

2020

World Café to Listening Café: Creating a Community of Listeners and Learners

Mary Keator
Westfield State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/joci>

Recommended Citation

Keator, Mary (2020) "World Café to Listening Café: Creating a Community of Listeners and Learners," *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*. Vol. 7: No. 1, Article 9.
Available at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/joci/vol7/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Contemplative Inquiry by an authorized editor of Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. For more information, please contact Jane.Monson@unco.edu.

World Café to Listening Café: Creating a Community of Listeners and Learners

Mary Keator

Westfield State University

In Lectio Divina as Contemplative Pedagogy: Re-appropriating Monastic Practice for the Humanities (2018), I examined the ancient monastic practice of lectio divina as a contemplative method of reading, interpreting, and responding to sacred texts, and demonstrated how this method can be re-appropriated for use within the Humanities. Since the time of its publication, I have adapted this contemplative method in my literature courses as I find that it continues to keep the students the subject of their learning experience while strengthening their acumen to read, listen, interpret, and respond to texts. This article, which is a result of a SOTL grant (spring 2019), will describe how I adapted the Brown and Isaacs' World Café (2005) and integrated it to create a community of listeners and learners in my World Literature course.

"Can we listen the way we breathe, inhaling everything then giving it back?"

(Mark Nepo, *Seven Thousand Ways to Listen*, p. 34)

LECTIO DIVINA: A CONTEMPLATIVE WAY OF READING

In the monastic schools, *lectio divina* (ever ancient, ever new) continues to be the primary pedagogy used to teach the monks how to read, listen, interpret, and respond to texts. Learning to explore a text begins with *lectio*, the slow careful reading and attentive listening to the text before them. *Lectio* flows into *meditatio*, the rumination, memorization and analysis of the text, requiring the monks to return to the text and re-

read it, again and again. *Lectio* and *meditatio* opens a way for the monks to enter into a relationship with the text and experience it on a deeper, more personal level. As the monks re-encounter the text, they naturally begin to respond to what they are seeing, listening to, hearing, and feeling in the text. Their response to the text is called *oratio*. Throughout this continuous flow between *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *oratio*, the monks unexpectedly find themselves in a contemplative state called *contemplatio*, “a beholding moment,” in which they awaken to a deeper understanding of the literal text, of God and of themselves.

This contemplative method of reading (*lectio divina*) can be described as a dynamic sensuous dance, in which the monks embrace the text, flow with it, and allow themselves to be pulled deeper into a subjective relationship with it. In the process, their minds and hearts begin to surrender and open to a deeper, fuller understanding of the text before them. They begin to see, hear, and feel the text more intimately as a living reality. The text, no longer a static object to learn about, becomes a living presence to come to know and experience, revealing truth and wisdom, to guide and support the monks along their journey. For the monks, the *lectio divina* practice is a trust walk into the text because they do not know what to expect nor where the text will lead them. As a result, they cannot prepare a response in advance of their experience. This method of reading, listening, interpreting, and responding to texts is the beginning of a transformative journey of awakening to a deeper sense of self and a deeper understanding of the meaning of life embedded within the human condition.

RECLAIMING THE ART OF ATTENTIVE LISTENING

Human beings, by nature, are dialogic and community-oriented. From the earliest times, the Indigenous peoples had to be attentive to their environment. Listening was critical to their existence, way of life, and survival. They intuitively listened to the inner voices of nature, interpreted the natural phenomenon around them, and responded to what they experienced for the good of the people. According to First Peoples Worldwide,

Indigenous communities thrive by listening carefully to the shifting patterns of nature. Natural resources are most useful and abundant when they are cultivated in harmony with the laws of nature, rather than despite them. This requires seeing nature as a larger and much more sophisticated system than that of human technology. (*How Our Societies Work*, n.d.)

There has always been and continues to be a sense of respect for the unknown as they observe and listen to the natural world all around them, what they see, hear, feel, and experience in relationship to the natural world. Their need and desire to articulate what they see, hear, feel, and experience gives way to story through symbols, language, art, music, and dance, which needed to be interpreted and reinterpreted in order to be understood and valued. As Cajete (2017, pp. 114-115) explains,

listening to stories is a way to know how things have come into being and how they are related to everything in the world—plants, animals, places, the stars, and we as human beings.

He continues,

Stories were the first ways humans stored information; they were the basis of the oral tradition of all Tribal peoples. Since the beginning of human history, Tribal cultures have ordered the understanding and meaning of human existence through their remembrance and enactment of stories in ritual, song, dance, and art. Stories have deep roots stemming not only from the physiology and contexting process of the brain but also from the very heart of the human psyche. Stories reflect aspects of the way the human mind organizes and remembers information. At a deeper level, they reflect the topography and language of the human spirit. However, stories go beyond education and the recitation of words. Indigenous stories related the experience of life lived in time, place, and spirit. They were not only a description

or narrative but an echo of a truth lived and remembered. They remain the most “human” of human forms of communication.

This communal practice of attentive, respectful listening to the voices within the textures of our lives is reclaimed in The World Café.

