit this week and why?

6) Anything else you want to share...?

After describing the learning goals, and the use of a journal as a method of assessment, the end of this section of the syllabus reads:

I encourage you to be open to new experiences in listening to yourself, others, nature, and the divine—this allows for the possibility of growth, life, and cultivating new sensory awareness, attitudes, and actions related to listening in your everyday life...you may be surprised at what you uncover/discover in the course of our 16 weeks together.

The semester long listening course is organized as a sixteen-week *SONG of life*. The SONG is divided into four *verses*: listening to self, others, nature, and the divine. In the middle of the SONG there is a *refrain*, consisting of a midterm journal assessment, recitation of and listening to student learning poems, and individual student conferences. Likewise, there is a *refrain* at the end of the SONG: an end of term journal assessment, poem, and conference.

### **The Story of Listening to the SONG of Life <sup>4</sup>**

#### **Two Decades of Planting Seeds**

Two stories from pre- and post-tenure time periods illustrate the idea of *planting seeds* that eventually led to the development of the SONG of life listening course.

Pre-tenure, I found myself on a rugged mountainous stretch of interstate, bouncing in the driver's seat of an old U-Haul truck, moving across the country with

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my wife from Tucson, Arizona to Norfolk, Virginia to begin my academic career at Old Dominion University. About a year later, I navigated winding mountainous roadways from the driver's seat of a 1976 Chevy Nova. With navigational assistance from my wife, we found our campsite among the sweet-smelling woodlands of pine, oak, and maple. Looking across the campsite at my wife's growing abdomen, ripe from the *seed we planted* six months ago, I was reminded of a *seed I had planted* before we began the trip. Reaching into the bottom of my backpack, I felt for the seed, a small paperback book. Lifting the book through the soil of other articles in my backpack, I read the title above the Sanskrit writing that decorated the front cover, *The mantram handbook* (Easwaren, 1997). I began reflectively reading about mantram prayer for the first time. Little did I know how this simple prayer would help me *listen* to, and cope with, the stresses of tenure, fatherhood, marriage, and illness through the next two decades. I imagine the mantram seed planted as an acorn on that campout, and I visualize the tree now, inside of me, like the child inside of my wife, well rooted, steadily growing, maturing into something mysterious that would eventually lead me to teaching the SONG of life.

Moving from the pre-tenure years to my immediate post tenure year, another significant *seed was planted* on a Sunday afternoon after a church service. A wise elder in the community announced that she would be showing a video after the service about a local retreat center. I had not been on a retreat since high school days about fifteen years prior, and I was intrigued by the possibility of exploring my adult spirituality on retreat. I was the only one out of over 200 people that showed up after the service to watch a somewhat fuzzy VHS tape play for five minutes on a small television screen set atop a mobile cart near the corner of an otherwise unoccupied room. The video describes a retreat center on ten acres positioned

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beside a small lake in [name of place] County. Over time I would discover more riches in nature at the retreat center than the video could show: trees of oak, pine, walnut, mimosa...a variety of birds—geese, robin, chickadee, sparrow...flowers in abundance—rose, dandelion, tulip, peppermint...different kinds of animals—ground squirrel, brown patched rabbit, white tailed deer...and insects--sky blue dragonfly, monarch butterfly, and garden spider. The video also showed the inside of the hermitages that I would eventually stay at. Rough wooden walls surround a bed, chair and table, and bathroom—austere but adequate. The main retreat center is set up with self-serving meals in a kitchen area for solo retreatants like me as well as larger spaces to accommodate groups. There was a private library of religious/spiritual books and tapes that appealed to me, and a small chapel. Inside the chapel, a brightly colored stained-glass mural of the retreat center rests against one wall opposite of a bible and three chairs on the other side. In the center stands an oak colored wooden altar with a white candle sitting on top that lights up a small tabernacle. I made it a ritual to visit the chapel at the beginning and end of each retreat, and over the years, this space became a quiet oasis of refreshment for me where I listened to the SONG of life.

This *seed* in the unusual form of an elderly woman showing a five-minute video of a retreat center led to me journeying on solo and group spiritual retreats at *The Well Retreat Center [The Well]* over thirty times in the next twenty years. Over the course of years, through *listening* in silence and meditation at [place] retreat center and at home, all of life, especially in nature, began to speak to me in a new way. Other *seeds* planted at the *The Well* sprouted and eventually produced fruit in the form of academic research and publications. For example, on one retreat, well past midnight in the private library of the *The Well*, I discovered the many books on

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prayer that would eventually lead to a new line of academic research on prayer that has sustained me for over twenty years. I envision my retreats at the *The Well* as nourishing a *Tree of Life* with different kinds of fruit on its branches—some love fruit is for family, other creative inspirational fruit is for academics, and one particular kind of fruit, perhaps a pomegranate with its many ruby red seeds, developed into the course that I call “listening to the SONG of life.”

