

# Learning Through Listening: Creating Open Spaces for Interdisciplinary Learning

## 1. Introduction

Inspired by the HEFCE Catalyst project at Keele University, 'Unmaking Single Perspectives: A Listening Project' (The Listening Project), which explored innovative pedagogies to develop one-to-one communication skills, with a view to enhancing interdisciplinary working, and education for sustainability.

The main project output has been a series of workshops which aimed to bring students from different disciplines together. Originally we worked with Postgraduate students but ultimately we included all students, and a small number of staff also attended some of the workshops, working alongside and on an equal footing with students. This conference workshop shares some of the activity and knowledge from the project and provides a taster of some of the main activities used in our workshops in order for participants to be able to adapt them for their own uses.

### Workshop delivered by:

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## 2. The Workshop Space

The learning space is an important aspect of all our workshops. In order to develop the environment to foster a culture of open dialogue everyone is seated in a circle, equally able to see each other, on equal levels, in equal positioning. There is no use of anything that would distract from the focus on direct face-to-face communications, for this reason we do not use PowerPoint. The emphasis is on an environment that feels equally inclusive for everyone and provides a safe space for dialogue.

## 3. Why one-to-one communication?

Within higher education, outside of the professional disciplines, 'communication', a key employability skill, often just focuses on given presentations or debating – communication focused around *transmission* of messages. This project aimed to shift the emphasis of communication skills training to what we can learn from others, and how to engage with and learn from those with perspectives different to our own. One-to-one conversation dominates the communication in our personal and professional lives, and yet it rarely features in education as an explicit area of development. Improved communication, listening, and respect for others with views different to our own is key to interdisciplinary working, as well as a key attribute underpinning the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. A more sustainable society requires us to listen to different, and frequently unheard voices, and to work in partnership with different parties, hence developing attributes of respectful, two-way communication is a key element of Education for Sustainable Development.

## 4. What we mean by respectful, two-way conversation

*'Meaningful interaction and exchange between people ... who come together through various kinds of conversations or activities with a view to increased understanding.'*

Bohm, D., in Sleep and Omer (2013)

Defined as 'Open Dialogue' this type of conversation requires both conversation participants to recognise certain type of behaviour and conditions, these form the basis of the first activity.

## 5. Activities

### Activity 1: Open Dialogue Ground Rules (from our project activity cards – A5 size)

OPEN DIALOGUE ACTIVITY: GROUND RULES
What conditions/attitudes do you think are important in order for two people to have a meaningful conversation - one that brings them together and allows for an open exchange of views?  E.G. not being judgemental.

Activity completed in small groups through conversation - recording collaboratively agreed 'ground rules' on flipchart paper. Group feedback.

### **Activity Summary: the Listening Project list of ground rules (from project activity card)**

OPEN DIALOGUE ACTIVITY: SUMMARY
<p><b>Conditions that support 'meaningful' conversation</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Respect – genuinely listening and considering your responses</li><li>2. Openness - no personal agenda, honest responses</li><li>3. Equality – non-judgmental, tolerant</li><li>4. Empathy – put yourself in the other persons shoes</li><li>5. Curiosity – fuels enthusiasm to explore a topic and <b>Cognitive Effort</b> – giving the speaker your full attention</li></ol>

### **Benefits of Open Dialogue**

- Helps avoid misunderstandings
- Enriches knowledge
- Informs decisions and solutions
- Improves relationships
- Helps build rapport between individuals

## Activity 2: Perspectives – where does our knowledge come from?

**Perspectives Activity:  
Where does our knowledge about the world come from?**

Think about who you are, what experiences and people have shaped the views, knowledge and values important to you today.

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Talk about these influences in small groups and create a list.

Activity completed initially individually and then discussed in pairs. Participants can decide how honest they want to be in their discussions having reflected honestly individually.

**Literature quote shared** - Each of us views the world through different lenses ...

*“These lenses are constructed in our contexts - produced collectively in social interactions (in families, education, the media, religion, the government)”...*

*They “determine what we see as real, ideal, true, good and bad.”*

[Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry](#) (OSDE) – safe spaces for dialogue

### **Perspectives Activity Summary**

**Perspectives Summary**

1. Everyone has a valid and unique set of experiences and knowledge to share
2. Everyone’s views have a personal bias
3. Everyone’s knowledge is partial, therefore we can learn by listening to each other

Being open to new and different perspectives, views very different to our own, represents a significant opportunity to learn and broaden our understanding of different topics. Working across the disciplines enhances the opportunity to appreciate different areas of expertise and forge relationships and understanding that develop a wider appreciation of world challenges and underpin team work, collaboration and problem solving in the future – for employability and transferable skills.