THE WORLD CAFÉ

I teach at a midsize public university located in the Northeast region of the United States and generally have some students from a variety of backgrounds and ethnicities, making for a powerful listening and learning environment. This particular semester, the two classes were a mix of sophomores, juniors, and seniors. I had some first-generation college students and also students with documented learning disabilities. Some students came from a large urban area, while others were from small towns. As I continued to develop the re-appropriation of *lectio divina* for my world literature classes, I sought ways to engage my students more deeply in what they were reading. I wanted to deepen the *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *oratio* moments in hopes that it would lead my students to moments of wisdom and transformation (*contemplatio*). In addition, I have become aware that students tend to open up and share their inner thoughts and truths in smaller groups more so than in a large class of thirty plus students. As I was pondering new ways to implement, deepen and extend the *lectio divina* practice in my course, I recalled a memorable experience I had attending a World Café.

What is World Café? World Café recognizes our basic human need for others to listen to, interpret, dialogue, and respond to our experiences living within the world. It acknowledges the value of sharing multiple perspectives as we dialogue about the things that matter most to us, and is set up to support this person-to-person sharing. In the introduction to *The World Café* (Brown & Isaacs, 2005, p. viii), Margaret J. Wheatley offers the following description of World Café.

The World Café reintroduces us to a world we have forgotten. This is a world where people naturally congregate because we want to be together. A world where

we enjoy the age-old process of good conversation, where we're not afraid to talk about things that matter most to us. A world where we are not separated, classified or stereotyped. A world of simple greeting, free from technology and artificiality. A world that constantly surprises us with the wisdom that exists not in any one of us but in all of us. And a world where we learn that the wisdom we need to solve our problems is available when we talk together.

The World Café is built on the premise that all people "have the capacity to work together, *no matter who they are*" (p. ix) and dialogue around questions that deeply matter to them. It maintains two fundamental beliefs:

First, we humans want to talk together about things that matter to us. In fact, this is what gives satisfaction and meaning to life. Second as we talk together, we are able to access a greater wisdom that is found only in the collective. (p. ix)

It is through this process of attentive listening, dialogue, and communal sharing of life experiences that new insights arise. No matter the size of the group, participants usually sit four or six to a table. This small group setting ensures that each person at the table has a voice. Participants take turns sharing their thoughts on the topic at hand, while the other members of the table listen attentively. Through their listening to each other, the participants begin to discover a greater collective wisdom together.

Years ago, during The Global Women's History Project at the university where I teach, I participated in a World Café. As I sat at the table and listened to each participant share their personal stories and insights, I was inspired by their presence, their honesty, and the unique perspectives they offered on the question at hand. At first, I felt a bit intimidated to speak as I sat at a table with women from Syria, Iran, Lebanon, and Palestine. I remember thinking to myself, "What could I possibly offer to this conversation?" In addition, I was not accustomed to people giving

me their full undivided attention. Yet, as I moved from table to table, listening to each participant's meaningful lived experience, I became more curious and courageous, while at the same time deeply affected and relaxed. I slowly felt empowered to open up and offer my own perspective on the question at hand, with the recognition that it had been molded and shaped through my own authentic lived experiences. The café conversations, "designed on the assumption that people already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges" (p. 4), had unearthed wisdom and creativity within the diverse group of people that day. I left this event transformed. My worldview expanded and my heart became more compassionate.

FROM WORLD CAFÉ TO LISTENING CAFÉ

The World Café experience inspired me, but it also challenged me to create another way of reading, listening, interpreting, and responding to literary texts for my students that deepened the *lectio divina* pedagogy in a secular classroom, which I present in *Lectio Divina as Contemplative Pedagogy*. I wanted my students to have the opportunity to listen to the voices within the stories, to each other, and expand their worldview from this deep practice of listening. I wanted them to develop the courage to share their perspectives in light of their own experiences with the texts that we were reading in class as well as develop the capacity to listen with their alert receptive attention to the perspectives of others without judgment. I wanted them to understand that the focus and centerpiece of a literary text is never the text itself but the underlying universal human condition experienced by people from diverse cultures throughout time. My intention for adapting The World Café into my course was to create a community of listeners and learners, who practiced listening attentively to the multiple voices of people's experiences within the human condition, in hopes that they would come to understand, respect, and appreciate both the unity and diversity within the global family.

World Café is a "process of bringing people together around questions that matter. Again, it is founded on the assumption that people have the capacity to work together, *no matter who they are*" (Brown & Isaacs, 2005, p. ix). I first adapted Brown and Isaacs' World Café and renamed it

Listening Cafés in a course I designed called World Literature: Exploring the Human Condition. I decide to change the name for two reasons: to emphasize the active practice of listening and to honor the fact that I had slightly altered Brown and Isaacs' approach. Through our class Listening Cafés, I found that the students became more engaged with the stories and more eager to listen to and share their perspectives with each other. I have continued to refine and develop Listening Cafés in a new course I designed called "World Literature: The Search for Wisdom." I wanted to focus more intently on the art of listening, a listening deeper than the ears, a listening that include their hearts, their whole being. A type of listening that is depicted in the Chinese character *ting*. In *Nourishing Destiny* (2015, p. 358), acupuncturist and author Lonny Jarrett explains,

The character *ting* (listen 聽) is composed of the character that stands for the rectitude of the heart (惇) combined with that for the ear (耳) of the disciple who is listening attentively to the sage 王. The overall sense imparted by this character is that, through attentive listening, one's heart may be rectified. From the imagery of the character *ting*, we might define that ability to 'listen' as the ability to hear our hearts and the hearts of others without deviation.