These two stories, the pre-tenure mantram story and the post-tenure retreat story, mark a twenty-year period of spiritual renewal, resulting in many changes in my personal and professional lives (see Baesler, 2009 for details). Looking back over the last 20 years since that post-tenure transition period, I see the SONG of life as a gestalt, with different *figures* of the SONG standing against the *foreground* of life. I came to a deeper understanding of myself (SONG as Self) by listening to my feelings, needs, and experiences through a special kind of journaling (see Progoff, 1975). I discovered and incorporated the nonviolent communication teachings of Rosenberg (2005), in particular empathizing with others (SONG as Other), which later folded into the content of a peace class that I have taught for several years. My connection with nature was further revitalized four summers ago when I imagined, and began creating, an edible food forest (Hemenway, 2009). I started climbing trees and digging holes again—my two favorite non-academic activities as a boy growing in Sunnyvale, California. With the help of permaculture teachers like Hemenway, and Fukuoka (1978), I found a new appreciation of, and connection with, trees, earth, and the many wonders of nature (SONG as Nature). Lastly, the growth in my personal prayer life with God (SONG as God) translated into a professional passion for prayer research (Baesler, 2012a). When I finally decided to teach the listening class, these four contexts of my life-world converged into a gestalt that I dubbed “listening to the

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SONG of life.” This two-decade gestation period finally gave birth to the SONG of life which became the organizing framework and foundation for the SONG of life listening course.

### **Birth Pangs**

To paraphrase my dissertation director Judee K. Burgoon, when a door closes, look for an open window, and jump! The door to teaching my proposed graduate level class in listening, with a heavy emphasis on theory and research, began closing two weeks before the beginning of the semester when my department chair informed me that the class was cancelled due to insufficient enrollment. Looking for an open window, I jumped! I secured permission from my department chair to offer the course at the *undergraduate level*. That meant revamping the entire class in less than two weeks. This time pressure provided the creative inspiration needed to change the course emphasis from a graduate theory and research course to an undergraduate course that centers on experiential activities. Within one week of advertising the undergraduate listening class, the enrollment increased, and the new undergraduate listening class was officially born.

### **Narrating the SONG: Assumptions, Description, and Elaboration**

In the following sections, I provide the reader with a sense of what it means to BE in the sixteen-week undergraduate “listening to the SONG of life” class. *I describe and elaborate on listening activities associated with each verse of the SONG of life, and on what I learned from students in class discussions.* The descriptions and elaborations that make up the story of my experience of the SONG of life in the classroom are marked by several assumptions/qualifications. First, the story is necessarily incomplete because it represents the single viewpoint of one instructor (there were 20 other student viewpoints in the classroom). That is, the story is based



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on my selection of the most important/meaningful activities and learnings. Second, the story is partly based on memories of conversations with students in and outside of class during the term. As I began writing the story only a few days after the last class meeting, there are probably many kinds of memorial distortions operative in the selection and narration of classroom events and discussions (Baesler, 1991). Third, I acknowledge times when I've felt the inspiration of the Creative Spirit in writing the story, a more mysterious and intuitive kind of influence that I cannot fully explain. Finally, the story is rooted in my worldview/standpoint as full professor of Communication trained in social science, aligned with the interspiritual mystical tradition (Teasdale, 2001), and imbued with my life-experiences as a middle-aged, Caucasian, husband and father.

The story would be more complete if I could include the voices of students that journeyed with me during the semester, but due to complications with the human subjects committee, I am not ethically able to include excerpts from student journal writings and poems. However, I do have my personal memory and class notes. Using these resources, I reconstruct student voices by paraphrasing their words. As a partial validation of these reconstructed student voices, I obtained human subject's approval to survey former students from the listening course. I invited students via electronic mail to rate an amalgamation of six student excerpts from the present autoethnography. Twenty-five percent (5 of 20) of students completed the survey. In 93 percent of the cases, student excerpts were rated as "consistent with my experience in the class" rather than one of the other choices provided: "partially consistent," "not consistent," or "no recollection of this statement." This evidence suggests that at least some of the reconstructed student voices in this autoethnography align with the experience of students from the course and are not

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simply memory distortions based on instructor bias. *Ultimately, my purpose in narrating this story is to provide readers with teachings, learnings, and insights that may benefit those interested in incorporating one or more verses of the SONG of life into their teaching-research-service.*

**SONG as meditation.** It is Thursday evening, almost 7pm, and students begin to file in for the once a week listening class that begins at 7:10 and ends at 9:50. Some students notice the word *LISTEN* printed in big bold blue letters on the whiteboard. “Welcome, I’m Dr. B...I invite you to ‘drop out’ of your digital world for a few minutes, and ‘drop in’ to your inner world by meditating with me.” Some preliminary instructions on meditation are given (for detailed classroom meditation instructions see Baesler, 2015a), and the whole class sits quietly, holding the word *LISTEN* at their center for a few minutes. Softly I speak, “It’s time to bring your mediation to a close...slowly open your eyes...take a deep breath...stretch if you like...I invite you to share something from your mediation with the class.” Hesitantly, one student raises their hand and speaks...eventually, others join in: “That was the first time I’ve been able to relax all day”, “I’ve never meditated before”, “My thoughts kept jumping around”, and “I wondered what you meant by ‘listen,’ like, maybe that’s the whole point, we need to listen more.” All responses are affirmed and encouraged.

The pattern of meditating on a word/phrase at the beginning of class followed by an invitation to dialogue and listen serves multiple purposes. First, meditation assists students in transitioning from an often full and stressful day to a more relaxed and open classroom learning environment. Second, the skill of focusing and attending to *one thing* transfers to other listening skills such as developing a sense of centered presence, and empathically connecting with a communication partner.

