

Story-Listening: Relational Reporting on a Wicked Problem

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Goal: The best news reporters have a knack for finding the right sources with the best information and distilling their interactions into narratives that resonate, illuminate, and stick to the facts. But how well do we train journalism students to listen to those sources? What would change about reporting if students were taught state-of-the-art listening skills, coupled with a variety of storytelling techniques, by a team of one journalist and one expert in listening?

This GIFT Is meant to train journalism students in multiple aspects of listening, including the following key topics for this assignment:

- Listening styles (analytical, critical, relational, and task-oriented);
- Listening and cognition;
- Storytelling effects on listening; and
- Listener effects on storytelling.

Following student knowledge-building and self-reflexivity, they set out to listen to and report on a “wicked problem.” This improves their own skills as a listener. For example, one student stated: “This has been one of my favorite classes during my tenure at CSU. ... It was so introspective and I really enjoyed exploring the ideas/minds of other perspectives. It almost felt that our classroom had some type of spell on it where most of us would walk in and feel safe enough to share our true beliefs.”

One of the key take-aways for students is that since there is no one way to listen, there is also no one way to tell a story. How they listen has clear effects on how they told the story, and how it would be received. In addition, the purposeful act of listening leads to stories about those less likely to be heard. Voices not common in media become important, new perspectives emerge, old divisions start to fade to be replaced with more dialogical approaches to the wicked problem of division. For example, one student who engaged this process stated: “The larger themes I'm seeing emerge are those of people who are feeling underrepresented and unheard. There's a lot of injustice running through the projects I've reviewed. The "them" here would be an audience who refuses to listen and/or take action for the benefit of the "other.””

Note: Even in the context of evolving course needs (e.g., coronavirus moving the whole course online), students can reflect on possibilities in digital and in-person contexts and how, together, they might better engage wicked problems. As one student stated, “When I engage with digital stories and ‘conversations’ I have to be much more focused than if I were talking to someone or actively engaged in a dialogue. For me, digital listening is much more intense, requires much more focus, and it's a lot harder for me to listen and remember what I just read or heard, unless it is truly profound. I rely heavily on interpersonal interactions for listening, and it's tough for me to listen the same, or at least remember as much...”

Story-Listening Teaching Process:

Step 1: Deliberate on the subject of the stories students would report, using the framework of “wicked problems.” Students should be catalysts in deciding what that topic would be, and multiple dialogues are probably required. Choose a broad category (e.g., “Us vs. Them”) and then refine that idea to specific domains (e.g. political partisanship, inequality, and climate conflicts). Each student should pick one of those three domains and develop a story idea that fits into the larger “wicked problem” that they chose.

Step 2: With the topic in mind, engage readings about styles of listening and listener effects on storytelling. Students read research from the *International Journal of Listening*, *The Wisdom of Listening* (anthology), and *Relating Narratives* by Adriana Cavarero.

Step 3: Students write brief reflections on how the readings changed the way they have been thinking and create a strategic question to prompt meaningful class discussion. All of the questions are gathered by the instructors, distributed to the class at the beginning of the discussion, and are used as seeds for discussion about each of the readings.

Step 4: Instructors lead listening demonstrations in class, using different styles and techniques from other fields, including counseling, dialogue, deliberation, and interpersonal communication.

Step 5: Students workshop story ideas, recruit interview/focus group sources, choose listening styles from the readings that they had not used before, and set off to create stories in multiple different media, including podcasts, feature stories, videos, participatory action research.

Step 6: Students share their projects with each other and deliberate on how all of the work would come together to address the chosen “wicked problem.” For example, they might create a multi-episode podcast (featuring a handful of students in each episode) in which they discuss both the stories themselves and the processes of story-listening they used during the reporting.

Or they might participate in engaged community dialogue and deliberation with local community members to strategize how to promote community good through engaged scholarship. See, for example: <https://cpd.colostate.edu/community-projects/>