I wanted my student to bend their ears towards the heart of the text, towards their own heart and the hearts of one another and listen without deviation. I wanted them to develop the courage to enter more deeply into what they were hearing, to face it and embrace it, rather than to shy away from it. I wanted my students to learn how to develop and strengthen their ability to listen and discern the inner voices of the stories we read in class as well as their own subjective experiences in response to these stories. I have observed that students cannot search for the deeper meaning within these stories nor begin to interpret them without first learning to listen to and discern the inner voices contained within the stories. In *Catalyzing the field: second person approaches to contemplative learning and inquiry* (Gunnlaugson et al., 2019), the authors and editors demonstrate the impact of the intersubjective turn: mostly importantly,

that it allows students to bend their ears towards one another to listen, and in this posture of attentive listening, they deepen dialogue and expand learning.

DEEPENING THE ART OF LISTENING: THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF WORLD CAFÉ

The World Café operates around seven main principles: create hospitality; set the context; encourage everyone's participation; explore questions that matter; connect diverse perspectives; listen together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions; and harvest and share collective discoveries (Brown & Isaacs, 2005, p. 174). I have adapted and incorporated these seven principles into a Listening Café to enhance the students' ability to deeply listen to the voices of the characters within the stories we read in class. These seven principles also help to prepare the students to listen attentively to each other's insights and perspectives in response to what they read together.

THE RESEARCH

In the remainder of this article, I describe the Listening Café as practiced in my World Literature: The Search for Wisdom course. I gathered this information as part of a SOTL grant I received in the spring of 2019 to assess how student-led Listening Cafés impact students' learning, understanding, and respect for self and others. I collected the data over the course of the semester which included three student questions created around a story, each through a specific lens, and an individual reflection paper on their experience leading a Listening Café. Upon completion of the semester I reread their questions, lenses, and reflection papers. I then cataloged the data through the lenses of *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio* and *contemplatio* and assessed it in terms of the impact on student learning, understanding, and respect for self and others. In the spring of 2019, I had two classes of World Literature totaling fifty-one students.

PREPARATION OF A LISTENING CAFÉ

Students need to feel welcome and know that their thoughts and insights are valued. I take time in class to introduce and model a Listening Café. I

set the context, including the structure, the intention, and the purpose, which helps the students to get a sense of the nuts and bolts of how a Listening Café actually works. By modeling a Listening Café with the students, they are able to experience one, get a sense what it is that I am asking them to do, and have an opportunity to practice with me and with each other. In my explanation and demonstration, I approach the whole process with a sense of openness, wonder, and curiosity as we create a safe space to listen together.

This past semester (spring 2019), I selected a story from India called “The Five Blind Men and an Elephant.” (The below tale from “Five Blind Men and an Elephant – A Story About Perspective” [Poke, 2010], is an adaption and retelling of a story found in Jalal al-Din Rumi’s *Masnavi*.) The story goes as follows:

Once upon a time, five blind men came upon an elephant.

“What is this?!” asked the first one, who had run head-long into its side.

“It’s an elephant.” said the elephant’s keeper, who was sitting on a stool, cleaning the elephant’s harness.

“Wow! So this is an elephant! I’ve always wondered what elephants are like!” said the man, running his hands as far as he could reach up and down the elephant’s side. “Why, it’s just like a wall! A large, warm wall!”

“What do you mean, a wall?” said the second man, wrapping his arms around the elephant’s leg. “This is nothing like a wall. You can’t reach around a wall! This is more like a pillar. Yeah, that’s it! An elephant is exactly like a pillar!”

“A pillar? Strange kind of pillar!” said the third man, stroking the elephant’s trunk. “It’s too thin, for one thing, and it’s too flexible for another. If you think this is

a pillar, I don't want to go to your house! This is more like a snake. See, it's wrapping around my arm! An elephant is just like a snake!"

"Snakes don't have hair!" said the fourth man in disgust, pulling the elephant's tail. "You are closer than the others, but I'm surprised that you missed the hair. This isn't a snake, it's a rope. Elephants are exactly like ropes."

"I don't know what you guys are on!" the fifth man cried, waving the elephant's ear back and forth. "It's as large as a wall, all right, but thin as a leaf, and no more flexible than any piece of cloth this size should be. I don't know what's wrong with all of you, but no one except a complete idiot could mistake an Elephant for anything except a sail!!!"

And as the elephant stepped aside, they tramped off down the road, arguing more loudly and violently as they went, each sure that he, and he alone, was right; and all the others were wrong.

Whereas the truth is that the elephant is... the elephant.