Third, meditating on a word/phrase creates a sense of wonder and curiosity for some

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students, preparing them for class activities and discussion. Finally, sharing meditation experiences provides intellectual fuel for the often unexpected and rewarding dialogues about listening to the SONG of life.

**SONG of the self: Silence and solitude.** What does it mean to “listen below the noise”? I asked students during our second week of class. Students easily identified with the term “noise,” but the entire phrase “listening below the noise” was more difficult to grasp. Students were quick to enumerate external noises—traffic outside of the building, chatter of talk from the hallway, the hum of the projector in the classroom. Students also considered how social media can be *noise*: “I feel like I have to respond to every text right when they get it,” “I need to update my Facebook status at least once a week,” “I have to see if the people I’m following on Twitter have any new posts,” and “I’ve got to check out my friend’s pics on Instagram.” Only then did some students go deeper and talk about internal noises: “Gurgles in my stomach,” “I’m just itching to go on break,” and “Maybe my own random thoughts are a kind of noise.” At this point, I introduced the idea of “listening below the noise” as LeClaire’s (2010) way of expressing being alone, in silence and solitude with the Self. Some students seemed intrigued by the idea; others found the prospect of listening solitude and silence “boring,” “tolerable,” and “terrifying.” Reminding them that this is a course in listening, I asked them to remain open and receptive to LeClaire’s ten-minute audio story. After listening to the story, many student attitudes shifted: “How could she stay silent for a whole 24 hours?”, “Twice monthly?”, “For over twenty years?!” , “ I don’t get how being silent made her more in tune with others?”, and “How can she stay comfortable in her own skin with all those thoughts running around?” Curiosity and wonder in the form of questions now pervaded the atmosphere in

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class—just the type of motivation I needed before inviting them to listen to the silence and solitude within themselves.

I challenged students to carve out some time (not less than one, but no more than six hours) the following week to be silent in a private quiet place without talking to anyone, and without the influence of media (no texting, facebooking, gaming, skypeing, googling, netflixing, etc.)...JUST BE. Journal writings of their experiences revealed that many students could not recall a recent time in their life when they intentionally created a space for silence and solitude. Reactions to the solitude and silence activity varied greatly: some were frustrated with continuous mind chatter that filled the silence, others heard the chatter but in a more detached way, still others experienced their thoughts slowing down, sometimes accompanied by feelings of peace, like “muddy waters becoming clear” (Progoff, 1983). As we discussed their experiences, we discovered different ways to practice the art of “silently listening to the self in solitude”: (a) pausing to recollect oneself in the car upon arriving to school, work, or home, (b) sitting outside--under a covered porch, on a park bench, or on a patch of grass--free from the tether of electronic devices, and (c) clearing a corner of a room, shed, or garage for a private place to be alone. There seems to be seeds of silence and solitude in each of us that, in due season, sprout in a place where we can “listen below the noise”, where we grow to discover our true self, and perhaps in time, where we blossom and bear fruit. In the words of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1949, p. 59, italics added),

The truest *solitude* is not something outside you...it is an abyss opening up in the center of your soul...And this is a country whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. You do not find it by travelling but by *standing*

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*[being] still*...here you discover act without motion, labor that is profound repose, vision in obscurity, and...a fulfillment whose limits extend to infinity.

The class activity of “listening below the noise” begins to orient students in the direction of their interior life, a life so beautifully and poetically described by Merton. The benefits of silence and solitude are available to all who are willing to listen to the Self that speaks below the noise.

**SONG of the self and other: Listening sticks.** I found some sticks made of cedar, birch, and pine in the landscape of *Trinity Pines* in Chesapeake, Virginia, cut them to one-foot lengths, rounded the tips, sanded the body, and rubbed Murphy’s oil soap into the grain. The crafted sticks are the centerpiece of an activity designed to hone the skills of listening to self and other. Typically, sticks like this are called *talking sticks* when used in the context of small group sharing. The person holding the stick is the one that talks; others listen. In the *listening stick* (Lindahl, 2003) version of the traditional talking stick activity, the one with the stick still talks, but with a special listening focus: listening to answer a question, and listening to create a question.

Following is brief description of the listening stick activity (adapted from Lindahl, 2003, see pp. 32-37 for complete instructions). The class is divided into small groups of no more than five arranged in a closed circle. The first person holding the stick voices a question out loud for the group (I provide three starter questions to choose from: When was the last time you had a good belly laugh? When you think about the future, what are you most afraid of? Who do you turn to for support in times of need?), closes their eyes, and silently listens to whatever answer(s) bubbles up inside of them during the next 30 seconds. Next, holder of the listening stick speaks their answer to the question while others in the group listen with their heart without interruption. Lastly, the stick holder closes their eyes a second time, returns to their

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inner world, and listens for a new question to emerge in the next 30 seconds. They speak this question aloud to the group, and pass the listening stick to the next person who repeats the question out loud, closes their eyes in search of an answer, and so on until the last person has taken their turn with the listening stick.

