



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Listening in the Classroom
(*Schools in a Pluralist Culture*, pp. 27-34)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 One Makes All the Difference
(*Schools in a Pluralist Culture*, pp. 62-65)
- 📖 Teaching ESL to Immigrant Families in Public Schools
(*Schools in a Pluralist Culture*, pp. 66-70)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Listening in the Classroom

The classroom as a pluralist space should not be seen as a space of contention and disagreeableness, but should be appreciated for its potential to cultivate peace and extend moral awareness. As teachers and students listen—to texts, to marginalized voices, for privilege, and through activism and experiential learning—they can work together to create learning rooted in justice.

Prayer

Father, grant us your grace that we may love
those who are different than we are,
those who are in need of our time,
those who have hurt us or offended us,
those who may not love us back.

In the presence of your Son, Jesus Christ,
and through the power of your Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 145:14-21

Meditation†

At a moment when childhood poverty is shamefully widespread, when many families are under constant stress, when schools are often limited by lack of funds or resources, criticism of the public schools often ignores an essential truth: we cannot believe that we can improve public schools by concentrating on the schools alone. They alone can neither cause nor cure the problems we face. In this context, we must address with prayerful determination the issues of race and class, which threaten both public education and democracy in America.

Reflection

In elementary schools through graduate schools across America, there is more and more religious, cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity among students. These increasingly pluralist classrooms provide wonderful opportunities for what Mercy Oduyoye calls “a globalization of shalom”—a deeper understanding and wider realization of the justice and peace God intends for the world—if we can learn to listen to one another.

“Intentional listening is required from both teachers and students,” Melissa Browning writes, “to create space not only for individual voice finding, but also for communal moral formation.” She commends these good listening practices:

- ▶ *listening to texts.* “A good course...includes the seminal texts on the subject,” Browning notes, but what counts as “seminal” depends somewhat on the context. Do the assigned texts—books, articles, artwork, and so on—present mutually enriching perspectives? Do they draw students into the conversation? “Selections written by women, by individuals in the Two-Thirds World, and by others who have been historically marginalized can create space for students from these same contexts to find their own voice.”
- ▶ *listening to marginalized voices.* Some voices are not represented in the “bodies of literature...developed and extended by those with privilege, education, and the time to write.” So, Browning enriches here classes with ethnographies, or life stories. One of her



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colleagues requires students to interview “someone of a different culture, socio-economic class, or gender” in order to help them “anchor the content of the course to issues of race, class, gender, and privilege.”

- ▶ *listening for privilege*. Some classrooms represent the privilege associated with race, ethnicity, and wealth more than others. A pluralist classroom “can be a site for recognizing and examining privilege,” Browning writes. Stereotypes and myths can be identified and then replaced with new patterns of understanding and moral practices. “As these stereotypes arise in the classroom and interfere with our seeking the truth, we must take the time to explore why they exist.”
- ▶ *listening through activism and experiential learning*. In every academic subject, “connections can be made to historic or present injustice.” Classroom activism and service learning will not change the world, but it can “help students develop moral habits. The ten hours of community service they log may do little for the service agencies they assist, but it may have a significant impact on the students’ moral formation.”

The goal is for teachers and students “to *hear one another into speech*,” Browning writes. “As we learn to listen both to marginalized voices and to our own places of privilege, the classroom becomes a space to cultivate peace and discern the contours of our common moral obligations. As we listen together through activism and experiential learning, we develop a solidarity of listening that can lead to justice beyond the classroom walls.”

Study Questions

1. Consider the increased diversity in your city or town over the past few decades. What factors account for this change? What challenges and opportunities has this shift in population caused for schools and churches in your community?
2. How might the listening practices that Melissa Browning describes lead to *individual voice finding*? How might they encourage *communal moral formation*?
3. Will the listening practices that Browning mentions *support* or *interfere with* the main goals of education in a classroom?
4. Discuss how the KIDS HOPE USA mentoring program, which Virgil Gulker describes in “One Makes All the Difference,” incorporates some of the listening practices that Browning commends.
5. Discuss how the Learning English Among Friends family literacy program, described by Randy Wood in “Teaching ESL to Immigrant Families in Public Schools,” incorporates some of the listening practices that Browning commends.
6. How does Carolyn Winfrey Gillette’s hymn, “God, You Give Each Generation,” help us see the pluralist classroom as an opportunity to love God’s children?

Departing Hymn: “God, You Give Each Generation”

† National Council of Churches, *The Churches and the Public Schools at the Close of the Twentieth Century* (1999).

