

## **Let's Talk About Writing: Enhancing Conversations Across Disciplinary and Institutional Lines**

**Sandy Tarabochia, Rachel Cayley, and Tracy Santa**

**12<sup>th</sup> International Writing Across the Curriculum Conference**

**Commons Hotel, Minneapolis, MN (June 12-14, 2014)**

### **Enough About Me: Listening in/to the Writing Center**

**Tracy Santa**

Our umbrella theme on this panel is talk about writing. What I want to talk about are the receptive acts of listening which make talk possible. Specifically, I want to talk about acts of listening as they are embodied in writing center conferences.

The challenge in framing listening in writing center work (and elsewhere) is to move it from a category of “natural” acts we take for granted to a discursive strategy we choose and are aware of enacting, a collaboration that is central to invention and reflection in writing center work.

Consider what Karen Burke LeFevre is saying and how her assertions about invention also apply to the act of listening.

Historically, invention has been neglected as a subject of inquiry because it has been thought of as a private and personal activity. How, after all, should we study an act that is thought to be hidden, mysterious, and inaccessible to research methodologies? (23)

Gemma Corradi Fiumara has pointed out similar challenges in conceiving of listening as an intentional act, one worth examining.

No one would deny that talking necessarily implies listening, and yet no one bothers to point out, for example, that in our culture there has always been a vast profusion of scholarly works focusing on expressive activity and very few, almost none in comparison, devoted to the study of listening. (5-6)

Trudell Thomas connects acts of listening with models drawn from Peter Elbow.

The theme of listening echoes ideas set forth...in *Embracing Contraries*. Elbow describes the importance of writers (and others) practicing “the believing game,” whereby individuals seek understanding by deliberately and temporarily taking on viewpoints other than their own. (100)

Krista Ratcliffe in her 1999 essay “Rhetorical Listening” combined these threads in demonstrating the invisibility of listening in the Western rhetorical tradition. Ratcliffe suggests that “the dominant trend in our field has been to follow the lead of popular culture and naturalize listening—to assume it is something that everyone does but no one need study” (196). In 2005, Ratcliffe implicitly references the connections Thomas sees between listening and Elbow’s “believing game” defining rhetorical listening as “a stance of openness that a person may *choose* to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” (*Rhetorical* 17). This stance stands in contrast to the privileging of writing, speech, and Elbow’s “doubting game” in Western rhetoric and dominant composition pedagogies. Drawing on Heidigger, Ratcliffe suggests that we have inherited “a logos that speaks, but does not listen” (“Rhetorical” 202).

Writing center practitioners would seem to be in an excellent position to reflect on the value and act of rhetorical listening. That writing center work is about listening seems obvious to those of us who work in writing centers. But then why has listening been so rarely studied or discussed in literature on writing center practice? LeFevre, Fiumara, and Ratcliffe have all identified one reason why this may be the case—the fact that most of us, tutors and writing center directors included—take listening to be a natural act. Julie Bokser offers a rare example of a writing center theorist addressing listening directly, suggesting that “a rhetoric of listening attempts to develop a method of listening to what others say, but it is also a method for listening to how we listen” (47).

We’ve been working for the past year or two in the Colorado College Writing Center to follow Bokser’s lead and develop a method “for listening to how we listen,” but we have just begun to scratch the surface. The invisibility of listening presents a challenge. For instance-- some of you may be listening right now. Or not. What does active listening look like? To study listening, we need to identify what active listening looks like, how it is *performed* or manifested in tutorials.

Another issue, stemming from the difficulty in identifying listening behavior, is fashioning a research study which is RAD. Dana Driscoll and Sherry Wynn Perdue assert that “most of what has been published as research in the *WCJ* is not replicable, aggregable, and data supported: in other words, it does not meet the test of what other disciplines define as evidence-based research” (36). Rebecca Babcock and Terese Thonus’ recent *Researching the Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-Based Practice* drives this point home, suggesting that on-going research in writing center practice will be valuable to the extent that it is generalizable.

Our felt sense of writing center work situates listening at the heart of practice. But what evidence have we developed in support of this intuition? What is the relationship between a tutor’s observed listening behavior in a writing center tutorial and perceptions of the tutorial’s success in the eyes of the consultant, the student writer, and the researcher?

