



Listening and Learning: The Joys of Teaching

By Dr. Juanita Copley

It was a beautiful fall day in Houston, Texas... one of those rare days that is just the right temperature, a day with little humidity, a light breeze, and cloudless skies. As part of a department of education grant, I was excited to spend my entire day with six classes of first graders and their teachers, modeling and sharing mathematics activities. As I opened the front door of Martin Elementary School, I was greeted by two first graders who ran down the hallway shouting, “The great BIG teacher is here. She’s got lots of stuff!”

While I appreciated their enthusiastic advertisement, I was wondering why I was classified as the “great big teacher.” Did I need to lose weight? Yes. Was I just taller than them? Yes. Do I need to review what BIG meant? Yes, in fact we had just spent time with a unit on measurement that involved specific terms for BIG, e.g., length, width, weight, capacity, and I thought I had taught the more specific math meaning of big.

So... I decided to ask them, “Why did you call me the ‘great big’ teacher?”

“Cause we forgot your name and you are ‘great big’ and you’re more numbers than our teacher and you are the boss!” After further investigation, I discovered that they meant I was older than their teacher (true) and that I was there to help them learn math in a “more fun” way (true).

The Lesson I Learned

By nature, I am a talkative person and as a beginning teacher I spent most of my time telling, explaining, directing, responding, controlling, preaching, correcting, talking, and talking and talking. I thought my main job was to teach, to tell my students what they needed to know. As the years have progressed, I have learned that listening helps me learn what my students know, their perceptions and beliefs, their current environment for learning, and how they learn best. In other words, I have learned about teaching from listening to my students and focusing on them as I teach. Yes, I have been teaching, but my students have taught me as well.

James 3 begins with the words, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check” (vs. 1-2). Then, after a sermon on “taming the tongue,” James ends with the meaning of wisdom and understanding. “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom” (v. 13).

These scriptures address the importance of listening and learning. I am not advocating that as teachers we never talk or explain or prompt discussions. Of course not, but I am suggesting that we 1) spend more time listening to students, 2) model actions that match our words with an understanding heart, and 3) focus on our students and what they have learned and not on our own imperfections and shortcomings.

Examples of What I Learned

Let me give just a few more examples that illustrate how listening to students has helped me learn and understand them.

- I encouraged discussions by asking math questions to my seventh-grade algebra students and often did not respond to their answers to difficult problems. When I was quiet after asking a question (without allowing my face to show right/wrong answers), their peers often gave their suggestions or expressed frustration/relief as they listened to the ideas of others. Many times, no one said anything for a long 30 seconds and when others responded, their reasoning was often amazing. More importantly, when I listened, I learned about their understanding and how I could teach or provide better learning experiences.
- Amanda was a junior in the College of Education at the University of Houston. As the chair of the department, I served as the final judge for those students who had cheated or broken the student code in some way. Amanda was sent to talk to me. Although I had all the documentation necessary that would result in her exit from the program, I asked her to tell me her story. I listened with no interruptions. There were long silences, especially when she ran out of excuses for her behavior, but I just listened. At the end of the conference, I understood her situation (a recent death, a relationship loss, and a dangerous environment), and yet I still exited her from the program. However, Amanda took responsibility for her behavior and selected an option that made it possible for her to return as a student during the next semester. Most importantly, she asked me to pray for her and I did!
- I was privileged to teach four children from one family in junior church and Sunday school for the past three years. Each of the children has specific needs, with a variety of diagnoses that cause them often to be argumentative and negative to each other. It seemed I spent most of my time correcting their behavior, and I often wondered if my teaching had any effect on their daily life. At Christmas this past year, I invited the entire family to my home for dinner and a time of Christmas sharing. The youngest child, aged 5,

opened every door in my home and was amazed that my “car was IN the house” (garage) and that I had “THREE toilets and you are only one person! Wow!” As I listened to him, I was reminded how truly blessed I am. I was able to tell each of them how special they were. They all hugged me as they left that night and later, one of them asked if I could be their grandma. What joy I experienced! My actions and their responses demonstrated the love of Christ as we modeled care for each other.

I agree with James when he stated, “Not many of you should become teachers.” I am just glad that God called me to teach, listen and learn from my students, and experience the joy of teaching! Thank you, Lord!

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