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Teaching Listening in the Classroom

Title: From Talking Stick to Listening Stick:
A Variation on an Ancient Practice.

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Grade level: The listening stick activity is focused on undergraduates enrolled in an introductory listening course, but the activity may be adapted to other courses that have a listening component, and to any age in the lifespan from pre-kindergarten through elderhood.

Keywords: Listening stick, Talking Stick, Council, Circle, Tallis

Content

Course title: The Listening Stick Activity has been Field Tested in:
(1) the *Listening to the SONG of Life* undergraduate course by the author, and
(2) in *Sacred Listening* retreats with adults by Kay Lindahl (2003).

Course level: Undergraduate, but may also be applied in graduate courses.

Goals:

The primary goal is to introduce students to the concept, experience, and application of the listening stick activity within the context of an undergraduate listening course. Students participate in a group listening stick activity that cultivates experiences of first person attention, focus, and awareness of self and others' feelings and needs for the purpose of self-discovery and building small group cohesiveness. As a secondary goal, students learn how to apply the listening stick activity to interpersonal and small group situations in school, work,

social, and spiritual settings for a variety of purposes including relationship building, problem-solving and decision-making.

Type / Aspect of listening in focus:

Using the listening stick in small groups in the classroom combines *self- and other-focused listening*. While holding the listening stick, students learn to listen more deeply to their own thoughts and intuitions before speaking, and when others are holding the listening stick, students learn to gift the speaker with their personal presence and attention.

Description:

In the first part of this description, background about the talking stick is provided as a conceptual framework for understanding the listening stick activity.

The *talking* stick (or talking piece) is historically rooted in the practices of Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island (Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009). The use of the talking stick as part the practice of sitting in council is described succinctly by Beyer (2016, p. 7) where:

...people sit in a circle and pass around what is called a talking stick. Whoever holds the talking stick gets to speak, and everybody listens. There are no interruptions, no questions, no challenges, no comments. People speak one at a time, in turn, honestly from their hearts, and they listen devoutly with their hearts to each person who speaks.

Sitting in council probably derives from the more ancient practice of *calling the circle*, or simply sitting in circle, as our ancestors did when finding a place around the circle of the first fires, each person receiving warmth and food while listening to each other's stories (Baldwin,

1998). Evidence of circle symbols are prevalent in the Paleolithic and Mesolithic periods (Baldwin), but it is not known when or why contemporary Indigenous peoples began using talking pieces as a way to structure the communication within the circle. Perhaps, as the number of individuals around the circle grew, a few dominant voices emerged, creating an imbalance in the circle of ideas. To restore balance, a wise person may have suggested passing around a sacred symbol (e.g., a stone, stick, or shell) to indicate the person's right to use the power of speech, and the concurrent responsibility of others to listen.

Each talking stick is uniquely symbolic of the person who crafted it. For instance, a talking stick made from the wood of a pine tree might represent peace, rabbit fur wrapped around part of the talking stick might represent a good listener because rabbits have large ears, and blue beads that dangle from the end of the talking stick could represent understanding (Avant, 2017). Even though talking sticks may be adorned with different symbols, all talking sticks used in council are the bearer of the speaker's sacred words. The talking stick is "...for free speech and assures the speaker that he [she] has the freedom and power to say what is in his [her] heart without fear of reprisal or humiliation" (Locust, 1997). According to Cherokee-Navajo Cronbaugh (2010), and based on descriptions of training sessions for sitting in council (Ojai, 2017), the talking stick can serve a variety of communicative functions such as: establishing relational agreements, settling disputes, completing unfinished business, brainstorming creative ideas, achieving group consensus, and building cohesiveness.

In this second part of the description section, the relationship between the talking and listening sticks is explained, and the specific learning goals of the listening stick activity is detailed.

Lindahl (2003) originally coined the phrase *listening stick* and describes the listening stick activity as a variation of the ancient practice of the using the talking stick. A review of the Communication literature for the topic “listening stick” revealed a single article describing the use of a talking stick as part of a group *listening activity* (Hyde, 1993). No citations were found for title searches using the phrase “listening stick” for the database *Communication and Mass Media Complete* and the search engine *Google Scholar*.