Class discussion of the listening stick activity uncovered several learnings. First, many students could not recall a time in their recent past when someone listened to them with complete attention--without interrupting, commenting, or giving advice--just listening. Students treasured the comfort and freedom of knowing that they could speak without being interrupted, and that they could continue to speak for as long as needed. Second, group members noted a different *quality* to their *other-listening*. Normally, when a group is given a question for discussion in class, group listeners preoccupy themselves with formulating their answer to the question while simultaneously attempting to listen to the speaker, that is, listener attention is divided. But, in the listening stick activity, since the question changes with each speaker's turn, group listeners did not know what question they would be asked until it was their turn to hold the listening stick. Unburdened from the need to rehearse a response to a common question, group listeners were free to give their undivided attention to the speaker. Third, students discovered that the extended response time can add a creative dimension to their *self-listening*. For some, their initial response to the question morphed during the 30 second reflection period into something unanticipated, something richer, fuller, and often more profound than their initial response to the question. We could not determine how to apply this learning to public face to face interaction between strangers and acquaintances where extended pauses like this would be considered a negative violation of social expectations (more than three seconds of silence is often considered an undesirable lapse of time

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in normal conversation; McLaughlin & Cody, 1982). However, we decided that the listening stick activity could be reproduced in the context of a close personal relationship where partners frame the pregnant pauses as birth places for creative ideas. Finally, the nonverbal passing of the “listening stick” from one person to the next in the group, each with a new question to answer and a new question to pose, provided some students with a feeling of group cohesiveness, the sense that they were part of something larger than themselves, perhaps that they were collectively sharing and searching for “communal truth” (Palmer, 1998).

**SONG of the other: Surfing the waves of empathy.** In a talk to members of the *Google* organization, Buddhist teacher Kabat-Zinn (2007) quotes Swami Satchidananda who reportedly said, “You can’t stop the waves, but you can learn to surf!” Waves of life energy are continually emanating from human beings, and we can learn to surf these waves by listening empathically (Rosenberg, n.d., 2005). In class, we learned to surf the waves of energy from another person by having each person in a small group tell a short story (the wave of energy) from the past week followed by other group members empathizing with the feelings and needs<sup>5</sup> in the story (attempting to surf the wave). We adopted the following question to structure empathic responses, “Are you feeling...(guess the feeling), because you are needing...(guess the need)” (Rosenberg, n.d.). Sometimes we catch the wave, experience the exhilaration of popping up on the surf board, and ride the wave of energy into the shore. Other times, we miss the wave or wipe out; but, even in “wiping out,” our attempts to empathize with the other person demonstrate the values of caring and support, thereby sustaining our connection with the waves of life energy flowing from the other person.

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As an east coast university, students resonated with the surfing metaphor as a way to understand the process of empathic listening. Sometimes it is hard to “catch a wave” because the wave is too “...humongous, intense, or otherwise gnarly.” Likewise, it is challenging to catch the feelings and needs of others when their story is embedded in language that blames or criticizes the listener. In such cases, we may first need to empathize with our own feelings and needs before empathizing with another. Developing an expanded feelings and needs literacy for ourselves may enhance our ability to connect with the feelings and needs of others (see Rosenberg, 2005 for developing feelings and needs literacies). I note that some students remained skeptical about empathically surfing waves of energy outside the classroom. “Dr. B, this is cool for class, but my friends aren’t gonna listen like that...if they’re done talking and I don’t say anything right away, they’re gonna think somethings wrong with me!” “Yes,” I replied, “That’s probably going to happen because of the elongated time it takes to: clarify our own feeling and needs, listen and verbalize the feelings and needs of the other, and allow time for feedback from the other to ensure that we accurately heard their feelings and needs.” After empathizing with the student, I ended with a simple metaphor that seemed to satisfy: “like surfing, empathizing just takes practice!”

**Interlude: Voicing our learnings.** We recited learning poems to mark our mid-semester assessment (students also completed weekly journals as part of the mid-semester assessment). To motivate students to meditate, write, and recite a learning poem for the class, we listened to Kay’s (2011) mediated presentation of her poem entitled “B...” which begins with the phrase, “If I had a daughter...” From beginning to end, the class sat in rapt attention as she performed her poem, and when Kay paused at the end of the poem, the class clapped with intensity, and I felt



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wetness beneath my eyes. After performing the poem, Kay shares insights and activities for developing a poetic voice. Students inspired by Kay's poetry and message, were ready to create and share their listening learnings as poetry. A week later, students recited their learning poems. There was a palpable silence in the room while each student in turn gave voice to their personal learnings as poetry. When the last student finished reciting their poem, one student in the class playfully remarked: "Dr. B, don't you have a poem for us?" I replied, "I sure do!" Unfolding a poem from my back pocket, I began to slowly recite, *Wonderings and Hopes of a Professor*.

**SONG of nature: Sunflowers and tubers.** The second half of the term began (student's voice) with the professor placing a few grains of sand and a small yellow flower in the palm of each of our hands. Our instructions were to let our gaze focus on these natural objects resting in the palm of our hand and meditate. After a time, the professor wrote some lines on the whiteboard and then recited William Blake's (1803) *Auguries of Innocence*, "To see the World in a Grain of Sand/And a Heaven in a Wild Flower/Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/And Eternity in an hour." In listening to Blake's words, I began to experience concretely a connection with nature. I thought about how the micro grains of sand resting in my hand also make up the macro world around my hands. Processed sand makes up parts of the classroom we are in, and sand is embedded in the concrete walkways on campus. The poem also inspired me to look with renewed senses at the flower in my hand: smelling the aroma, beholding the golden color, and feeling the velvety petals.