Our practice of reading and listening to the story began with reading the story out loud (*lectio*). I asked my students to form a large circle in the classroom and moving around the circle, I invited each student to read a paragraph out loud. Students may opt out of reading by simply saying pass, but I have found that this rarely happens. Next, we read the story again; however, this time we read it as a play. I invited the students to select a character (narrator, zoo keeper, first blind man, second blind man, third blind man, fourth blind man, and fifth blind man). Before the students began reading, I reminded them to read as though they are the character in the context of the story. I directed them to pay attention to punctuation, word choices, descriptions, tone, and emotions of the character, which are all prompts to help them embody their chosen character. Sometimes, I invited the students to pause in the course of their

reading and ask them to imagine the character and the situation. I asked them, “Do you think this is what this blind man sounded like?” However, when working with the students, I am cautious to be gentle, playful, and curious, rather than harsh, critical, and judgmental. Finally, I asked the students to read the story one more time quietly to themselves.

After reading and listening to the story, we moved deeper into the story by asking questions such as, “What did you see, hear, feel, notice or wonder about as you listened to the story?” The students responded that they saw the blind men’s inability to listen to one another. They heard each blind man explaining an elephant from his own perspective, but unable to open his mind to listen to other perspectives. The students sensed the rudeness of one blind man, pointing out the line, “I don’t know what’s wrong with all of you, but no one except a complete idiot could mistake an elephant for anything except a sail!!!” They felt the anger and frustration of the blind men as they leave the elephant arguing “more loudly and violently.”

They noticed that the zoo keeper answers the first blind man’s question, “What is this?” but after that remains silent as the blind men continue arguing with one another. The zoo keeper’s silence bothered them. They wondered why he never offers to clear up their misconceptions. They also wondered why the blind men didn’t engage in dialogue with each other to help them “see” and “understand” their various perspective of the elephant. Through this listening process, the students began to explore and experience the story on a deeper, more sensual level.

Now that the students were in the world of the text, I provided them with an interpretive tool, various pairs of plastic glasses, to search for deeper meaning and wisdom embedded within it. I had labeled the frames of the glasses with words such as literal, historical, personal, psychological, cultural, religious, college student, educational, political, healthcare, etc. Each pair of glasses served as an interpretive lens through which the students could interpret the story.

Again, before I asked the students to select a lens, I chose one and modeled it for them. For example, I selected a literal lens and put on the pair of glasses that had “literal” written across the front of the frame. Then, we read the story once again, this time paying close attention to

what the story says literally: Who says what? How do they say it? How do the others respond? Is there dialogue? Are there questions? If so, what are they? How do punctuation marks impact the meaning of what is being said and about the character who is saying it?

Once I had modeled for the students how to use this interpretive tool, I invited them to get into small groups and select one lens through which they read and interpret the story. One member from each group came up to the front of the class, selected a pair of glasses, and brought it back to their group. As I looked around the room, I inevitably saw one of the students in the group wearing the pair of glasses as they reexamined the story through their chosen lens. Through this exercise, the students began to move deeper into a subjective experience of the story. During this time, I walked around to each group, working with them individually to answer any questions and guide them through this activity. After about ten minutes, I invited each group to share out loud the lens they chose along with what they discovered looking at the story through their chosen lens. As the students listened to each other, their minds start to open as they begin to “see,” “hear,” and “feel” the story through various perspectives.

INTERSUBJECTIVE LISTENING

Upon completion of this small group activity, I invited students to form six groups with five students in each group (I typically have thirty students in a class; however, if the class is smaller, I adjust the size of the groups). I explained to the students that I was going to teach them how to create a Listening Café around the story “The Five Blind Men and the Elephant.” The Listening Café is an opportunity for us to listen to each other’s perspective on the story. I emphasize that it is not about finding the “right” answer; rather, it is about being thoughtful and honest as we continue to explore the story for deeper meaning.

For this first Listening Café, on “The Five Blind Men and the Elephant,” I placed on each table one strip of paper bearing a quote from the story along with a specific lens and question. I set up two tables (or groups of chairs) for each of the three different table configurations, for a total of six tables. Below is an example of what was on each table from

the story “The Five Blind Men and the Elephant.” Note that tables 1a and 1b have the same quote, lens, and question, as do tables 2a and 2b and 3a and 3b respectively. This set-up helped me to facilitate the Listening Café for my specific class size.

Tables 1a and 1b – Quote: “‘What is this?!’ asked the first one, who had run headlong into its side.”

(Cultural Lens) Question: What prevents you from inquiring into another person’s culture or way of life?

Tables 2a and 2b – Quote: “I don’t know what’s wrong with all of you, but no one except a complete idiot could mistake an Elephant for anything except a sail!!!”

(Personal Lens) Question: When have you been mistaken about someone or something?

Tables 3a and 3b – Quote: “And as the elephant stepped aside, they tramped off down the road, arguing more loudly and violently as they went, each sure that he, and he alone, was right; and all the others were wrong.”

(Political/Hegemonic Lens) Question: How does your affiliation with a particular political belief, position of power or membership in a group, impact your ability to listen to others?