Repurposing the talking stick as a listening stick does not change the basic *function* of the stick as an indicator of who is talking in the context of a small group seated in a circle. However, the change in nomenclature from *talking* stick to *listening* stick dramatically shifts the symbolic intention in using the stick. The intent of the talking stick is the creation of speech for the benefit of listeners while the intent of the listening stick is two-fold. First, as holder of the listening stick, the focus of attention is on listening to the stream of ideas emerging in the speaker’s consciousness, and on discerning which ideas to share for the benefit of the group. Second, when others in the group are holding the listening stick, the focus of attention is on listening to them with heart-felt empathy.

Both the talking stick and the listening stick have value in the small group communication process; but, in a listening course, the focus of learning is on the listening stick as a physical object representing the symbolic intention to listen more deeply to self and others. Perhaps the two sticks could be integrated into a third stick, a blending of energies/forces like that of the Taoist *taijitu* or the yin-yang symbol. This dual awareness might be represented by a new symbol which I name *tallis* (“tal” for talk, and “lis” for listening). However, the dynamics and implications of such an integration are beyond the scope of the present paper.

The preparation, procedures, and process of teaching/learning the listening stick activity, as described in the next section, is part of an undergraduate listening course taught in the department of Communication and Theatre Arts at a mid-Atlantic university in the U.S. by the author. The listening course is entitled, *Listening to the SONG of Life* (Baesler, 2017) where SONG is an acronym representing listening to self, others, nature, and God or the divine. The listening stick activity is one of several activities introduced in the section of the course on *listening to others* which sequentially follows the section on *listening to self*.

The intention of introducing the listening stick activity in the listening course is to facilitate a deeper, more heart-focused experience of listening to self (when one is holding the listening stick) and listening to others' (when others hold the listening stick) feelings and needs. The heart-focused emphasis is based on Rosenberg's (2005) philosophy to make life more wonderful through a process of *nonviolent communication* that includes: making behavioral and non-judgmental observations, identifying feelings and needs, making a positive request to meet those needs, and empathy.

Preparation and Procedures:

Instructor Experience. Before instructors introduce the listening stick activity to students in their listening class, I recommend that they craft and use their own listening stick (see: <https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/history/events/talking-stick-and-feather-indigenous-tools-hold-sacred-power-of-free-speech/>). Alternatively, instructors can use any meaningful physical object to serve as a listening stick such as a: feather, stone, shell, candle, or in a pinch, even a pen or dry erase marker will do. Resources for practicing the listening/talking stick activity in small groups include: the instructions that follow in this article, Lindahl's

(2003) *Practicing the sacred art of listening*, Baldwin's (1998) *Calling the circle*, and Berg's (2013) *The power of listening*.

When to Introduce the Listening Stick Activity. While the listening stick can be introduced at the beginning of the listening class as an ice breaker, I recommend introducing the activity sometime later in the course after student introductions. The listening stick activity can deepen existing relationships, and develop a greater sense of group and class cohesiveness. Before providing instructions on the practice of the listening stick activity in class, I narrate two short stories about my relationship with trees, and how I crafted my first listening sticks.

The Gift of Trees. I love trees. When tall enough to pull myself onto the trunk of an almond tree, I climbed up betwixt three limbs that came together in a kind of seat and looked in awe over the landscape of walnut, grapefruit, pomegranate, and peach trees in the family backyard in Sunnyvale, California. Now, dwelling on a half-acre in Chesapeake, Virginia with my family, I listen to the trees tell me about the cycle of life: smelling the nectar of apricot blossoms in spring, sitting beneath the shaded branches of the magnolia in the heat of summer, enjoying the sweet taste of succulent brown figs in late August, sitting against the trunk of a maple while watching leaves cascade in the cool of fall, and contemplating the naked branches of a young pecan in the stillness of winter. Trees bring me happiness and peace. Trees also teach many other lessons about life if we listen: rooted in the earth, we are rooted in our ancestors, branches reaching for the sun, we reach for our goals, standing together in a grove, we stand together as family. Among the many gifts trees provide, they also gift us with their very substance in the form of wood that, with some imagination and artistry, can become a listening stick for cultivating and fortifying our personal relationships.