I (professor's voice) have a vivid picture in my mind's eye of a group of students (men and women) adorning their hair with the sunflowers that I had given them as they departed class that evening. They were smiling, laughing, and rearranging the flowers in each other's hair. After this initiation into listening to nature,

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we as a class engaged in many other nature activities (see Cohen, 2007). We offered our exhaled breath (carbon dioxide) to green plants; and in return, consciously breathed in the gift of the plant's life-giving oxygen. We explored the unseen characteristics of small stones through the sense of touch. We sat outside in a natural setting near the classroom with closed eyes and silently named the individual parts of the soundscape surrounding us. We mindfully ate a single raisin in the space of three minutes. Overall, we explored different ways to listen to nature: buzzing insects, singing birds, animal movements and sounds, colorings and textures of plants, brightness and warmth of sunlight, and the "feel" of the earth on our bare feet.

Our discussions of the different nature activities left students with mixed feelings: awkward, perplexed, surprised, peaceful, renewed, happy, and so forth. As one example of these mixed feelings, I recall the story of student that said, "Putting my head into a green plant in a public place was one of the silliest things I have ever done, but after breathing with the plant for about a minute, I found myself feeling inexplicably happy." Another student found connection with nature in a mature Magnolia tree that she had been observing from our second story class window during the first half of the semester. Recounting her story to the class, she said, "I felt drawn to the tree, hugged it like an old friend...I saw a name plate next to the tree, and when I googled the name, it was a professor that had died over a decade ago...I'll always remember the name of that professor and that special Magnolia tree." Another insight from experiencing nature came from "listening to the feel of a stone." One student said: "You can feel things about the stone that you cannot see with the naked eye." This insight was particularly revealing because it experientially demonstrated that we possess latent abilities to listen with more than just our ears and eyes. In the feeling stone activity, there are subtle textures of the stone that we

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cannot see with the naked eye, but that we can know by feeling them with our hands. Cohen (2007) suggests, based on 30 years of leading workshops and extended trips in nature, that there are at least 52 senses that humans are capable of “listening” to (e.g., temperature, heliotropism, balance, proximity, the passage of time, and electromagnetic fields). Further, Cohen believes that we can actively cultivate listening with these senses to enhance our connection with, and understanding of, the natural world.<sup>6</sup>

The nature section of the course ends with handing out a thumb sized, light brown colored, plant tuber to each student. Recall that I handed out small sunflowers to each student at the beginning of the nature section of the course. The tubers and sunflowers came from the *same plant* in my garden known as the Jerusalem artichoke (*Helianthus tuberosus*) or Sunchoke. The Sunchoke flowers from my garden had faded with the cooler temperatures of fall, and I harvested the tubers the day before I handed them out in class. I asked students if they could see the connection between the flowers I handed out two weeks earlier and the plant tubers I gave them today. Gradually, students began to articulate the universal “circle of life” in nature...tuber gives birth to plant, plant to flower, flower to seed, and seed gives birth to tuber, and so on. I could only smile to myself as the discussion slowly filled in the missing pieces of the circle of life that I was sketching on the board as they voiced their ideas. Finally, the circle was complete, and we marveled at what we created based on our experience of deeply listening to nature.

As a follow-up, I challenged students to plant the tuber in a pot, or in the ground, three to four inches deep, and then patiently wait for spring when the tuber put out shoots and grows into a six to eight-foot Sunchoke (or a three to four foot plant if potted). Fall will bring a harvest of flowers to enjoy, and the edible tubers can

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be consumed in the company of friends. This assignment involves *listening* to the needs of the plant, cultivating the soil to ensure the spreading of roots, ensuring ample sunshine by attending to the movement of the sun, providing appropriate moisture by listening to rainfall, and conscious breathing with the plant to continue the connection. In return for listening deeply to nature, the plant will yield beauty, nourishment, and wisdom about the great “circle of life.”

**SONG of God (the divine): Lectio divina.** Written accounts of an individual’s direct experience with God (Sigler, 2014), or more broadly the divine, when validated by a community of believers, is sometimes raised to the status of “sacred scripture” among major world religions. Examples of sacred scriptures in world religions abound, for example: the Hindu *Vedas*, the Jewish *Torah*, the Christian *Bible*, and Islam’s *Quran* (Beverluis, 2000). Listening deeply to sacred scripture, as in prayer and/or meditation, can guide the listener into something akin to the original divine experience that inspired the sacred writing. Deep listening can also connect the listener with a community of believers embodying the meaning and lived experience of the sacred scripture. *One* way to practice this deep listening to sacred scripture, in the Christian tradition, is called *lectio divina* or divine reading.

