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LISTENING AS AN ACT OF COMPOSING

Moral, by The Cat: You can find in a text whatever you bring, if you will stand between it and the mirror of your imagination. You may not see your ears, but they will be there.

Mark Twain, "A Fable," 1909

We began to explore the idea of listening as essential to writers in 1983 while we were team-teaching English 098, the most basic level of basic writing at the University of Louisville. The students in this course are the most unskilled beginners, unprepared even for the regular developmental sequence that leads to freshman composition. These are the students who have difficulty both at the conceptual and mechanical levels. The readers of their placement test essays commented that they "failed to recognize the requirements of the task as defined in the assignment," and "they had serious problems with word order, sentence structure, and recognition of sentence boundaries." In fact, we created English 098 that year precisely to give these students a psychological advantage—to keep them out of the deadly cycle of failing remedial English semester after semester. They reminded us of the most poignant of Mina Shaughnessy's students, those who, as some of their detractors complain, "shouldn't be allowed in the university." Yet they are smart—we could tell that by their speech. They are surely at home with talk and banter. But that facility does not necessarily, or even usually, transfer to the other language arts—reading, writing, or even listening.

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We focus on listening simply because it is the most neglected of these language arts. In the last several years, repeated calls for a new integration of reading, writing, and speaking have changed our approaches to teaching composition. We encourage more talk in the classroom because cognitive psychologists have stressed the crucial developmental relationship between speaking and writing.¹ We pay more attention to our students as readers because psycholinguists and literary response critics have demonstrated that reading is as much an act of composing as writing.² A revival of interest in the history of rhetoric has led us to reapply classical models, where students continually read, imitated, recited, rewrote, and discussed their own and others' work.³ However, despite the emphasis on our students' revolving roles as readers, writers, and speakers, little attention has been paid to them as *listeners*, except perhaps in a negative way—as teachers complain, “my students don't listen.”

We agree that students don't listen well. Shaughnessy taught us that writing teachers should constantly try to figure out reasons for students' lack of skill. So, we asked ourselves—what is a listener? What does a listener do? We began simply by positing that a listener is one who hears “voices.” Those voices may be spoken or written, one's own or another's. We knew our students had trouble hearing those voices. Although their headphones attested to their comfort with the passive sort of response to music that lulls a hearer, we found that they had trouble “hearing” or “seeing” what was on the pages of the texts they wrote or read. They also seemed unable to hear our instructions or the comments of their classmates. Sure, they read the suggestions for improvement, but they could not seem to apply them to their own work in any independent, active way. Therefore, we decided to change our orientation toward the relationships among the language arts. Instead of concluding that basic writing students can't write because they don't read, we speculated that perhaps they don't write well because they haven't learned to listen.

In *One Writer's Beginnings*, Eudora Welty supports the idea that a writer must be able to “hear” a written text:

Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn't *hear*. As my eyes followed the sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me. It isn't my mother's voice, or the voice of any person I can identify, certainly not my own. It is human, but inward, and it is inwardly that I listen to it. It is to me the voice of the story of the poem itself. The cadence, whatever it is that asks you to believe, the feeling that resides in the printed word, reaches me through the reader-voice. I have supposed, but never found out, that this is the case with all readers—to read as listeners—and with all writers, to write as listeners. It may be part of the desire to write. The sound of what falls on the page begins the process of testing it for truth, for me....

My own words, when I am at work on a story, I hear too as they go, in the same voice I hear when I read in books. When I write and the sound of it comes back to my ears, then I act to make changes. I have always trusted this voice (11-12).

Clearly our students are not this conscious, either of a reader-voice or a writer-voice. We decided, therefore, to design exercises that would enhance their awareness of the connection between listening and composing, both before writing begins and after a first draft is completed. We decided that recognizing the voices in any text, read or heard, was an essential part of making sense of what we read and write and possibly, as Welty says, the impetus for writing or, more importantly, rewriting. If readers aren't listening, they cannot select and organize information in order to respond to it. If writers aren't listening, they cannot gain enough distance from their texts to revise them. And we found our students singularly unable to respond to texts they read, or even to "see" what was on the pages of their own drafts.

Richard Larson recently suggested that readers interact with texts not by seeing them, but through hearing them. In "The Rhetoric of the Written Voice," he claims that auditory appeal makes a reader want to "keep company" with an author, or to engage with a text in the first place:

I am suggesting that our experience of a written text—the transactions in which we participate with a writer when we read—has elements of a dramatic encounter; it includes a response by the reader's imagination—his or her auditory imagination—to the sounds heard during this imagined encounter with the text. I am suggesting that part of our response as readers is to the way we *hear* a text in our imagination and that every written utterance we encounter has its own imagined sound to which we as readers respond (116-117).