Crafting and Introducing the Listening Stick Activity. In surveying our property after a northeastern storm, I spied some fallen branches. After gathering branches of cedar, birch, maple, and pine, I trimmed them to one foot lengths, lightly sanded them, and rubbed them with oil to accent the grain. These crafted sticks [here I hold them up for the class to see] are the centerpiece of a listening stick activity that enhances our ability to listen to ourselves and each other. It is important not to become too fixated on finding and crafting the “perfect listening stick” and thus lose sight of the purpose of the listening stick.

The indigenous peoples of *Turtle Island* use these *talking sticks* in tribal council, but we will call them *listening sticks* and use them in small group sharing in the classroom. 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 before speaking: listening as an intuitive response to a question, and listening to create a question. Next, I chronologically outline the steps of the listening stick activity.

Instructions for the Listening Stick Activity. These instructions are adapted from Lindahl (2003, see pp. 32-37 for complete instructions; 2017), and revised based on correspondence with Lindahl (personal communication March 22, 2017) and re-testing the procedure with the fall of 2017 listening class. The class is divided into small groups of three to five students (depending on class size) arranged in a close closed circle. I let each group choose one listening stick from the collection of listening sticks I crafted. Instructors can substitute any meaningful object for the listening sticks such as a feathers, candles, shells, or stones (even a dry erase marker will do in a pinch).

(1) The first person to hold the listening stick voices the question that I voice at the end of my modeling activity (see number 6 below). Alternatively, students can make up their own question. Or, if they feel the need to choose some other question, one could provide examples of starter questions such as: (a) when was the last time you had a good belly laugh? (b) when you think about the future, what are you most afraid of? and (c) who do you turn to for support in times of need? I encourage students to use my modeled question instead of choosing from a list of questions because the act of choosing engages their logical/linear left-brain, and one purpose of the activity is to encourage a deeper, more intuitive right-brain response (Lindahl, personal communication, March 22, 2017).

(2) I direct students to close their eyes, and silently listen to whatever content bubbles up inside of them during the next thirty seconds. I do not encourage anyone to keep time, but recommend “about thirty seconds.” I’ve found that time-keeping, by the speaker or other group members, distracts from the listening focus of the activity. Additionally, students are encouraged to listen the entire thirty seconds and simply watch their thoughts emerge.

(3) Next, the holder of the listening stick speaks from the heart, trusting their intuition, that whatever they say will be beneficial for the group to hear. As they speak, others in the group listen with heart-felt attention without interruption.

(4) Next, the stick holder closes their eyes a second time, returns to their inner world, and listens for a *new question* to emerge for another thirty seconds. I instruct students to give voice to the *last* question that emerges during their thirty second reflection rather

than attempt to choose the “best” of many questions that may emerge during the thirty seconds. Committing oneself to give voice to the last question encourages students to trust their intuition, their deep knowing, by believing that the last question will provide whatever the group needs to hear rather than attempting to logically analyze which is the best question (Kay Lindahl, personal communication, March 22, 2017).

(5) Lastly, the person holding the listening stick passes it to the next person along the rim of the circle who repeats the new question out loud, closes their eyes in search of a response for thirty seconds, speaks their response to the group, closes their eyes in search of a new question for another thirty seconds, speaks the new question to the group, and passes the listening stick to the next person...and so on until the last person has taken their turn with the listening stick.

(6) I model steps 1-4 for students by holding the listening stick and asking students to provide a question for me. I close my eyes and *verbalize for the class what I am thinking* in my attempt to intuitively respond to the question, including my struggle to create a meaningful response. I open my eyes and speak my response. Returning to the inner world, I verbalize my ruminations and formulate a new question. With opened eyes, I give voice to the last question that I reflected on. *My last question becomes the group’s first question to respond to.* This modeling process, especially when students hear me struggle with formulating a response to the question, reduces some of the anxiety associated with *how* to practice the listening stick activity.