I borrow from the Benedictine tradition in Catholicism, and retreat notes from Monsignor Chester Michael to provide students with a simple version of *lectio divina* as listening with four R’s: Read, Reflect, Respond, and Rest.<sup>7</sup> Following are instructions I provide students for practicing divine reading/listening. First, select a short text (a page or less) believed to be divinely inspired. Second, slowly *read* the sacred text until inspired by some word or phrase that speaks to the head, heart, and/or gut (Rohr & Ebert, 2001). Stop and *reflect* on the meaning and significance of the word/phrase by slowly repeating the word(s) as if sipping a fine wine, swishing

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the wine in the mouth, absorbing the full flavor. When the word(s) has little or no remaining *taste*, then begin again to slowly read the passage until feeling inspired by another word or phrase. Continue this process for a period of time (in class, 5-10 minutes), and then *respond* to the sacred text by listening for a praxis message. What is the passage calling one to be and/or do? After making at least one concrete resolution, *rest* with the passage. Gently hold the passage in consciousness, let go...relax...rest. For logistical purposes in class, I set a time limit for each of the four steps of *lectio divina*. I invite students to bring closure to a given step before proceeding to the next one. For out of class practice, I encourage students to allot at least a half hour for the entire process without concerning themselves with the time spent on any particular step.

After we practiced deep listening as *lectio divina*, our class discussion revealed that no one had any prior experience with the method. Despite the lack of familiarity, students said that the four steps seemed “natural,” “not difficult,” “easy to flow with.” One student suggested that we read college textbooks this way, slowing sipping on the words to extract the maximum meaning and practical benefit. Other students counter-argued that this would take “way too long.” Still others suggested that most college textbooks are not “divinely inspired,” and therefore do not deserve/require the attentive listening that sacred scripture does! We used the experience of listening to sacred scripture as a spring board to introduce: (a) *passage meditation* (Easwaran, 1993), memorizing a passage of sacred scripture, and slowly, silently, repeating the passage, and (b) *centering prayer* (Keating, 1986), intentionally, silently, and gently repeating a “sacred word.” I encouraged students to try out these other methods of listening to the divine outside of class.

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In student conferences near the end of the course, three students who identified themselves as “not religious” or “atheist” found new connections with the divine. For one student, the new connection was described as “something larger than me, a feeling that there is more to life than just me, that there is a something out there that I can connect with.” For another student, the divine connection was a return to, and reframing of, their family’s religious roots. This student was estranged from their family’s fundamentalist Christian practices, but the experience of *lectio divina* rekindled an interest in approaching the Bible in a new way. They found this new way more “meditative, practical, and restful.” Still another student expressed their new connection with the divine as: “...mysterious, hard to explain, a presence.” Coming from an agnostic, the realization that there is “something there,” and that our languaging of it falls short of the actual experience, is particularly insightful. I’m reminded of the Taoist idea that *the Way* cannot be verbally spoken or communicated to another person through ordinary language. Rather, *the Way* is known through direct experience (Merton, 1965), that is, through listening. Similarly, *lectio divina* provides a way to experience the divine through deep listening. In addition, the majority of students with a religious and/or spiritual faith expressed their connection with the divine in our class discussions and in their journal writings with words like: “renewal, growth, peace, and happiness.” The joy of being able to facilitate these kinds of listening experiences with students is the fulfillment of a life-long dream for me for I too am experiencing renewal, growth, peace, and happiness.

**Ending the class SONG: Beginning the life SONG.** We ended the term the same way we marked the middle of the term, by voicing our listening learnings through poetry. My face felt wet with tears welling up on more than one occasion as I listened to the heart felt poems that conveyed the breadth and depth of students

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listening to the SONG of life throughout the semester. In their individual student conferences, students said things like: "...this has been a life-changing experience for me," "I will actually use what I learned," "I learned more in this class than in any of my other communication classes," "I hope you offer this again because my friends want to take it..." I felt a sense of fulfillment in what we accomplished together. I reflected on the semester as well, bringing closure to the last class by reading my poem, *Dr. B. Dreaming*. Students lingered afterward, we talked some, and more importantly we *listened to OUR SONG of life*.

**Extending the SONG: Future research.** "Listening to the SONG of life" integrates pieces of my life into a holistic picture that brings me joy and pleasure in recalling and writing the story. This is the "auto" part of autoethnography. When I as author share the story with colleagues, students, and friends, connecting my story with their story, the "ethnography" part of autoethnography is emphasized. For example, anecdotal feedback from an earlier version of this autoethnography delivered at the *International Listening Association's* annual convention (Baesler, 2015b) indicates that several academics are interested in incorporating some of the ideas from "listening to the SONG of life" into their listening courses. To extend the potential impact of this narrative beyond the scope of the conference, in the next section, I invite readers to connect with the ideas in the autoethnography by considering possibilities for future research that center around issues of validity and assessment.<sup>8</sup>

There are several options for validating the veracity of autoethnographies that emphasize teaching-learning in a classroom context like the present narrative. One option involves students (instead of teacher as author, or reviewers as critics) judging the accuracy of autoethnographic claims. For example, in the present

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autoethnography, I surveyed former student's opinions of six reconstructed student excerpts (see previous section "Narrating the Song") to obtain a partial validation of the story. Additional ideas for future research to bolster the validity of the story might include exit interviews, or surveys, of students immediately after grades are posted. Questions such as the following might be asked: Is the instructor's descriptive story of the course synchronous with your perceptions as a student in the course? Are instructor paraphrases of student voices accurate? Has anything especially important from class discussions been left out of the story? Another option for enhancing the veracity of the story is to use the narrative paradigm (Fisher, 1989) as an evaluative lens for the autoethnography. Fisher's narrative paradigm provides two criteria for evaluating the rhetorical persuasiveness of a story: narrative coherence (does the story hang together?) and narrative fidelity (does the story ring true with everyday life?). To test the rhetorical efficacy of an autoethnography, students upon completing the course could read the autoethnography and complete survey items to measure the coherence and fidelity (see Baesler, 1995 for items) of the story. Finally, future research might involve instructor and students co-authoring an autoethnography of their learning experiences throughout the term. Co-authoring increases the validity of the story through the dialogue of multiple voices. This integration of instructor and student perspectives allows for a living document to emerge over the course of time through, for example, an on-line *Wiki* that includes student and instructor postings, weekly summaries, and middle and end of term assessments. In the next section, a more quantitative approach is described to assess student competencies in "listening to the SONG of life."

