**Developing Generous Listening Skills:**

**Authentic Relating Practice in the Classroom**

**Abstract**

Authentic Relating is a practice of focusing attention and acceptance within a small group (Bénéteau, 2021). The ability to listen compassionately to develop rich relationships is key to a successful life and career. However, students can find compassionate listening difficult, especially in the midst of conflicts. How can courses provide experiences to help students develop generous listening skills?

I’ll discuss an Authentic Relating exercise I used as part of an experiential undergraduate course in Organization Development. I’ll describe reactions and we’ll engage in brief practice sessions with feedback to provide a sense of how it works.

**Keywords**

Active Listening, experiential learning, relationships

**Time Requested:**

60 Minutes (*Activity/Exercise*)

**Introduction**

This session has the purpose of presenting and practicing an approach to improving listening and building relationship skills among students in our courses. The approach, called Authentic Relating, has characteristics related to T-Groups, NonViolent Communication, Appreciative Inquiry and Quaker Clearness Committee meetings. Its main attributes are:

* Building connections to other participants through a stance of acceptance and charitable perceptions, akin to “unconditional positive regard”.
* A focus on the present, the “now” of the conversation.
* An open inquiry around reactions to and perceptions of others.

I chose to include this learning experience as part of my undergraduate course in Organization Development because students were having difficulty taking a stance of unconditional positive regard towards the groups they were working with. Without a specific activity aimed at understanding and appreciating others’ perspectives “where they were”, my students would find themselves unconsciously engaging in blaming and negative evaluations of their client groups.

The exercise is suitable for undergraduate management students and can be used by faculty interested in using experiential activities in their classrooms to develop listening and relational skills among their students.

**Theoretical Foundation**

*Acceptance and charitable perceptions*

The development of listening skills has long been a focus for management educators (Spataro & Bloch, 2018), (Ferrari, 2012), but what is sometimes missed is learning around the attitude or mindset of the listener toward the other. One can parrot active listening phrases without positive regard for the other party. Research has indicated that perceptions of empathy can have a significant positive effect on relationships and other outcomes (Ramsey & Sohi, 1997). Some approaches to listening and interaction skills have explicitly included some attributes of Carl Rogers’ (1957) “unconditional positive regard” toward his clients in psychotherapy. For example, Marshall Rosenberg’s (2005) “NonViolent Communication” (NVC) emphasizes the “heart” and understanding without evaluation or blaming how others’ needs drive their actions. Along similar lines, the “positive principle” of Appreciative Inquiry (Bushe & Kessler, 2013) emphasizes the need for positive affect and social bonding.

*Focus on the “now”*

Authentic Relating has a focus on the “now”, what is happening immediately among the participants. In this respect it is similar to classic forms of a T-Group, whose guidelines for action preclude storytelling or outside cases, focusing instead on the immediate (Blumberg & Lockhart-Mummery, 1972). This helps create a self-awareness described (Williams, et al, 2008) as a momentary state of heightened self-awareness, which can promote insight into one’s own cognitions.

*Open inquiry around others’ and one’s own reactions*

A key aspect of Authentic Relating is that participants are open and honest during their interactions. This means guarding against advice-giving (which embeds a disguised directive) and stories around ones’ own experience (containing a hidden moral). Predating the previously described approaches by several centuries (the 1660’s), Quaker Clearness Committees help a focus person work through a decision by requiring that the group only ask open and honest questions, with no hidden advice or morals (Palmer, 1998, 152-156). When Authentic Relating applies open, caring attention to a focal person the interactions could be indistinguishable from a Clearness Committee meeting.

*Outcomes*

Authentic Relating has the objective of training people to develop greater self-awareness and acceptance of others. It is designed to be developmental and to help uncover relational blind spots. Besides personal awareness, participants often report a greater connection resulting from the focused attention and acceptance of an Authentic Relating group (Bénéteau, 2021).

**Teaching Approach and Implications**

This session will provide a brief description of my recent experience using Authentic Relating with an undergraduate Senior-level course in Organization Development. To better help students with their personal praxis I would meet with them in smaller groups of between 10 – 15 people consisting of several smaller teams to discuss their experiences and barriers to effectiveness. With the help of their teams each person would identify a behavior that either a) impeded their own effectiveness or future development, or b) impeded the development or effectiveness of their team. These were typically behaviors like: taking on the bulk of the teams’ work, showing up late to class, presenting themselves as “slackers” as a way to bond with team members, etc. During Authentic Relating the group of 10-15 people would explore this behavior with a focal person in a non-evaluative manner, either by sharing reactions or inquiring into the focal person’s thoughts and feelings.

Typical conversational moves in Authentic Relating include the following:

Awareness, Curiosity, Empathy, Openness, etc. For example:

 “What are you feeling right now?”, “How is it to share that with us?”, “I’m curious about…”, “I’m imagining that you are…”, “What are you thinking about?”, “I’ve noticed that you do X, what’s leading you to do that?”, etc.

Students were free to participate or not, and about a half hour was spent per focal person.

This approach was suited for dialogue-based courses rather than lecture-based courses. Because of the high degree of interaction typical of my courses, students were open to and expected this kind of relational learning. With three hours of meetings per week, a significant amount of time could be spent during a semester on this, but students were free to decide at any point that they no longer wanted to do these activities and I would follow their lead on activities that they felt would be more helpful to them.

I was reluctant to open Authentic Relating up to unsupervised student teams, because I felt they did not yet have the expertise to be able to manage non-evaluative focused attention. While I didn’t think that harmful conflicts would break out, I did expect that they would find it hard to be open and honest when sensitive issues arose.

**Learning Objectives**

The exercise was designed to elicit several outcomes from the students.

First, as part of the course students were being told to practice looking at others in a non-evaluative, non-blaming way. This was often hard for them, as in the past I have heard them refer to others as “babies” or other negative terms. The intense focus on understanding and acceptance of others during Authentic Relating was designed to help shift perspectives of others towards one that was more generous and charitable. As I told them, the goal was to see that everyone did what they thought was best based on their own experiences and way of looking at the situation.

Second, students were expected to learn better listening skills as a result of practice focusing in the moment on what was going in in the sessions. Even for those who spoke less, observational learning was expected to help increase their ability to mirror, paraphrase, and inquire into others’ thoughts and feelings.

Third, as with T-groups, self-awareness was expected to increase. This was expected not only because of their increased attention to their own reactions, but also because of reflections by others that might resonate with their own lived experience. Descriptions of thoughts, fears, joys, feelings of inadequacy, belonging, and isolation, while not recounted by everyone, could raise awareness of similar situations and reactions.

**Exercise Overview**

Students were seated in a circle, with a monitor included in the circle for off-campus students jointing via Zoom. The focus person was asked to begin by describing the situation they were facing. Then a conversation ensued, which I facilitated to be sure that the basic rules for Authentic Relating were maintained.

**Session Description**

Fifteen minutes will be spent presenting the use of Authentic Relating and framing what will happen during the session. A half hour will be spent in practice sessions at tables. The last fifteen minutes will end the session by bringing everyone together to discuss how it went and applications

This session promotes “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” by giving students learning and practice implementing skills and abilities they will need to enhance understanding, justice, and participation in the organizations they will go on to manage.

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