During the Listening Café, the students had one minute to share their response to the question at each of the tables. After all the students responded to the question, they dispersed to a different grouping of chairs (or table) which had a different quote, lens, and question. The front two groups (tables #1) had the same lens and question, the middle two groups (tables #2) had the same lens and question, and the back two groups (tables #3) had the same lens and question. There was no specific order. The students had the choice to move to any table of their choosing as long as they answered all three questions

While the students participated in the Listening Café, I pulled up a chair and listened with them. I also watched the time, signaling when it is time to switch to a new table. While I did not participate in this first

Listening Café due to the fact that I was the one leading it, I did participate in the student-led Listening Cafés throughout the remainder of the semester.

After the students had completed the full exercise (all three questions), we moved the chairs back into a large circle. Once the students had settled, I proceeded to read out loud the quote from the story, the lens, and the accompanying question, and invited the students to share with the class what they heard in their small groups. As students shared, we all listen together. As we listened, we noticed new perspectives and insights arising. We also noticed deeper questions emerging. During this communal sharing, I did not comment; rather, I listened with interest and wonder at the students' discoveries. I wrote some of their thoughts, insights, and questions on the chalkboard, so we could go back to these thoughts later. At the end of the Listening Café, I acknowledged and thanked them for their participation and thoughtful responses with an applause.

THE STUDENT-LED LISTENING CAFÉS

Throughout the semester, the students were responsible for matching up with one or two students (depending on the number of students in the class) to prepare and lead one Listening Café. They were also responsible for writing one reflection paper on their experience (one per student) of the whole Listening Café process (preparation, leading, reflection on it), which counted for ten percent of their final grade. In the beginning of the semester, I created a sign-up sheet with dates and invited the students to select a date for their Listening Café. In the syllabus, each date corresponded to particular stories that we were reading, listening to, analyzing, and searching for deeper meaning that week.

Again, once the students selected a date for their Listening Café, they referred to the syllabus for the story/stories corresponding to that week. While some students decided to focus their Listening Café around one story, others decided to use two or three. However, regardless of the number of stories a group selected, all groups were required to have a total of three quotes, three lenses, and three questions to place on each group of chairs/tables (#1, #2, and #3). Again, the students set the

classroom up with two groups of #1 in the front, two groups of #2 in the middle, and two groups of #3 in the back.

LECTIO: DEEPENING READING AND ATTENTIVE LISTENING

As each group prepared their Listening Café they had to go back to the stories and re-read them in order to become more familiar with them. One student explained the benefit of the preparation process, stating,

Preparing the listening café forces the student to not only be intimately aware of the source material, but also able to distill the meaning of the original work into something good for discussion. This level of familiarity is phenomenal for fully digesting literature.

Notice that the above student mentioned having a “level of familiarity” with the text and recognized the importance of having such familiarity, stating, “This level of familiarity is phenomenal for fully digesting literature.” In addition, the students had to work to “distill meaning” to create questions that were “good for discussion.” This student revealed that his intention was to create something “good for discussion,” meaning he was invested in the assignment and thinking about his audience (his classmates and professor).

As the students read and reread the stories, they selected a line from the story that they *wanted* to focus on. It was their choice. As noted in the World Café experiences, I too have found that my students want to talk about things that matter to them. No longer were the students just skimming through the pages of stories; instead, through their process of preparing a Listening Café, the students deepened their intersubjective experience with the characters in relationship to their own lives.

MEDITATIO: THE SEARCH FOR DEEPER MEANING

As the students continued their preparation process, they chose lenses with which to read the story through. Each lens offered a unique perspective to view the human experience embedded within the story. In the syllabus, I provided the students with some possible lenses along with some questions to facilitate their thinking (see below); however, I also allowed them to create lenses of their own.

Possible Lenses:

Literal: plot summary (who, what, where, why, when, how); literary elements such as allegory, alliteration, symbols, metaphors, similes, etc.?

Cultural: What culture is this story from? What did these people deem important? Is this still true today in our culture? Why? Why not?

Moral: What moral wisdom is shared in this story? According to the story, how do people behave? Why? What motivates them to behave this way? Is this true today? What can be learned through this story?

Philosophical: What philosophical wisdom is shared through this story? What is the meaning of life? What constitutes the good life? Fate vs. free will? What is the goal of humanity? Suffering, is it necessary? What is the role of suffering? What are humans capable of? Is there a benefit in knowing oneself? If so, what is it?

Political/Hegemonic: Where is the power located in this story? What wisdom does this story share about power or lack of power (perceived or true)? Who has power? How are they using their power?

Psychological: What wisdom does this story share about one's inner thoughts, behavior, emotions, struggles, desires, or capabilities?

Worldview (religious/mythological): Is there any wisdom shared in terms of beliefs/worldview (religion or myth)?

College Student: What wisdom does this story contain for a college student?

Abject horror/"Other": Is there any wisdom in dealing with "the other," not like me? If so, what is it?

Educational: What lesson(s) are being taught? Are they still valid today? Is there value in reading stories? If so, what? If not, why not?

After selecting a lens, the students created one question using that lens as a window into the story. One student commented about this process, stating,

Creating the questions for the listening café gave me the opportunity to think about the story in a more in-depth way...When coming up with questions, it caused me to have to dive deeper into the meaning of the story because we didn't want the questions to just scratch the surface of the true meaning of the story.