Quantitatively, listening competency could be assessed by students completing a self-assessment of their competencies in the four listening contexts of



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SONG the first day of class and then compare them with assessments completed the last day of class (a preliminary assessment measure is available from the Author upon request). A more ambitious effort might include self *and other* (a friend or family member) assessments of student listening competency across the listening contexts to provide an outside evaluator's perspective. Another study might integrate the unique aspects of listening to the SONG of life with existing measures of listening like the listening styles profile (Watson, Barker, & Weaver, 1995), and then compare measures to assess predictive validity. Finally, the types of listening skills associated with each verse of the SONG of life could be more systematically mapped into "process components, descriptors, and listening behaviors," and then organized into skill levels as exemplified in Thompson, Leintz, Nevers, and Witkowski's (2010, pp. 270, 275) listening criteria matrix in their integrative listening model.

### **Deepening the SONG**

"Listening to the SONG of life" is a new type of listening course that connects students with the whole of life by learning to listen within and between the four contexts of self, others, nature, and the divine. In this final section, I develop visual and sonic metaphors to deepen our understanding of "listening to the SONG of life."

Imagine the listening contexts as four circles arranged like the rings of a dart board: the smallest circle occupies the center (the bull's eye), the next largest circle surrounds this center, the third circle surrounds the second, and the largest circle surrounds all the others (like the outer rim of the dart board). The inner most circle represents listening to the self, and involves being centered, open and aware of one's thoughts, emotions, and needs. This self-awareness expands to include a receptive awareness of other human beings in the circle of *other* that surrounds the center of *self*. Listening to others includes listening to their verbal and nonverbal

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messages, and listening to their emotions and needs via compassionate empathy. The circle of *other* expands to include non-human *others* in the natural world of the third circle such as: micro-organisms, insects, animals, plants, trees, rocks and minerals, and celestial bodies. Human beings exist in this context of nature, and our relationship with nature includes listening.<sup>9</sup> Finally, our consciousness of the natural world can expand to include an awareness of the supernatural and/or supraempirical world. This fourth circle, subsuming all of the others, I call the *divine* circle (represented as “G” for God in the acronym SONG). I encourage students to adopt their own naming for this circle depending on their particular religious/spiritual/philosophical orientation.

Lastly, we move from the visual metaphor of interrelated circles to a sonic metaphor of musical strings to add further depth to our understanding of the “listening to the SONG of life.” Consider the four listening circles as different strings on a ukulele (a musical instrument that looks like a small four stringed guitar). Each string produces a unique tone when plucked. So too, listening to a particular circle in the SONG of life produces a unique tone. When the musician uses their finger(s) to push two or more strings against the fretboard of the ukulele and strums across the strings, a blended tone or chord is produced. So too, when we listen to two or more tones in the SONG of life, we can hear a blended, and often richer, chord of life. As we cultivate listening to multiple tones in the SONG of life, we hear an arrangement or sequence of chords known as a song. There are many such songs in the greater SONG of life that can be experienced if we develop the capacity to consciously listen to them.

In conclusion, my hope is that we can open spaces in our lives to cultivate an ability to listen to the many songs of life within and among the four circles of life:

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songs of sowing, reaping, dancing, loving...songs that help us cope with fear, hate, disease, destruction, and death...and songs of courage, hope, resilience, transformation, and renewal. From our personal centeredness in the greater SONG of life, I hope that we can teach our students how to listen more intentionally, mindfully, and compassionately to the harmonies, melodies, chants, and hip hop beats that play among the four circles of the SONG of life. May those that endeavor to teach and learn how to listen to the SONG of life experience the beauty, vastness, and joy of the great SONG of life.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I use the term “divine” rather than “God” in the listening course because some students have negative conditioning associated with the word “God” while the term “divine” opens up possibilities for discussing a broader range of spiritual ideas. However, the SONG acronym for the course would not “sound as pleasing” if I used a “D” for divine (the *SOND* of life) instead of a “G” for God (the *SONG* of life); thus I retain the “G” in the acronym SONG for rhetorical purposes. Further, when discussing the “divine” in class, students meditate on the word “divine,” and then write about what *they believe is divine for them* whether that be God, Ultimate Reality, Divine Light, Higher Self, Ground of Being, Nature, or any of the names of God associated with world religions (Keating, 1993), or humanistic/philosophical values of the highest sense like Truth, Love, and/or Beauty.