(7) Depending on the size of the groups, 40-60 minutes may be allotted for the activity, including a post listening period to discuss their experience, feelings, and learnings as

a group, and then as a class. If some groups complete one revolution around the circle, I encourage them to continue until time is called. For example, in three-person groups, an instructor might plan on 15-20 minutes for the listening stick activity, 10-15 minutes to process in groups, and 10-15 minutes for class discussion.

Tips and Debriefing:

After completing the listening activity, I encourage students to respond to a series of questions based on Lindahl's (2003) suggestions: What was it like for you? What did you notice about your listening when listening to others...when listening to yourself? What did you observe about the process? Any patterns or new questions emerge? Next, I invite students to reflect what they have written, record something they learned in their listening journal, share one of their learnings in their small group, and then discuss as a class.

Some students have much to share with each other after several periods of quiet attentive listening. They appear eager to comment, question, and share their experiences. Other students appear more influenced by the listening activity and are more receptive/reflective in their communication with group members. After the *in-group* sharing, I ask each group to choose one learning from their group to share with the class. As a class, we listen to the most important learning from each group, pausing between groups for reflection, questions, and discussion. Unless a question is directed to me, I maintain the role of facilitator for these *inter-group* discussions. Lastly, we bring together the threads of the class discussion by summarizing what we learned. I record key words/symbols on the white board as students summarize their learnings about the listening stick activity. Together we create an acronym for the written symbols on the board to represent our collective learnings. This concludes the

debriefing part of the listening activity. In the next section, I describe some of the learning themes from past class discussions; and, where appropriate, I provide further guidance for using the listening activity.

First, many students cannot recall a time when another person listened to them without interruption, comment, or questioning. Students find a sense of comfort and freedom in knowing that they can speak as long as needed without interruption. Most daily interactions in our digital-techno oriented culture are brief (e.g., texting, Twitter tweets, and Facebook “likes”), and carving out extended face-to-face time with another person(s) is often a challenge.

In addition to the sense of comfort and freedom that extended interaction time can afford, the structure of the listening stick activity serves as an equalizer for group interaction. Normally dominant speakers in the group are now asked to reflect and listen, speaking only when holding the listening stick. At first, dominant speakers find this structure frustrating, but most of them begin to see the benefits of listening silently to others as the process unfolds. In contrast, normally reticent students now have a designated time to speak freely without fear of being interrupted. Reticent students enjoy a greater sense of power in knowing that they are guaranteed a time to speak, and that they do not need to compete or interrupt someone in order to obtain a speaking turn. In their journal writings, students report that implementing the listening stick activity in their daily life creates more equality between interaction partners (e.g., providing time/space for a shy friend to disclose more about their life) and small group members (e.g., curbing the talk time of dominant speakers in a study group).

Another issue that students frequently struggle with in their self-oriented listening is “choosing the right answer” to share with the group. The process of finding the “right answer” can inhibit intuitive and creative capacities by privileging the logical analytic process of comparing and contrasting the pros and cons of each option to find the “right answer” (Von Oech, 1990). While this kind of critical thinking may be appropriate at other times, it is not the focus of listening with the heart. In the listening stick activity, heart-centered mindful listening does not seek “answers,” but listens for “responses” that emerge from the inner intuitive world. Thus, I encourage students to trust their intuition by giving voice to the last response (or question) that emerges from within at the end of their thirty seconds of self-listening. If students desire to further contemplate their responses, I suggest they set aside time for further reflection after the listening stick activity. During this time, students might, for example, ask the following questions and record their responses in a journal: Is what I wanted to share with the group true? necessary? kind? These three discernment questions are traditionally known as the *Sufi gates of speech*, and their counterparts are also found in the Buddhist practice called *right speech* (truth, kindly intent, and gentleness) (Diller, 1999). Students might consider these three questions as part of a modified listening stick activity when a serious issue confronts the group, allotting more time to discern if their responses or questions pass through the three Sufi gates.

Second, students notice a difference in the *quality of their other-oriented listening*. Typically, when a small group in class is assigned a question to answer, group members begin formulating answers to the question while feigning listening. Their attention is divided. They cannot formulate *and* listen wholeheartedly at the same time. To counteract this tendency to divide our attention, the listening stick activity attempts to unify attention by focusing solely on listening to the person holding the listening stick. This is possible since the question

changes with each speaker's turn; thus, individuals do not know what question they will be asked until they are passed the listening stick. Untethered from rehearsing their answer to a standard question for the entire group, members of the group are freed to give their undivided attention to the speaker.