As the students prepared their Listening Café, they continued to search the story for meaning as they thought about the story in "a more in-depth way" and dove "deeper into the meaning of the story."

Below is an example from one group of students who decided to focus their entire Listening Café on one story. They selected a story from the Jewish tradition, called "Feathers," in which a rabbi demonstrates the consequences of gossip. In their preparation, the students selected three quotes from the story to help the classmates move deeper into a subjective experience with the story. Their Listening Café contained the following three questions:

#1 Behavioral Lens

Quote: "...he decided to use action, which often speaks louder than words."

Question: Why is talking to people sometimes not enough to get your point across?

#2 Hindsight Lens

Quote: "I cannot catch all those feathers. Some are near and some have already gone over the wall. They've gone into every nook and cranny. It would be impossible to gather them all."

Question: Have you ever said something that you wish you could take back? Why do you want to take it back?

#3 Personal Lens

Quote: "Understanding the effect of his actions at last, the man returned

to the victim's house and apologized. He never spoke harmful words of another again."

Question: Have you ever been in a situation where you didn't consider the consequences of your actions until it was too late? How did that experience change you?

These three questions invited the students into the story about gossip by helping them to enter more deeply into the subjective experience of the characters, allowing them to consider, grapple, and understand more deeply the consequences of gossip within the context of the story, but also within the context of their own lives. In addition, this group of students created a new lens (the hindsight lens) as a way to invite students to reflect back on their past actions.

Other groups of students prepared a Listening Café on multiple stories. Below are some examples from the Listening Cafés that students led throughout the semester. As you read through the lenses, quotes, and questions, notice how the students moved from the outer objective world of the story into the inner subjective world of themselves. By doing so, the students were entering into a dialogue with the text, and since these questions are the focus of each table's café conversation, they are entering into dialogue with one another on issues that matter to them.

A Sample of Students' Lenses Quotes and Questions

College Lens: "A Drop of Honey" from Thailand

Quotes: "Small problems if unattended, grow into larger ones, and a whole kingdom can be lost from a drop of honey."

Question: Have you ever ignored little problems in college until they felt too large to resolve?

Cultural Lens: "The King and his Falcon" from Asia

Quote: "Then the king looked down at his dead bird, the bird that had saved his life. He climbed down and sadly put his loyal friend into his hunting bag. He rode slowly home that day, vowing never again to act in anger."

Questions: Do you think our society promotes violence or tries to promote non-violence?

Educational Lens: *The Dhammapada* (Buddhist)

Quote: “All that we are is a result of all that we have thought. We are molded and shaped by our thoughts.”

Question: How has your approach towards higher education molded/changed the way you view/approach the world?

Moral Lens: “The Question” (Hasidic)

Quote: “Zusya, why were you not Zusya?”

Question: Do you allow others to influence you into becoming someone that you don’t want to be?

Political Lens: “The Struggle of the Butterfly” (unknown origin)

Quote: “Sometimes struggles are exactly what we need in life. If nature allowed us to go through our life without any obstacle, it would cripple us. We would not be as strong as we could have been. And we could never fly...”

Question: In the United States today what do you think cripples us as a nation?

Psychological Lens: “The Difference Between Heaven and Hell” (Japan)

Quote: “But the people in heaven were plump and rosy-cheeked, and as she watched the musical sound of laughter filled the air. And then the old woman laughed, for now she understood the difference. The people in heaven were using three-foot-long chopsticks to feed each other.” Question: Do you allow yourself to be fed by others? Why/why not?

Relationship Lens: “The Bag of Gold” (India)

Quote: “I cannot give this to him because he is not yet ready to receive it.”

Question: When was a time that you were the bag of gold that someone wasn’t ready to receive?

As demonstrated in the students’ questions above, the students had to know the story and hear it speaking to them in order to create lenses and questions that mattered to them.

Creating the questions for the listening café gave me the opportunity to think about the story in a more in depth way...When coming up with the questions, it caused me to have to dive deeper into the meaning of the story because we didn't want the questions to just scratch the surface of the true meaning of the story.

ORATIO: STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO THE LISTENING CAFÉ EXPERIENCE

Below, are the various realizations students experienced through the Listening Cafés.

The Distracted and Wandering Mind

As mentioned above, after the students completed their turn preparing and leading a Listening Café, they were each required to submit a two-page typed written reflection on their experience. Although preparing and leading the Listening Café was a group activity, the reflection paper was an individual activity. In their written reflection papers, the students revealed their struggle to listen attentively to others. They became aware of their inner distractions and wandering minds and realized that their preoccupation with themselves prevented them from listening attentively to what others were sharing. As one student noted,

The listening cafés we had in class helped me learn a great deal about myself. A common topic that came up in several listening cafés was being able to ignore distractions. I feel like this class and our constant discussions about controlling our thoughts has definitely brought my awareness to my wandering mind. I realized that I even have difficulty with simply listening to my peers who are sharing. Before it is my turn, I am constantly thinking about what I am going to say and perfecting it in my mind. However, after participating in all these listening cafés, I have learned that it is good to stop and listen to my peers speak.