The listening response that Larson describes is dramatic and active, not the passive stance that some teachers have assumed in their students. We realized that in previous classes, when we had thought about listening at all, we had conceived of it too literally, as decoding words in order to get to meaning. We expected students to listen to us, to classmates, to assignments, to readings, and sift from those "texts" the information that told them how to complete any given writing task. However, we did not recognize that such sifting is an active process, requiring the same skills of prediction, hypothesizing, checking, revising, and generalization, that reading and writing demand. Our exercises, therefore, are designed to make students conscious of themselves as active listeners who create the voices they hear as they read/listen and write/listen. Eudora Welty, again, describes this critical distinction between active and passive listening:

Long before I wrote stories, I listened for stories. Listening *for* them is something much more acute than listening *to* them. I suppose it's an early form of participation in what goes on. Listening children know stories are *there*. When their elders sit and begin, children are just waiting and hoping for one to come out, like a mouse from its hole (14).

We wanted our students to become these kinds of anticipating listeners and to be conscious of listening *for*, for the unspoken as well as the spoken meaning. We also wanted to instill in them some of the sense of drama that both Welty and Larson describe—the playful encounter with language that is missing from too many classrooms.

Besides learning to hear and respond to the voices in the air and on the page, learning to listen *for* helps students practice the skills they need for composing, as both readers and writers. Listeners must predict what is coming in order to make sense of what is immediate; they must revise those expectations in light of what they are hearing; above all, they must make associations among what they hear and what they already know. They must make what they hear meaningful. James Britton clarifies the listening/composing relationship as he describes the connections between listening and a child's developing facility with language:

As he [the child] listens to people talking, he must be taking in more than they say: he must be perceiving the general *forms* utterances take: 'forms' in terms of what words may occur before and after what other words. It may be that the listening is not so different from the speaking as would first appear (46).

Listening *for*, then, can make what students hear meaningful by requiring their active participation in making sense of a spoken or written text. As students match the given to new information and formulate hypotheses through guessing and revising guesses, they can gain some sense of control over what they might want to say in writing, some reason to write at all.

Moreover, listening *for* makes students aware of the community in the classroom because it involves both their semantic and episodic memories. As Endel Tulving and Wayne Donaldson define them, semantic memory is a thinker's mental thesaurus—the conventions, procedures, and linguistic choices shared by a group. It is more or less public, whereas episodic memory is private—the autobiographical, associative narrative of feelings and events triggered by certain cues (380-402). Listening *for* exercises both kinds of memory. As students consciously listen *for* texts and retell what they have heard, they learn that their individual perceptions and associations from episodic memory are valid. And, listening to other students retell the same story, through *their* episodic memories, triggers the group's semantic memories as they learn to share and add to the group's conventions and repertoires.

Beyond that, becoming aware of themselves as listeners who create meaning can help students think of themselves as meaning-makers when they write. It can make them realize that meaning is negotiated within an interpretive community.⁴ That interpretive community becomes real to the students because it is audible in the classroom. They have listened to each other—listened *for* each other—actively changing the way they see their classmates and their own writing. Basic writing students, particularly, get stuck in a passive stance toward their own texts, not listening to the voices they have created.

In the rest of this essay, we will describe the exercises we devised to make our students conscious of what Welty and Larson say that experienced readers and writers do unconsciously. In short, we wanted our students to learn to hear the reader-voice in external texts, so that it might become internal in their own texts—and so that they might hear their own writer-voices as they compose and revise.

Of course, what teachers hope for from all their writing students is that they attend to their writer-voices as they compose and their reader-voices as they edit and revise. If we teach students to listen *for* those voices as they are read to and as they read and comment aloud, we allow the external to become internal and functional when students write. As students find themselves beginning with expectations, making predictions, deriving and challenging generalizations, in the immediate aural medium, they learn what listening *for* means and learn how to transfer those auditory skills to their own writing.

The English 098 students we team-taught could be identified easily on a placement test by their lack of facility in using the written word. Their prose was characterized by serious syntactical problems—inability to use normal word order consistently, lack of attention to verb forms and sentence boundaries. They often encountered difficulty in generating even a page of writing. Early in the semester, we also discovered that many of our students who read their own work aloud would not truly read but comment upon what they had written with statements like “I start out by...” or “And then I say....” These comments demonstrated their discomfort with their own writer-voices. However, as their oral marginalia often indicated, these students were fluent as they spoke. Our attempt was to help them take their oral facility into writing.