Moreover, there are those uncomfortable with conceptualizing “listening to the divine or nature” as part of the field of “human communication”; but, if at least one human being is involved in the process of listening, then there is some “human communicative” element in the listening system. A similar argument is found in the body of research that argues...[content omitted to protect anonymity]...(see Baesler, 2003, 2012b)...Finally, listening to the divine and nature as a part of “human communication” is supported by the words of the late Bud Goodall (1996, p. 94), “Communication is the primary experiential source of all lived and imagined connections to all life forms and forces as well as to how, why, and what we know about them.” Part of establishing a lived/imagined connection with nature and the divine as “life forms and forces” involves listening deeply to discover the “how, why, and what we know about them.”

<sup>2</sup> I realize that my personal network is very limited when compared to the national data based samples of listening curricula in U.S. colleges, but my personal network does represent a limited set of real people, and so I advance the claim about the lack of development of listening curricula as *informed speculation* with one caveat. By “development of listening curricula” I mean a *series of listening courses* introducing students to the listening literature (theory and research) and providing opportunities to develop listening competencies (including practice, feedback, and further practice until a predetermined level of listening competency is achieved), and *at least* one additional listening course at the intermediate or advanced level that builds on the knowledge and skills learned in the introductory course. Finally, one notable exception to the lack of development in listening curricula is the well-developed listening curriculum called the *Integrative Listening Model* which is taught across the curriculum at Alverno College. This listening curriculum focuses on receiving, constructing meaning, and responding to verbal/nonverbal messages (Thompson, Leintz, Nevers, & Witkowski, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> A google search in December of 2015 for the phrase “SONG as self, others, nature, and God” revealed one anonymous Facebook webpage with the identical phrase (Facebook, n.d.); thus, I cannot claim to be the first to use this acronym in these four listening contexts.

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<sup>4</sup> The methodological rationale for using autoethnography as *story* to describe this new approach to teaching the listening course as a SONG of life is embedded in two assumptions. First, language is a primary medium by which we are conscious, understand the world, and communicate our learnings to others in *stories* (Coles, 1990). Second, there are many “signs” in the teacher/student learning context that, when read with the assistance of the imagination, can open up new understandings of the relationship between teacher and student in the ongoing *story* of life (Goodall, 1996). These assumptions, based on the work of Coles and Goodall, are developed in more detail in Baesler (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Rosenberg references the work of Chilean economist Max-Neef (1992) who describes a human matrix of needs and satisfiers that are culturally and historically universal. Needs are categorized as a combination of axiological (e.g., subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, creation) and existential (e.g., being, having, doing, and interacting) criteria. For instance, the “protection BY interacting” cell in the human matrix of needs is described as a “Living space, social environment, dwelling” while the “understanding BY doing” cell is described with as “Investigate, study, experiment, educate, analyse [*sic*], meditate” (Max-Neef, p. 206).

<sup>6</sup> Since teaching the listening class for the first time in 2014, I discovered and have incorporated ideas from the naturalist Joseph Cornell (2015) who frames “listening to nature” as a sequence of *flow learning* in which one: (a) awakens enthusiasm, (b) focuses attention, (c) offers direct experience, and (d) shares inspiration.

<sup>7</sup> Hall (1998) provides a readable introduction to the general method of *lectio divina* with a special emphasis on the contemplative listening dimension of the experience.

<sup>8</sup> Different criteria are to assess autoethnography in the field of communication (e.g., Ellis, 2004; Pelias, 2004; Frenztz, 2008; Chang & Boyd, 2011; Gingrich-Philbrook, 2013; Bochner, 2014). I hold four criteria in particular as a personal standard. Autoethnographies that I narrate should be: (a) rooted in the personal experience of the author (auto) and in the lives of others (ethnography), (b) connected with a stream of ideas in scholarship and in the life-world, (c) engaging to readers in ways that facilitate mindful reflection and life-enhancing praxis, and (d) grounded in the human mystery of the interconnections between mind, body, and spirit. Mirroring this criteria, the present autoethnography fulfills, at least to some degree, each of these criterion: (a) the story of “listening to the SONG of life” is rooted in my teaching experience as a professor and in the lives of my students, (b) there are connections in the story to formal (e.g., scholarly journals and books) and informal sources (e.g., nonacademic books and digital resources), (c) the verses of “listening to the SONG of life” organize the content of the story as a song, and the description of the listening activities, and student responses to them, may inspire teachers to reflect and consider options for enhancing learning in their own listening courses, and (d) the acronym SONG is a holistic representation of the interconnections of listening to life in the contexts of self, others, nature, and the divine.

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<sup>9</sup> Most indigenous peoples believe that we can communicate with the natural world (see Beversluis, 2000). For instance, one Lakota prayer suggests that humans can hear the Spirit in the wind of nature: "O Great Spirit, *whose voice I hear in the winds* and whose breath gives life to all the world, *hear me.*" (Easwaran, 1982, p. 162, italics added). In the field of Communication, Bud Goodall claims that we can communicate with the natural world (refer to quote at end of Endnote 1). Even in the physical sciences, scientists like George Washington Carver (best known for developing 199 peanut products) suggest that we can listen to the *language of nature*: "More and more as we come closer and closer in touch with nature...are we able to see the Divine and are therefore fitted to interpret correctly the various *languages spoken by all forms of nature* about us" (Kremer, 1987, p.127, italics added). Finally, eco-psychologist Michael Cohen (2007) writes about our ability to connect with the natural world through over 50 *human senses*. In short, indigenous peoples, communication scholars, scientists, and eco-psychologists provide evidence of varying kinds that humans have the capacity to listen to nature.

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