We will be piloting a study this fall examining what we assert are two manifestations of listening behavior in tutorial interactions: backchanneling and gaze direction. Backchannels have been described by Roxanne Bertrand et al. as follows—short verbal utterances, e.g. *yeah*, *OK*, vocal interjections, e.g. *uh-huh*, or gestural signals, such as nodding or smiling. A videotape made at the end of our initial training course in 2012 offers some evidence of spontaneous backchanneling in an initial exchange between a writing consultant and student writer.

[backchannel video clip here]

Adam Kendon’s work on patterns of behavior in focused encounters offers insight into how gaze direction might be read in tutorials. Kendon drew from the work of Erving Goffman, who suggested “that direction of gaze plays a crucial role in initiation and maintenance of social encounters” (Kendon 52). According to Kendon,

whether or not a person is willing to have his eye “caught,” whether or not, that is, he is willing to look back into the eyes of someone who is already looking at him, is one of the principal signals by which people indicate to each other their willingness to begin an encounter. (52)

Following from Kendon, establishing a mutual gaze is a central initiating act in tutorial interactions. Goffman suggests that

once a set of participants have avowedly opened themselves up to one another for an engagement, an eye-to-eye ecological huddle tends to be carefully maintained, maximizing the opportunity for participants to monitor one another's mutual perceiving. (95)

In observing successful tutorials, we often see posturing reflecting Goffman's "ecological huddle." Goffman asserts that this posture of "working consensus" creates a mutually held ethos between collaborating partners, accompanied by a "heightened sense of moral responsibility for one's acts...a 'we-rationale'"(98) shared by interacting participants in a mutual exchange. Kendon suggests that intermittent mutual gazes...express continued commitment, that "to perceive two eyes focused upon one acts as a 'release' for specifically social action" (87). This posture of listening and openness may be one factor precipitating the conversations we aspire to in writing center tutorials.

[video clip demonstrating bearing of gaze in tutorial interaction]

This is our working hypothesis as we move into this study: that the performance of listening behaviors and a posture of active listening, as indicated by backchanneling, gaze direction, and mutual eye contact, are central to establishing an ethos of cooperation and shared responsibility in writing center tutorials. As Lonni Collins Pratt and Daniel Homan state,

[w]hen you listen you get past yourself...In the listening stance, the focus shifts from the self to the other...we have to make a choice to be receptive, to stop speaking and take an open stance. (qtd in Jacobs 576).

This sense of receptivity as central to writing center work extends, of course, to reconstructing the role of listening in broader academic and civic spheres. As Shari Stenberg has recently suggested "there is no genuine dialogue without dwelling in another's ideas" (252). And the writing center is a dwelling built for just such dialogue.

## **Works Cited**

Babcock, Rebecca Day and Terese Thonus. *Researching the Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-Based Practice*. New York: Peter Lang, 2012.

- Bertrand, Roxanne, Gaelle Ferre, Philippe Blache, Robert Espenner, and Stephane Rauzy. "Backchannels Revisited from a Multimodal Perspective." *Proceedings of Audio-Visual Speech Processing* (2007): 1- 5.
- Bokser, Julie. "Pedagogies of Belonging: Listening to Students and Peers." *WCJ* 25.1 (2005): 43-60.
- Driscoll, Dana and Sherry Wynn Perdue. "Theory, Lore, and More: An Analysis of RAD Research in the *Writing Center Journal*, 1980-2009." *WCJ* 32.1 (2012): 11-39.
- Fiumara, Gemma Corradi. *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Goffman, Erving. *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings*. New York: Free Press, 1963.
- Jacobs, Dale. "The Audacity of Hospitality." *JAC* 28.3/4 (2008): 563-581.
- Kendon, Adam. *Conducting Interaction: Patterns of Behavior in Focused Encounters*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1990.
- LeFevre, Karen Burke. *Invention as a Social Act*. Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1987.
- Ratcliffe, Krista. "Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretative Invention and a 'Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct'." *CCC* 51.2 (1999): 195-224.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*. Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 2005.
- Stenberg, Shari. "Cultivating Listening: Teaching from a Restored Logos." In *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*. Eds. Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe. Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 2011.
- Thomas, Trudelle. "Generous Listening: A Deeper Way of Knowing." In *Presence of Mind: Writing and the Domain Beyond the Cognitive*. Eds. Alice Brand and Richard Graves. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1994.