What we wanted was to show our students that their fluency with spoken language could be used to improve their fluency in writing and reading. We wanted them to realize, as Ann Berthoff says, that writing is “related to everything you do when you make sense of the world,” to talking, thinking, reading, and listening (8). The exercises we designed were intended to make our students more aware of what they do as they compose texts in writing and in reading. We began by playing to their oral strengths in listening and talking by showing them that listening actively is a necessary part of composing.

The first exercise in listening *for* asked students to retell the story of 1984. After reading a short excerpt from Orwell’s novel, students had

written a preliminary diagnostic assignment discussing what terrible punishment would cause them to surrender to Big Brother. Then we told them the rest of the story, inviting them to take notes as they listened. We let them know that they wouldn't be able to include everything as they retold what they had heard. We hit the high points of the story—information about Oceania and Winston Smith's job, the love affair and its symbolic rebellion against Big Brother's ideology, the eventual discovery, the punishment of the traitors, the aftermath. Students wrote their summaries and returned the next day to tell those stories to each other.

This exercise, which focused on students' listening skills, taught them several valuable lessons about composing:

1. Strategies of organization—beginnings, middles, ends—are set by the form of a narrative itself, but developed by writers as they retell a story.
2. General and specific ideas occur naturally both as they tell details of the story and move to the next point by generalizing.
3. Retellings of the same plot can take many different forms.

This last was perhaps the most striking and useful lesson students discovered. As they read their retellings in small groups, they saw what one listener had emphasized, what another had ignored, what one listener had developed in detail, what they themselves had merely mentioned. Most surprising to them was that all the stories were successful; that is, each response transferred effectively the story the students had listened to, to other listeners. The students learned that although they had all listened to the same plot, they listened for different, though equally valuable, specific details and generalities. Their listening *for*, then determined the form, style, and content of the responses they wrote.

A few brief examples from drafts of opening paragraphs serve to illustrate this point:

Pamela:

Winston Smith sits in his few spaces that's called his work area. He knows he must do everything right because Big Brother is always watching. The Ministry of Truth is where he works. It's not really truth, it's lies, because everything in Oceania means the opposite. He works there in the records department destroying the past, making sure everything Big Brother says is true and recorded.

William:

This is the story about George Orwell's famous book 1984. The book deals with two main characters. Big Brother, who is the party, the dominant one in power of everyone more like the president of the United States except with greater power. Winston Smith is the second, who works for Big Brother in his ministry of truth. Now in 1984 the Earth is completely different from now. It is divided into 3 countries—Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia. Big Brother is in control of Oceania and his picture is everywhere, on posters, coins, and even watching you in your cubic room that is considered home.

Damon:

It's 1984 there are only 3 countries in the world. Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia. There is always some country fighting the other, all the time. Oceania is where our hero lives his name is Winston Smith. He works for the party in control of the country headed by a dictator type figure called Big Brother. He is the records clerk in the ministry of truth. When Big Brother predicts something and turns out to be wrong Winston would change the records to make it look like Big Brother predicted the future.

These students had heard basically the same details: the reduction of countries, the lie of the ministry of truth, the character of Big Brother, the lack of privacy and space. However, each student listened individually, choosing distinctive details. Some repeated our language; some created their own terms. Some retold all the details; some generalized or added comments of their own. The responses show how fluent basic writers can become once they make connections between what they hear and what they write. Their concluding paragraphs also show that they trusted our emphasis on individual perceptions:

Pamela:

Winston started keeping a diary which was illegal. At the same time he loved Julia and on one such occasion they were caught together. Winston is then taken to Room 101 where they torture him. He had never lost faith in Julia or lost his memory. But when they told him about the rats and he finally gave in and said do it to Julia and Julia said do it to Winston. And then Julia went off and Winston said I Love Big Brother.

William:

Winston was left inside a cell to rot because of his disbelief. His teeth and hair began to fall out. He was left to starve, all beaten badly until Winston couldn't take anymore and said he believed everything Big Brother said was true, not really giving up for the love of his girl, Julia. The thought police knew Winston was lying so he was placed in front of a cage filled with rats. See Winston was feared of rats and big brother new it and when Winston was place in front of the rats he broke down. "Take Julia, why don't you do this to her." Winston was defeated by Big Brother. Winston was freed and forgiven. As he walked away with defeat to the nearest pub he noticed sitting directly across from him Julia. They stared each other in the eyes with no emotion. They both walk opposite each other knowing they had been defeated.