Developed Self-Confidence

The students felt that the Listening Café experiences helped them become more confident in their abilities to read deeply, analyze, and interpret the stories. As a result, the students were able to participate more fully in the stories, relate them to their personal life experiences, and even find meaning for themselves.

The questions took the longest amount of time to form because they were the most important part of the listening café. I learned that coming up with thoughtful questions rather than questions that can be answered in a few words takes time to form and require a deep understanding of the reading.

Leading the Listening Café also helped the students to overcome their initial fear of being in front of their classmates. Through the process, the students became more self-confident and aware of their own leadership skills. By taking on the role of a leader, the students came to appreciate that what they had experienced and learned in their Listening Café experience could be adapted in their other courses.

The listening café was an upbringing experience for someone who usually doesn't look forward to being in front of the class. As soon as I had to go over the questions with the whole class, my nerves settled down and I was able to hold a conversation about my two questions. I have a presentation in another class for a final, and I am looking forward to practicing my presentation skills.

Opened their Minds and Expanded their Worldview

The students found that the slow reading of a text made it easier for them to experience the text, to pose questions of the text, and search for wisdom within it. The students also noticed that the *slow* reading method was a way of listening to the texts that opened their minds to new ideas, challenged their understanding of themselves in relation to others, broadened their perspectives on the human condition, and expanded their worldviews.

It was a lot of fun to work with our texts. Encouraging us to look at it in different perspectives is a very insightful idea. After reading a text for the first time, a perspective is already established, and the more you think about the text, and the different lenses you can put on a piece brings up so many opportunities for growth of one's mind.

Fostered Community

The Listening Café experience helped the students to relate to one another on a deeper and more personal level. It also helped to foster a sense of community within the class.

Being part of the listening cafés was a blessing. It was a time for me to share who I was with the class. The questions, sometimes uncomfortable, helped me to relate to my peers and understand them beyond the surface level. These cafés created a learning community that was a safe and comfortable space to speak. The community in your classroom was unlike any I had experienced before.

As the students listened to one another share their viewpoints, personal struggles, and life experiences, they developed a greater respect and appreciation for one another. The students became more honest and genuine in their interactions with one another and became more open-minded and caring as they listened attentively to their classmates' personal narratives.

Hearing everyone answer questions using their own personal experiences has given me a real sense of appreciation for my classmates and what they have gone through in their lives. It made me realize that we truly never know what someone else is going through on a daily basis... these interactions are much more genuine, and I think that has caused us to form a comradery as a class.

As the students developed and deepened their appreciation and respect for one another, they began to see that they, too, were bearers

of wisdom and as a result, leaned in a little closer to listen to the contributions of their classmates.

In order to obtain wisdom from people in your life, you must already have an understanding that they have wisdom to share. When I realized the impact of each person's contribution, I started really listening to what everyone had to say and I got so much more from the class and the people in it. Every person has a different perspective and this semester had taught me that with these differing perspectives, comes a wealth of knowledge that is only accessible to those who allow themselves to learn.

Overall, the Listening Café experience introduced the students to a new way of reading, listening to, and interpreting a text in relationship to their own lived experience. Listening Cafés extended and deepened the *lectio* and *meditatio* processes, which supported the students in their ability to articulate both their responses (*oratio*) and transformative moments (*contemplatio*). Slow attentive listening and student engagement led to perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991, p.167) as well as self-transformation, key features of contemplative education and specifically, *lectio divina*. The students not only became aware of their wandering minds, they learned to discipline them and focus them on listening to one another. Through the practice of listening, they strengthened their abilities to read, interpret, and respond to the stories. The deeper they listened, the more they expanded their perspectives and deepened their understanding of self in relation to others. Listening to the stories they read and to one another's experiences and perspectives, the students began to find a deeper understanding of themselves. As Palmer notes (2007, p. 30), "Encounters with mentors and subjects can awaken a sense of self and yield clues to who we are." Students encounter these mentors and subjects within the stories and within one another. Through the practice of listening, they awakened to a deeper sense of self, one that was more accepting, respectful, and caring for themselves and others.

CONCLUSION

“Is it too big a stretch of our imaginations to envision a world engaged in conversations that have real heart and meaning for us all?” (Peter M. Senge in Brown & Isaacs, 2005, p. 220)

As this article points out, the adaptation of World Café to a Listening Café is another way of deepening and expanding the *lectio divina* method of reading in my courses. Throughout the semester, the students experienced a paradigm shift. Reading was no longer something a student did to just memorize information and pass the course. It became much more than that. The students discovered that reading required attentive listening. This attentive listening became integral to understanding themselves, others, and the human condition. As they read and listened to the stories, they came to understand that they, too, face many of the same issues. They began to relate to these issues and in doing so, began to see the stories, as persons, speaking to them. The deeper the students connected to the story, the more they leaned in to listen to the wisdom within the story, and enter into dialogue with it and one another about what they heard, saw, and felt. Through the deepening and expanding of *lectio divina* through Listening Cafés, the students entered into an intersubjective experience with the text and with one another.