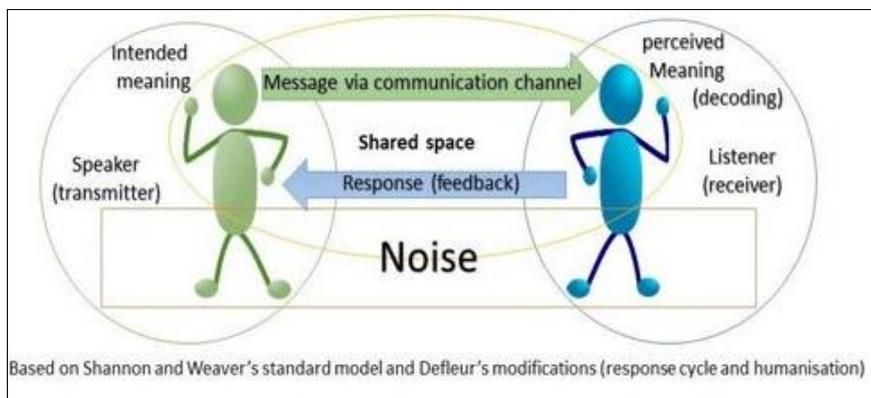
### **Activity 3: Active Listening**

Listening does not just happen (that is the mechanics of hearing) listening involves an active choice to engage, it requires cognitive effort to listen well enough to be able to interpret what is heard and understand the message accurately.

*“Most often we know what we want to say and wait our turn to say it. We are closed to hearing the unexpected from others, cutting ourselves off from honest exchanges that leave us enlightened and inspired”*  
William Isaacs, [The Art of Dialogue](#) (2001)

### **A Basic Model of Communications**

Misunderstandings often arise in conversational interaction because we are easily distracted, ‘Noise’ might mean physical noise but the term is also representative of any other interference that creates a barrier to the listening process that causes the listener (and sometimes the speaker) to lose focus.



**Activity 3: What stops us Listening? Identify Barriers or ‘Noise’ that interferes with listening and therefore the correct decoding of a message**

**Active Listening: Barriers to listening**

**What stops us listening?**

There many distractions, internal and external that make it difficult for us to stay focused on listening, physical noise is just one example.

- What often distracts you from really listening?
- Have a conversation (pairs or group) about what you think the main distractions are (‘noise’) that cause us to lose focus and stop listening.

### **Listening well (Active Listening) Summary**

- Avoid making pre-judgements about the speaker or message
- Stay focussed on the speaker the whole time
- Be patient - don't interrupt or jump to conclusions
- Observe non-verbal clues that support words – expression, gestures and body language
- Pay attention to the way things are said – tone, pitch, volume and gaps

## Activity 4: Sustainable Development: What is it?

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Brundtland Report, '[Our Common Future](#)' (1987)

### Contains two key concepts:

- Needs – in particular the basics dictating the difference between life and death – poverty and starvation
- Limitations – the ability of the environment to keep meeting human demands now and in the future.

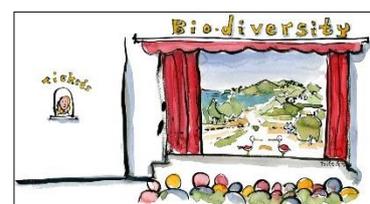
(E.g. use of finite resources, responsible consumption and waste management, managing sustainable food production, impact on other life and biodiversity).

### Sustainable Development: why it's important

- Relates to all of us, in our personal and professional lives.
- Covers many challenges at all levels (local, national and global).
- We all know something about it and have our views but we can become more informed by exploring and learning from others.
- Developing a greater awareness of the problems and issues helps inform our decisions in the future.
- Collaborating and co-operating within teams that bring different skills and perspectives together is essential if we are to solve the big problems that relate to sustainability now and in the future.

### A Conversation to Raise Awareness of Sustainability

Improved communication, listening, and respect for others with views different to our own is key to interdisciplinary working, as well as a key attribute underpinning the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. A more sustainable society requires us to listen to different, and frequently unheard voices, and to work in partnership with different parties, hence developing attributes of respectful, two-way communication is a key element of Education for Sustainable Development. For student workshops images linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals were used as a catalyst to conversation, these resources (which will be released under Creative Commons license) were showcased at this event.



## 6. Learn More

Project website: <https://www.keele.ac.uk/listeningproject/>

Project blog: <https://usplistingproject.wordpress.com/>

All project resources will be shared on the website, they will be made available during June 2018

The Activity Cards shown, and the workshop illustrated here, will be useful to anyone wanting to make use of single or series of the activities we have used to develop open dialogue and active listening skills.

## 7. Literature Relating to Dialogue

Bohm, D, Factor, D, and Garrett, P, (1991) Dialogue - A Proposal (reproduced in full online <https://www.albany.edu/cpr/gf/resources/Dialogue-3.htm> )

Isaacs, W., 1999. *Dialogue and the art of thinking together*. New York: Doubleday.

Shannon, C. E., & Weaver, W. (1949). *The mathematical theory of communication*. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press

Sleap, F. and Omer, S., 2013. *Dialogue Theories*. London: Dialogue Society.

Thompson, K., Leintz, P., Nevers, B., & Witkowski, S., 2004. *The integrative listening model: An approach to teaching and learning listening*. Journal of General Education, 2004,