Damon:

Within time the thought police catch Julia and Winston both together. They take them to the ministry of love to punish, beat, and starve them. All of this time Winston kept his loyalty to Julia. Until they found out the one thing he was most afraid of. Rats, they put a cage over his head and threatened to let them chew his face up. He finally breaks and asks them to do it to Julia. Not long afterward, he sees Julia in a restaurant they hardly speak. This is evidence that Big Brother has won and Julia and Winston are now unpersons.

In these concluding paragraphs, the students all comment on the most shocking episode in our telling of the story, the scene where Winston Smith comes literally face to face with the rats he dreads. But each listener chooses to emphasize the scene differently: one concludes with it; two use it to lead to a broader conclusion. Each writer uses individual perceptions, heard while listening *for*, to find appropriate strategies for completing the narrative.

Our success in having students recognize in this external way the reader-voice as they listened for the story of 1984 in the teacher's retelling and in the re-retelling of their classmates led us to assign a more difficult task that would ask students to listen *for* the writer-voice of a short story and determine what it demanded from them as readers.

The story we chose was Dorothy Parker's "You Were Perfectly Fine," a very short, funny and bitter little tale of the woe that attends the inability of a man and woman to communicate honestly. The two characters discuss the events of a party the night before where the man has become so drunk that he can remember nothing. The plot develops through his date's reminding him of his successively more embarrassing activities, all the while assuring him that he was "perfectly fine." The

story culminates with her revelation of a promise he has made to her in the park, ending with his request for a drink to counter the “collapse he feels coming on.” Parker tells this story almost entirely through the dialogue of Peter and the girl. Since neither character is at all frank about feelings or motivations, their personalities are not ordinarily clear to students whose skill in recognizing the writer-voice through their own reader-voice is limited at best. This second exercise is more demanding in two ways. First, it is the writer-voice students must listen *for*, not the interpretive comments of our 1984 retelling. Second, because the writer-voice is ironic, students must listen *for* the mocking tones behind the voices of the characters in the dialogue. In this task, students must use their listening skills more consciously as they suspect, reject, and identify motivations while they listen and read.

To counteract the difficulties in getting past the untruthful conversation between the two characters, we played a tape of the conversation read by two of our colleagues. Their voices revealed to the listeners in the class the two characters’ real feelings that are implied by the writer-voice on the page—the man increasingly uncomfortable and making the pretense of remembering his promise, the woman determinedly cheerful and cheerfully determined to hold the man to his promise. The writer-voice demands that readers hear through the dialogue and listen *for* clues about motivations and about the writer-voice’s ironic intention. For sophisticated readers, hearing that kind of writer-voice presents few difficulties. Our less fluent readers would not have overheard the ironic writer-voice lurking behind the dialogue they read. But the tape allowed them to listen *for* that voice.

Students listened to the tape as they followed the written story. Then they began to discuss their speculations about the relationship between the two characters. For the next class, we asked them to write about which character they felt more sympathy for and why. Later, they read these statements aloud to the class, and we asked them to list adjectives to describe each character and then to combine some of the male/female adjectives to make a statement about men and women, for example: “When men are guilty and foolish, women are strong and manipulative.” Our final assignment asked students to write about relationships between men and women using the characters’ relationships in the story and their own experience or observation as support. Had we begun with this final assignment, students would have been unable to accomplish a task that required them to “hear through” the writer-voice on the page to the character’s feelings and the writer’s ironic comment upon them. They would have remained caught, as Shaughnessy characterizes basic writers, between “cases and generalities,” (240) staying either with unsupported conclusions about Parker’s point or with details from the story that led nowhere. But by beginning with the oral reading to hear the writer-voice, and by listening *for* details and generalities to synthesize their own conclusions, the students were able to complete their tasks with some success. As they read rough drafts aloud, their listeners commented just as

they had upon the tape, and students heard how their own writer-voices transferred to their listeners.