Through intersubjective listening the students began to feel comfortable showing up to one another and sharing their deeper truths. The Listening Café guided the students on a journey into the text, wherein they could experience, interpret, and respond to the text together and engage in an intersubjective dialogue on what they had encountered. Scott (2014, p. 337) shares that

The intrinsic value of dialogue as a contemplative practice lies in its ability to create, uncover and explore, and develop meaning; to manifest an *I-Thou* relationship, which reveals and affirms self and others; and to serve as a way of being in the world. This creation of meaning in and through relationships reveals what is sacred in ourselves, others [and] the world...

Reading and listening created a dynamic process of intersubjective dialogue, which guided and awakened the students into an *I-Thou* relationship (Buber, 1970) as they searched the text for deeper meaning and wisdom to bring into their lives.

The Listening Café experience deepened and expanded the *lectio divina* practice as it guided the students into intersubjective dialogue with the stories and with one another. As I note in “A Three-Tired Monastic Approach to Intersubjective Dialogue within Higher Education” (2019, p. 188),

Intersubjective dialogue is an integral part of the *lectio divina* practice. Intersubjective dialogue (literally between subjects) understands that there is an active, conscious, and communal field that people can access and cohabitate. ...Intersubjective dialogue as a contemplative practice is a way of being open to, present with, and moving together with the dynamic principle of life within and between conscious beings, as we seek the highest *I-Thou* relationship possible in every given moment.

Intersubjective listening and dialogue had a positive effect on them. Throughout the semester the students came to realize, as one student voiced, “that wisdom and greatness dwell within all people and can be tapped into and attained by putting in the work...” Due to the students’ commitment to the practice of listening, their perspectives shifted and their minds and their hearts opened and softened. In essence, these students experienced a *contemplatio* moment; they had a transformative experience. Through the Listening Café their perspective shifted, changed, and/or grew as they were no longer the same persons who had initially gathered around the tables together. As a community of learners, they listened for the highest *I-Thou* relationship, which inspired them to become more aware, respectful, and caring for oneself and others. Through the students’ participation in Listening Cafés, an ordinary practice of listening became a powerful learning technique, perhaps best summed up by Bache (2004-2005, pp. 35-36):

Everyone knows that words not supported by the energy of a person's experience carry much less power to influence others than words which are. This happens, I think, not because the words themselves are different or are delivered with a different inflection, but because when people speak, they unleash a tangible but invisible power into the space around them. The power comes ultimately from our experience and from the energetic access that our experience has created in us. Our words float on this power, like a canoe floating on a rushing stream. Moreover, it is not just the speaker's power that is important here but the power of the mental-emotional-spiritual field of the entire group...In the playful dance of course content and energetic resonance, ordinary learning sometimes crosses a threshold to become Great Learning.

Throughout the semester, as the students engaged in slow reading, deep listening, perspective gathering, interpretation, and honest genuine responding, they were tapping into the mental-emotional-spiritual field, which guided them across the threshold from ordinary learning to Great Learning.

REFERENCES

- Bache, C. M. (2004, November-2005, February). High Octane Learning. *Shift: At the Frontiers of Consciousness* (5), 35-36.
- Brown, J. & Isaacs, D. (2005). *The World Café: Shaping Our Future Through Conversations that Matter*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Buber, M. (1970). *I and Thou*. (W. Kaufman, Trans). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Cajete, G. (2017). "Children, myth and storytelling: An Indigenous perspective" *Global Studies of Childhood* Vol. 7(2) 113-130. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2043610617703832>

- Pearmain, E. D. (ed). (2007). *Doorways to the Soul: Wisdom Tales from Around the World*. Eugene, OR: Resource Publications.
- First Peoples Worldwide. (n.d.). *How Our Societies Work*. <http://www.first-peoples.org/how-our-societies-work.htm>
- Gunnlaugson, O., Sarath, E., Scott, C. & Bai, H. (eds). (2019). *Catalyzing the field: second person approaches to contemplative learning and inquiry*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Igumen Chariton of Valamo (ed). (1997). *The Art of Prayer, an Orthodox Anthology*, p. 130. London: Faber and Faber.
- Jarret, L. (2015). *Nourishing Destiny: The Inner Tradition of Chinese Medicine*. Richmond, MA: Spirit Path Press.
- Keator, M. (2018). *Lectio Divina as Contemplative Pedagogy: Re-appropriating Monastic Practice for the Humanities*. New York: Routledge.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Nepo, M. (2012). *Seven Thousand Ways to Listen: Staying Close to What is Sacred*. Free Press.
- Palmer, P. J. (2007). *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Poke, D. (2010, July 23). Five Blind Men and an Elephant – A Story About Perspective. *Better Life Coaching Blog*. <https://betterlifecoachingblog.com/2010/07/23/five-blind-men-and-an-elephant-a-story-about-perspective/>
- Scott, C. (2014). Buberian dialogue as an intersubjective contemplative practice. In O. Gunnlaugson, E. W. Sarath, C. Scott, & H. Bai (eds), *Contemplative learning and inquiry across disciplines*. Albany State University of New York Press.
- The Listening Center. (2009). *The Sacred Art of Listening*. http://www.sacredlistening.com/ylic_listening101.htm