Listening in the Classroom

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Psalm 145:14-21	Psalm 146:5-10
Meditation	Meditation	Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss the listening practices	Consider creating programs like KIDS HOPE USA and LEAF
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4, 5, and 6

Teaching Goals

1. To describe the challenges and opportunities presented by increasing religious, cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity within school classrooms.
2. To discuss listening practices that can promote individual voice finding and communal moral formation in a pluralist classroom.
3. To consider how congregations can support learning in pluralist school classrooms.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Schools in a Pluralist Culture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

The diversity of her students' ethnic backgrounds became clear to Melissa Browning when she invited them to identify the countries they were connected to. "Using an online travel map, we went through each country and they answered 'yes' if they or a member of their immediate family had lived in or visited that country. Among the forty-three students, 149 countries were represented. According to the travel map's calculation, our class was connected to two-thirds of the world." The university where she teaches is located in a Chicago neighborhood where eighty languages are spoken. She notes, "The migration movements associated with globalization that have shaped urban populations for years are broadening to include midsize cities and small towns. The resulting religious, cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity in classrooms has both positive and negative consequences" (*Schools in a Pluralist Culture*, 27-28).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer in the study guide in unison.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 145:14-21 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

The increasing religious, cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity in school classrooms makes teaching more complicated and learning more difficult today. In the previous study guide, "What Teachers Love about Teaching," Stephen Webb reminded us that teachers engender "a real intimacy of minds" by creating a safe place and time

for students to “share stories, information, questions, and ideas in confidence, without worrying what other people might say.” This is more difficult when teachers and students bring suspicions, stereotypes, and distrust about one another into the classroom. Melissa Browning commends listening practices to help us “*hear one another into speech*” – to question the stereotypes and overcome the fears that may divide us.

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In one session, examine the listening practices described by Browning. In the other session, discuss how you can support pluralist classrooms in local schools through creative programs like KIDS HOPE USA (KHUSA) and Learning English Among Friends (LEAF). For a free information kit and DVD about starting a KHUSA chapter in your community, visit www.kidshopeusa.org. For information about developing a program like LEAF, contact Dr. Randy Wood at the Center for Christian Education at Baylor University (Randy_Wood@Baylor.edu).

Study Questions

1. Outline the changes in religious, cultural, racial, and ethnic demographics of your city and town over the last few decades. What are the major causes: immigration, the attraction of new educational institutions or industries, job losses due to industry plant closings, changes in agricultural land use, and so on. How have local schools and congregations been affected by these demographic shifts? Have they experienced growing pains, or difficult losses in participation? Discuss both the challenges and positive opportunities that have resulted.
2. Melissa Browning believes the two goals – individual voice finding and communal moral formation – are not only compatible, but also mutually reinforcing. On first glance, the practices of listening to texts and listening to marginalized voices seem to emphasize giving voice to individuals, while the practices of listening for privilege and listening through activism and experiential learning emphasize communal moral formation. Yet as students study texts and ethnographies together, there will be communal moral formation, and as they critique conditions of unacceptable privilege or plan and carry out service projects, they will have opportunities to listen carefully to one another’s individual perspectives.
3. Stephen Webb, in “What Teachers Love about Teaching,” stated his concern that moral formation and service projects can distract from the primary educational goals in the classroom. Browning suggests they are integral to the formation of the trust among students and teacher, which is essential for any learning environment. Encourage members to share and examine their own classroom experiences, or the experiences of their children with these practices of listening. Did they create a better learning environment?
4. In KHUSA, adult mentors provide a listening presence to at-risk elementary school students. Many of these students come from marginalized families or groups. The mentor’s presence and guidance helps them voice their anxieties and overcome barriers to learning. The volunteer mentors grow through activism and experiential learning.
5. In LEAF, volunteer mentors help immigrant students and their families understand the school learning environment and take advantage of educational opportunities. Immigrants’ voices are heard and volunteer mentors grow through activism and experiential learning.
6. In the Trinitarian structure of Carolyn Winfrey Gillette’s hymn, the first verse reminds us all children are created by God. The goal of education, therefore, is guiding them toward maturity in God’s image. Verse two describes how the neighbor love that Christ exemplifies should draw us together as a community to support all schools. Verse three, which describes the Holy Spirit’s inspiration, draws these threads together in “a vision / of a world that’s just and fair,” and prays that “enriching education / touch the lives of rich and poor.”

Departing Hymn

“God, You Give Each Generation” can be found on pp. 53-55 of *Schools in a Pluralist Culture*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.