After considering this notion of using the auditory dimension to provoke some consciousness about composing acts, we extended the earlier listening and retelling assignments. We told our students the story of *King Lear* and asked them to listen and retell, beginning as we had with the 1984 assignment. This time, after they listened, wrote, listened to each other, and commented, we asked them to write a sentence or two that generalized about what they felt the writer-voice seemed to be trying to tell them. As a final writing task, we asked the students to begin with those generalizations and write a paragraph that explained why that general statement fit into their retellings. We had introduced the concept of generalizing early in the semester. (In the 1984 exercise, for example, students explained orally what they thought Orwell felt about the system he described. We called these comments "generalizations.") So students were familiar with the term and understood how to aim for controlling statements. Here is a response called "Actions Speak Louder than Words" from one of the class members:

Leonard:

William Shakespeare's story, "King Lear," gave some detail examples of the expression, "Actions speak louder than words." King Lear's daughters, Regan and Goneril, told the King exactly what he wanted to hear, to satisfy his desires and to gain the reward for this deed. Regan's and Goneril's actions through-out the story didn't show the love that they proclaim for him. But Cordelia, the King's youngest and favorite daughter, who refused to tell the King of her love, show her affection to him when she went to his side after he was forced into the woods by the other daughters. The same holds true for Gloucester and his two sons, Edgar and Edmond. But Edgar showed his love for his father through the action of going to Gloucester's side after he was banished from his home by Edmond. This saying, "Actions speak louder than words," is true even today, because this is one of the ways I use to determine the well-meaning of others.

Unlike many of his classmates who described in gory detail the battles and the "vile jelly," Leonard concentrated on parent/child relationships, and his generalization clearly derived from the story he retold. His final paragraph takes the general statement "actions speak louder than words" and explains just how he decided upon it. Leonard has here the beginning of an expository essay, one that proceeded from his own written narrative, that in its turn was preceded by his listening *for* that narrative. Of course, not every student succeeded in transferring the composing skill learned in listening *for* to composing an essay that employed it. Every student could provide a generalization, but a few students failed to work back from generalization to details for support, relying in-

stead on a retelling of the story. For these students, Leonard and others who succeeded became a resource. Students listened to Leonard's essay and listened for his explanations of how he had composed it from his original perceptions in the first response. By working in groups that revised details to accommodate generalizations, all the students learned more about how to use support for a controlling idea. This series of assignments follows the sequence of stages of reading response from subjective through transitional toward objective stances, but it begins a step further back by allowing the oral, and the aural, to find a place in the composing process.⁵

At the end of this series of listening exercises, we found our students more capable of controlling the movement among generalities and details, and more importantly, more sure of the control they had over their reading and writing. Consciously listening *for* stories and their meanings showed our students that, indeed, they could find something unique to say to us and their classmates. Moreover, the overt practice in listening transferred to their own papers as they began to read drafts aloud and listen *for* the connections between intention and performance. Finally, we saw them begin to listen *for* and correct the errors that had helped place them in English 098. Each of the fifteen students in the class successfully wrote the final exam (a more complex version of the placement test essay). They moved on to the last developmental course before freshman composition with more confidence in their strategies for becoming college writers.

What we learned with our basic writing students, and what is now being supported by people like Richard Larson, is that listening *is* composing. All of us who teach composition should want to teach listening. When students learn that they can listen *for*, they begin to hear the sound of their own voices and realize, like Twain's cat, that though they may not see their ears, those ears will be there as they compose and revise.

Notes

¹ Many composition theorists have applied cognitive psychologists' studies of language acquisition to the college classroom. James Britton and James Moffett draw heavily upon cognitive theorists to argue for more attention to speaking/writing activities in composition. Their major sources are Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Jerome Bruner. A more recent study of these relationships is edited by Barry Kroll and Roberta Vann.

² Excellent descriptions of the fluent reading process include those of Frank Smith and Charles Cooper and Anthony Petrosky. Literary response critics disagree about the exact extent to which a reader "composes" any given text. Two theorists who represent a middle ground—where a reader "transacts" with a text to create meaning—are Wolfgang Iser and Louise Rosenblatt.

³ There are several new essays on classical rhetoric's application to modern pedagogy. See especially Susan Miller; Robert Connors, Lisa Ede, and Andrea Lunsford; Joseph Comprone and Katharine Ronald.

⁴ Stanley Fish introduced this term. He believes that literary readers exist as members of groups that set implicit limits on interpretations about what a text "means." Individual readers are members of communities—though they are often not aware of the fact—whose assumptions (about form, genre, language, rhetoric) determine the kinds of attention a text gets and therefore its meaning.

⁵ Joseph Comprone describes these stages of response to a literary work. He terms them "progressive exercises"—where students develop structures to organize their progress through a text, "transitional" exercises—where students expand their responses to networks of structures in the text, and "symbolic" exercises—where students look back to earlier responses and reword them with a view toward audience. See also Hephizibah Roskelly.

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