Many students find it challenging to cultivate the practice of gifting others with their undivided listening attention *without* the aid of a listening/talking stick. Without the physical object of the listening stick as a reminder, it is easy to forget to listen with the heart. Instead, we may find ourselves busy formulating a brilliant response that will impress other people. I remind students that the listening stick is a *symbol of an inner attitude of the heart*, and that they can cultivate this inner heart-felt listening in virtually any communication context (personal or interpersonal, small or large group, face-to-face or digital) or function (decision-making or problem-solving, information gathering, discernment, relationship building, and conflict management). We talk about ways to remind ourselves to “listen with the heart” in the spirit of the Buddhist practice of using *gathas* (Aitken, 1992). For example, when we turn on a light switch, we might say to ourselves, “I will turn on my heart to listen with attention and devotion,” when we see a tree, we could think of the branches from which the listening stick is crafted, and when we feel the urge to interrupt someone, we can acknowledge the urge and give more attention to the other person. Other creative ideas for remembering to listen from the heart include the following that students from past classes suggested are: drawing a small red colored heart on the back of one's hand, wearing a heart shaped necklace or wristband, and carrying a heart shaped stone in one's pocket.

Third, students discover that the extended response time in the listening stick activity can add a creative dimension to their *self-listening*. For some students, their initial response to a

question morphs during the thirty second reflection period into something unanticipated, something that is often richer, deeper, and often more profound than their initial response to the question.

We could not determine how to apply the idea of extended time to public face-to-face interaction between strangers and acquaintances where long 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 in everyday face-to-face conversation (McLaughlin & Cody, 1982). However, we decided that the listening stick activity could be reproduced in the context of a close personal relationship. For example, in the context of close friendship, one can explain the intention of the listening stick activity, and use a listening stick during the interaction 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 respond to, and a new question to pose, provides many students with a feeling of group cohesiveness. This feeling of closeness is sometimes described as being part of something larger than themselves. Perhaps the listening stick activity allows students to experience a collective search for a communal truth (Palmer, 1998) that no one single individual could create on their own. A similar feeling of group cohesiveness is reported by Hyde (1993) after students completed a one hour talking stick activity in small group councils where the topic is a controversial social issue. Finally, a small number of students, in their journal writings, report successfully applying the listening stick activity in their close personal relationships, resulting in greater intimacy with their partners.

Assessment:

I do not formally assess students' experiences of the listening stick activity as part of the course grade. In my philosophy of teaching, the sense of being evaluated while one is learning a new skill is antithetical to the purpose of learning. That is, externally motivated learning for a *good grade* often decreases learning because the focus is on the shortest route to the highest grade and not on the process of learning; whereas, learning based on intrinsic motivation, like curiosity or self-improvement, can often enhance the learning process (Kohn, 1999). There are a number of options for assessing student learning other than traditional standardized tests including: portfolios, presentations, blogs and video blogs, stories, poems, artwork, comic strips, plays, music, journals, puppetry, and games (Bower & Thomas, 2013). For assessing the listening stick activity in the listening class, I encourage students write about what they learn in their listening journals, and to include something about the listening stick activity in their end of semester learning poem. Journals and poems count as part of the course grade and are assessed at mid and end of term along with student conferences during which we discuss what they have learned.

However, if one needs an immediate evaluation of the listening activity (e.g., to satisfy the administration that students are learning something during the listening activity), I recommend some form of self-assessment. For example, after the listening activity, and after students are provided time to apply the activity outside of class, students can write about what they learned and assign themselves a letter grade based on a rubric that the instructor creates such as “quantity and quality” of writing, or “effort and insight” of writing. Alternatively, students can create their own rubric for grading individually, or as a class, and the instructor can approve and/or recommend revisions to the rubric. I find these alternative means of

assessment more compatible with my ideal of teaching and learning from the heart in the context of listening to the SONG of Life.

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